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Research / Report

Developing Critical Thinking in EFL classes.

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Introduction.

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally. It is a way of thinking to make reasoned judgements that are logical and where you don't simply accept all arguments and conclusion you are exposed to but rather have an attitude involving questioning such arguments and conclusions. Critical thinking has been also described as an ability to acknowledge and test previously held assumptions. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. Therefore a person who with critical thinking skills are able to reflect on the justification of one's own beliefs and values.

Critical thinking also known as "complex thinking" and "high-order thinking". The ability to think critically calls for a higher order thinking than simply the ability to recall information. Critical thinkers need to have knowledge of concepts to an application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

It's important to develop critical thinking skills for more than just academic reasons.

Substantial critical thinking capacity serves us well in all aspects of our lives.

It encompasses problem-solving, decision making, personal responsibility, and managing relationships of every kind effectively, just to name a few things. There's no doubt it's one of the most crucial mindsets our learners could ever have, for learning and life. By using real-world examples, teachers can explore concepts that help learners think more critically. However, teachers must recognize the barriers and challenges accompanied by teaching critical thinking skills.

This article will explore some common critical thinking barriers and how to effectively get around them.



1.1. Critical Thinking Skills.

Critical thinking skills help you think logically and get to the bottom of persistent problems. These skills help you avoid logic traps and make you a more independent thinker, capable of coming to intelligent conclusions. Critical thinking is a valuable 21st-century skill because it allows you to evaluate information that could be biased or misleading and see problems in a new light. A fundamental part of decision making lies in the ability to be a critical thinker. The internet has exposed everyone to a wealth of information, but not all that information is quality or correct. Your point of view could be easily skewed if you don't understand how to break down problems and find solutions. Knowing how to evaluate information can liberate your thinking.

Critical thinking differs from just acquiring and retaining information. It implies continuous self-reflection (Scriven and Paul, 2003; Facione, 1998). Different authors have tried to create categorizations of critical thinking. Bloom's taxonomy (1956) for example, includes a six level hierarchy of cognition. In this model, an individual begins with the basic level, which is called knowledge level, and then progresses until he or she reaches the most complex level, which is evaluation. The model, as it is proposed, seems too rigid. Also, dividing the thinking process, which is characterized by its complexity, fluidity, and continuity into discrete skills, seems artificial.

A person can use one or many of these processes at a time to deal with a specific task or objective. We kept Bloom's knowledge level because we acknowledge the importance of retaining and retrieving information. When we gain insights about the way our memory functions, we improve our chances to recall information better. This is crucial in second language learning because we are constantly storing and retrieving new linguistic information. Besides knowledge, critical thinking involves the following cognitive skills or mental abilities: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. We selected this last categorization because it entails the idea that individuals should be capable of monitoring their thought processes, which is at the core of becoming an ideal thinker. Each cognitive skill is subsequently explained in brief:

Knowledge

Knowledge refers to the capacity to evoke appropriate material when resolving a problem that usually embraces memorization and identification. It involves remembering specific terminology, facts, and conventions in specific domains; classifying; categorizing; and using criteria to prove or judge facts.

Interpretation

Interpretation deals with the capacity to apprehend a set of qualities that characterize a piece of information. It usually involves translation, interpretation, and extrapolation. Translating deals with paraphrasing using a person's own words. Interpreting embraces students' ability to capture the content of a given context as a whole, the ability to understand and interpret different types of texts, and the ability to discern between legitimate and contradictory conclusions.

Analysis

Analysis relates to the capacity to fragment material into its components in order to establish relationships among those components and understand principles of organization. It entails three subcategories. The first one refers to the analysis of elements or the ability to recognize non-explicit assumptions; that is, distinguishing between facts and hypotheses. The second one deals with analysis of relationships or the ability to understand relations among ideas, and cause and effect sequences. The third one has to do with the analysis of principles of organization. It evaluates the capacity to determine the structure and organization of communication through inferences.

Inference

Inference is the cognitive skill that consists of recognizing and assuring factors that allow for rational results. These results in turn, form assumptions and theses to examine significant information and help to infer the outcome from opinions, data, tenets, and convictions.

Explanation

Explanation refers to the capacity to affirm the results of our own thinking, to justify our reasoning based on concepts, methods, sound criteria, and contextual considerations that constitute solid ground to support our convictions.

Evaluation

Evaluation has to do with the capacity to form judgments about the value of ideas, masterpieces, methods, materials, etc. It involves using solid criteria to establish the validity of any statement. For both, Facione and Bloom, evaluation refers to the process of judging the validity of statements, events, convictions, expressions, opinions, facts and figures, and regulations by using solid criteria .

Self-regulation

Self-regulation implies monitoring our own thinking processes. That is, constantly revising all elements used to achieve a task. The goal is to question, confirm, validate, and correct one's skills, how they were used, and the results obtained. Self-examination and self-correction are at the center of self-regulation. This component will be explained in detail in the section dealing with meta-cognition. A graphical representation of these critical thinking skills would be as follows:

Critical thinking is not a measurable concept, nor is it a final stage a person can reach. Despite the fact that we would expect critical thinking to permeate all spheres of our lives permanently, we sometimes render ourselves to the use of irrational thought and behavior. In addition, we cannot say that an individual has completed the task of becoming a critical thinker. Instead, we can speak of varying degrees of criticality (Scriven and Paul, 2003) and consider that there is always an opportunity to enhance one's skills and abilities. Thus, becoming a critical thinker is a life-long task that is only developed and sharpened through time and learning experiences.

1.2 . The process of critical thinking

Critical thinking can be divided into seven stages:

1. Formulate the question clearly and precisely.
2. Identify the purpose, reasons, goals and objectives of what needs doing or answering.
3. Gather information, facts, data, evidence, experiences about the problem from various sources.
4. It's also a good idea to get different points of view.
5. Distinguish between facts and assumptions/opinions.
6. Analyse and try to find similarities between similar incidents in the past.
7. Conclude and decide on the actions to be taken or opinion to be formed

1.3. Critical thinking in the classroom

Very often as teachers, we feel the pressure to know all the answers and to have all the solutions. However, in our experience of being teachers and teacher educators, this has been the most liberating aspect of our practice. When we focus on developing the curiosity of learners to explore and question, it's not up to us to have all the answers – it's up to them! We delivered a workshop at the recent ELTAI conference where we demonstrated just how this could be done. Using 'fake news' as our topic, we showed teachers how simple learner training can help young people today discern the reliability of all the information that is thrown at them on a daily basis.

These questions can help teachers be more purposeful in promoting critical thinking with their learners:

- How am I directing learners in the classrooms to think beyond the obvious?
- What should I do to hone their skills to think beyond the textbook?
- How can I adapt the syllabus to promote critical thinking?
- And am I, in fact, asking questions to make them think at all? If yes, what are those questions?

2.1 Teaching Critical Thinking

Every pupil should have an effective skill of critical thinking, and they must not accept anything for granted, but how can you teach thinking critically to students? There are several ways of organizing for instruction in critical thinking: We can teach a separate course or unit, we can infuse critical thinking into all that we teach, or we can use a mixed approach. The first approach of a separate course or unit requires materials that teach specifically for critical thinking dispositions, skills, and knowledge. The downside is that there may be little transfer from what the program or materials teach to the rest of the curriculum.

Ask questions

Asking questions, especially open-ended questions, gives elementary school students a chance to apply what they've learned and build on prior knowledge. It also allows them to problem-solve and think on their feet, and boosts self-esteem by providing an opportunity for students to express themselves in front of their peers.

Encourage decision-making

Since a large part of teaching critical thinking skills revolves around applying knowledge and evaluating solutions, elementary school teachers should encourage decision-making as much as possible. This enables students to apply what they've learned to different situations, weigh the pros and cons of a variety of solutions, then decide which ideas work best.

Brain storm

Brainstorming, a time-honored tradition in elementary education, is an excellent learning tool. It's also an excellent critical-thinking exercise, especially when paired with visual elements that bring original thinking and classroom discussions to life.

Work in groups

Group projects and discussions are another excellent way for elementary school teachers to encourage critical thinking skills.

Cooperative learning not only exposes students to the thought processes of their classmates, it expands their thinking and worldview by demonstrating that there's no one right way to approach a problem.

Connect different ideas

Connecting different ideas is key to teaching critical thinking. For example, elementary school teachers can ask students if they know anyone who has to take a bus to work, and if so, why it would be important for that person to also have a train schedule. Questions like these help children consider different situations (delayed buses, for example) and potential solutions (taking the train instead), helping them apply prior knowledge to new contexts.

Incorporate different points of view

Some of the very best critical thinking exercises for elementary school students involve exploring a concept from multiple perspectives. This tactic not only establishes that an idea should be assessed from different points of view before an opinion is formed, it gives students a chance to share their own viewpoints while listening to and learning from others.

Inspire creativity

Imagination is key to teaching critical thinking in elementary school. Teachers should seek out new ways for students to use information to create something new. Art projects are an excellent way to do this. Students can also construct inventions, write a story or poem, create a game, sing a song—the sky's the limit.

2.2. Developing critical thinking skills in the ESL classroom

Among the many goals of English language development at various levels of study, we find critical literacy, critical thinking and critical reading development. With the flood of information that our students encounter on various online platforms, it has become a central concern to equip them with the skills to critically approach and evaluate the texts they read. Let's look at some key terms and strategies to help students become critical thinkers and readers.

Unfortunately, critical thinking is often seen as a blurry area and students are often confused by what exactly is expected from them. However, both critical thinking and reading can be modelled, taught and developed in classrooms. As teachers, we need to reflect on what our subject area values as critical thinking skills. What do we, teachers, perceive as the demonstration of critical thinking and reading practices? When we have a clear view of our own expectations, it becomes easier to prepare students for critical thinking tasks.

First of all, it is important that the students need to possess the language and reading strategies to engage with a text and to approach it critically.

When we read critically, we think about and reflect on our reading. It entails a conscious reading approach, in which we predict what we are reading, we seek information, and we have expectations. It also means that we analyze and evaluate our reading process and materials with the intention of judging their value.

Although we can define universal characteristics of critical thinkers, it is important to mention that different school subjects and academic disciplines approach texts in different ways.

By giving students strategies to work with texts critically, we can help them become well-informed and confident readers and thinkers. At the same time, vocabulary, grammar and syntax form an equally important part of our comprehension of a text, especially when we read in a foreign language.

As our students improve their English and obtain more vocabulary, they will become better readers and will be able to combine different strategies:

Define the purpose of their reading

Predict the content of the text

Activate their background knowledge

Make a reading plan

Understand text structure

Check if their predictions were right

Ask questions that help them understand the structure

Ask questions that help them reflect on the topic and storyline

Find the answers to these questions

Make summaries

Draw conclusions

Find evidence to support their inferences and conclusions

Guess new words from context

Check their own comprehension

Discuss and reflect on their reading experience

As a language teacher, you are already doing a lot to develop your students' critical thinking and reading skills. Just think about the various reading and writing activities you carry out in class. You ask students to understand, analyze, interpret and find evidence in reading comprehension tasks. When you prepare them for writing tasks, they need to follow clear instructions and produce arguments and stories with details.

Here are some questions to help your students approach texts critically. You can select and adapt these questions for your students' language and reading levels. Remind your students that critical reading always has a purpose. They can start by asking *why this author has written this text?*

Did she simply want to entertain their readers?

Is the author trying to tell you something?

Is the author trying to convince you of their values and opinions?

Who wrote the text?

When and where was it written?

Why did the author write the text? If there is a narrator, what is his/her point of view?

How do the time and place of the writing influence the views expressed in the texts?

Are there any cultural, social or scientific assumptions in the texts?

When your students are reading a story, an article or a news item, remind them to pay attention to all the details.

In the language class we tend to concentrate on written and spoken texts, however, our overall judgement of a text also depends on visual elements. Ask questions about the following details.

What does the cover tell you about the text?

What does the title suggest?

What do the colours of the book / website make you feel and think about?

Is the text illustrated? If so, what are the illustrations like? How do they make you feel? Do they help you understand the text?

Does the text look easy or hard to read?

Does it come across as funny, serious or boring? Pay attention to the fonts in the texts. Good readers are good critical thinkers, as they constantly analyze, evaluate what they read, say, hear and write. They learn to think in structures, in different patterns, and they think about their thinking in another language. When you think in another language, you use reference points, ask questions, and form opinions in a more conscious way.

As we can see, critical thinking and critical reading share a lot of characteristics, and they support each other. Good readers will be good learners. It also means that they will be good thinkers.

Be patient. Give your students time to think and reflect. This may seem obvious but we are often short of time and want a quick answer. If your students feel safe and comfortable, they will think and read more confidently.

Start debates. Group debates work very well when we'd like to practise reasoning and argumentation. During debates students recycle new vocabulary and consciously use functional language.

Character interview and analysis. This is a kind of hot seating activity. Choose a character from a story and put him or her in the hot-seat, then ask him/her questions.

As mentioned above there are some barriers which the teacher must overcome.

2.3. TEACHER' S LESSON PLAN

Teacher's name ----- Hasmik Papyan

Grade ----- 6th

Lesson Topic: " The Well At The World's End".

References used on the material: /textbooks, additional materials, webpages, etc./

English 6. G. Gasparyan, N. Hovhannisyan, H. Kajberuni.

Unit 3.B. , pages 34-38

- Pre-reading Task:
1. Do you often help your friends?
 2. Are all your friends like you?
 3. How do you feel, when you help somebody?
 4. Why is it important to help others?
 5. Read and discuss the meaning of the quote below:

" Make just one person happy each day and in 40 years you will have made 14600 people happy for a little time, at least". Charles Willey.

Pupils.

The pupils listened to the text, translate the unknown words, understood the idea and tried to remember the words and expressions. They began to tell stories how they helped their friends.

" Do all the good you can, by all the means you can". John Wesley.

They began to discuss how they are helpful to their friends, parents, grandparents, to their neighbours and etc. They understood that they must be kind to those, who need support, like the King's daughter, and not so cruel like the Queen's daughter.

They thought about making they environment better at school and outside by helping each other. If their friend is sad and they cannot do anything to help, just ask "What's wrong?" and listen to his/her problem.

All the pupils were on task. They were excited, engaged in the discussion and asked questions.

Next time we will speak on topic:

Always think about what you say, how you say, may be it is hurtful for somebody.

Time management: 1. The topic and pre-reading discussion _____ 20 minutes

2. Reading the text, translateing the new words and making

Requirements _____ 25 minutes.

Some pupils were assessed.

Conclusions

Nowadays critical thinking helps students to think and develop confidence ultimately. I think critical thinking practices in class are really useful especially when teacher seems to be novice in using questioning ,reasoning and providing thinking times .Also, we can enhance the environment. Seats can be arranged in a way that students can see each other ,ask questions and interact with each other. This in turns will help to minimize the passive teaching.

Over the years, various meanings for critical thinking have been passed down. As for me, main thing for the development of critical thinking skills is to give students something to think about.

Critical thinking allows a person to analyze information and makes an objective judgement. Being able to properly analyze a solution and come up with a logical and reasonable conclusion. The ability to think critically helps people in both their personal and professional lives.

If the teacher practices critical thinking she logically connects the ideas, evaluates arguments, finds inconsistencies and errors, solves complex problems and engages in reflection.



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Critical Thinking Defined by Edward Glaser

In a seminal study on critical thinking and education in 1941, Edward Glaser defines critical thinking as follows “The ability to think critically, as conceived in this volume, involves three things: (1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods. Critical thinking calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends. It also generally requires ability to recognize problems, to find workable means for meeting those problems, to gather and marshal pertinent information, to recognize unstated assumptions and values, to comprehend and use language with accuracy, clarity, and discrimination, to interpret data, to appraise evidence and evaluate arguments, to recognize the existence (or non-existence) of logical relationships between propositions, to draw warranted conclusions and generalizations, to put to test the conclusions and generalizations at which one arrives, to reconstruct one's patterns of beliefs on the basis of wider experience, and to render accurate judgments about specific things and qualities in everyday life.

(Edward M. Glaser, *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking*, Teacher’s College, Columbia University, 1941)

