



Introducing Creative and Critical Thinking in ESL Classrooms

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Abstract:

Creative and Critical thinking is an approach to the teaching of ESL classrooms that emphasizes communication and interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. Rather than a gain, learning English (as a second language) can become a loss if learners are not motivated to think carefully about the cultural and political aspects of the language they are learning or those embedded in the syllabus, materials, methods, and testing the language. Very little has been done to make students aware of the presence of inequalities in the texts they read, the expressions they use and the programs they watch. This paper presents in favor of integrating critically thinking in language teaching methodology so that students can critically examine the cultural implications of texts, approaches and methods. While the first section of the essay explains what critical and creative thinking is and what it aims to do, the second section discusses how to include critical and creative thinking in language teaching classrooms by providing an example of a detailed plan.

Keywords: Creativity, Critical approach, Methods, Syllabus, Testing

Introduction

Critical thinking refers to the individuals' ability to think and make correct decisions independently. Therefore, through managing the ways of assessing language learners' ability, language teachers can help them develop critical thinking skills. One's knowledge of syntactic rules and the ability to speak or write grammatically correct sentences do not ensure effective communication. In fact, today's desire to promote cross cultural understanding among the users of English (Shahidullah 95; Rahman 111) testifies to the fact that just an ability to use a language is not adequate for communication. One needs to show cultural, political, racial, and economic sensitivity as well the creativity in the ESL classroom. The right choice of words and understanding of the context are so important that deviations can result in "communication breakdown". One's expressing his / her ideas or thoughts may be accurate, but may not include adequate explanation; so, communication will break down. Since communication is about reception, it might be difficult for the readers to interpret if explanations are not properly followed up.

When a language learner uses an expression like 'Walid is son of father', his/her error is not merely morphological/semantic; such an error is also an indication of the presence of patriarchal values, and means that the mother has no role to play. One can certainly teach the students to use a better expression which may conceal that world-view (for instance, 'Walid is a brave soldier' in place of 'Walid is a brave son'). But the kind of knowledge that makes such an expression possible should be challenged. Teaching how to use a language cannot be separated from teaching how to think, and, of course, thinking critically. In fact, language lessons should be seen as opportunities for encouraging students to expand their horizons of thinking critically (Mello, Nair, and Krishnasamy 2007).

Before we set out and look at some theories and practice for introducing creativity into the language classroom, let's have a look why is creativity important in language classrooms?

Language use is a creative act: we transform thoughts into language that can be heard or seen. We are capable of producing sentences and even long texts that we have never heard or seen before. By giving learners creative exercises, we get them to practice an important sub-skill of using a language: thinking creatively.

Compensation strategies (methods used for making up for lack of language in a communicative situation e.g. miming, drawing, paraphrasing used for getting meaning across) use creative and often imaginative ways of expression. Our learners will need these until they master the language. In my experience, some people cannot learn at all if they are not allowed to be creative. They do not understand the point in doing a language activity for its own sake, for only practicing the language without a real content, purpose, outcome or even a product. My experience also taught me that most people become more motivated, inspired or challenged if they can create something of value; if they feel that in some ways what they do and how they do it reflect who they are.

Creativity improves self-esteem as learners can look at their own solutions to problems and their own products and see what they are able to achieve. Creative work in the language classroom can lead to genuine communication and co-operation. Learners use the language to do the creative task, so they use it as a tool, in its original function. This prepares learners for using the language instrumentally outside the classroom. Creative tasks enrich classroom work, and they make it more varied and more enjoyable by tapping into individual talents, ideas and thoughts - both the learners' and the teacher's. Creative thinking is an important skill in real life. It is part of our survival strategies and it is a force behind personal growth and the development of culture and society.

In KSA, education system still relies heavily on examinations because it considers education as nothing more than a tool for obtaining a certificate and then getting a good job or starting a business. For this reason, the true objective of education, i.e., the ability of an individual to think and decide about any issue or context, remains largely ignored. Our learners in KSA lack analytical skills when they enter universities, because very few of them learn to question and doubt. The lecture-centered teaching-learning limits the learners' ability to think and find additional information on the topic that the teacher covers in the class. The dead-end-questions where learners are required to find the answers from a reading text or the teacher's lecture are promoted, which does not encourage students, thinking or effective communication. When questions are discouraged, communication is one way. So, the students' creative ideas and their ability to think for themselves do not develop. The absence of training in critical thinking leads to the students performing activities without understanding the objectives or the benefits to their academic and personal lives. This is why; they are unable to apply their knowledge to new situations. Using thinking skills while learning the language can open the door for learners and to make sense of the world around them and the ability to choose better alternatives.

A mechanical attitude to language teaching on the part of the instructor can end up constricting the students' ability to learn. Moreover, if the students and the instructors are unable to detect the bias inherent in language and expressions, the objective of providing humane education will falter. A text Book like Headway or Open Forum has become the most used book in communicative language learning/teaching even though it is full of references to western subjects that the students cannot connect to their own lives. In short, it is culturally biased as it does not show sensitivity towards aspirations of other cultures. For instance, there is rarely mention of the minorities. So, different cultures are neglected. It is for this reason that not only EFL learners, but also EFL teachers need to learn how to use critical thinking when they use the English language. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how to incorporate critical thinking in an EFL lesson plan. Besides, discussing what critical thinking is, this paper also outlines the objective and purpose of using critical thinking in EFL classrooms.

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is a cognitive activity which requires one to use his/her minds to evaluate situations. (Cottrell 1). It involves the use of mental processes such as "attention, categorization, selection, and judgment"(ibid). As Ennis (1987) has pointed out, critical thinking stems from (a) the ability to reflect skeptically and (b) the ability to think in a reasoned way. However, critical thinking is not an innate ability. Some people are naturally more skeptical than others. But, it does not mean that they are able to use this capability to carefully analyze either their own actions or other people's reasoning.

Critical thinking is a method which requires systematic reasoning. Critical thinking "originates in the learner's engagement with problems". It has got two major components – (1) belief gathering and processing skills, and (2) the habit of using these skills to guide behavior. Critical thinkers are expected to deliberately engage with an idea and accept, reject or suspend judgment about that idea on their own (Mello, et.al.17).

Different authors try to understand critical thinking in different ways. But, a common element in them is that critical thinking is a skill that human beings do not innately possess. Rather, it is a skill human beings develop to deal with the world around them. Critical language learners are expected to judge not only the proclamations made by others, but also develop their own thoughts and judgments. Through critical thinking, learners deepen their understanding and learn the thinking process of the subject. Without that, one does not learn to search for new ideas. So, by applying critical thinking method, one can learn, exchange information, and decide on the appropriate responses. If students remain passive recipients, their output will become minimal. When they are active, they think and use the language effectively.

Why teach critical thinking?

Critical Thinking is an important element in modern education as it teaches learners to systematically think about a specific subject. It also helps them interpret spoken, written, and graphic messages through explanation, interpretation, and comparison, and make judgments based on evidences. Schools, colleges, and Universities are the places to expand the students' knowledge, question facts, and analyze principles. To be successful in both in academic and personal life, one needs to think about an issue from different angles, examining probable alternatives, exchanging well thought out opinions, and making correct decisions. Learning a new language does not only mean that one has to learn the rules of that language, but one is also required to learn how to use that language and how to relate words with concepts. Since words and concepts are socially constructed, without a proper idea about the social relations of humans, one cannot successfully communicate either at an academic institution or at the workplace. For example, when I tell my students to introduce them to another, they approach directly and ask me "what is your name?" instead of introducing themselves first. It is also noticed that after two or three sentences personal questions are asked – "are you married?", or "how many children do you have?". The idea of creating reference goes back to Saussure's signifier where things are relational, but not absolutely determined. Interpretation may mean there are other possible ways of translating. So, meaning is in relation to other things and is not fixed.

In the classroom, learners usually ask how to look for the inner meaning while reading, how to find contextual meaning of words, how to paraphrase using synonyms, and so on. At that time, many teachers ask them to read the same thing a few more times, or just avoid their questions. Since most of the teachers are not familiar with the strategies of critical thinking and close reading, they fail to guide their students properly. So, learners have vague ideas; and, they ask the same question in every class. Once they become aware of the strategies, learners will take charge of their own thinking and will be able to analyze and formulate ideas, arguments, and opinions. By using critical thinking skills, readers will interpret, see alternative meaning, and create new concepts. Without relying on the language skill only, learners will create understandable and rational thoughts whereas speakers will have a comprehensible idea of what they want to say, and listeners will summarize what is being said. Instead of transmitting knowledge, teachers guide them through a procedure of finding out for themselves.

Critical thinking is a vital part of teaching learners how to analyze, and then speak and write in the academic programs and also in practical life. Developing this skill is important because it is a life-long skill. At the freshmen level, most of the learners are poor thinkers, not because they are incapable of thinking well, but because they have never been taught to think before. They go to the university without developing the habit of thinking for themselves. Teachers need to help learners develop thinking skills and hence better them to accomplish their objectives in the world.

Critical thinking is a way of thinking which helps one to think critically and also allows one to share a kind of common way of thinking globally. So, then one can agree or make better decisions for the whole world. Teachers need to be aware of the objectives of critical thinking so that learners can know about the culturally different approaches to knowledge acquisition and also point out why and how critical thinking is useful for their university level study. Without critical thinking, people can be easily exploited both politically and economically. If language lessons can help develop problem-solving skills among learners, it can prepare them for real world challenges. Therefore, the goal for language learning should be to help learners understand the practical aspects, but also to inspire learners to broaden their knowledge. Thus, we as teachers can teach a life-long process of learning, which should be the goal of all types of education.

Strategies for teaching Critical Thinking

Critical thinking can be integrated into all four basic skills of communication: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Teachers can develop teaching methodologies which allow learners to negotiate their objectives, preferred learning styles, and methods of assessment. Teachers need to give students ideas about critical thinking so that they know there are culturally different approaches to knowledge acquisition and point out why and how critical thinking is useful for their study at the university level.

A teacher's challenge is to lead learners step by step so that they are able to analyze, the verify information, check sources, and compare and contrast different versions of the same information in order to identify prejudice, if any. The ability to think on our own can help us do well both inside and outside the classroom. Asking questions about the content can help learners understand the material better and remember it longer. A text can help the students understand topic, but "deep questioning" can help them understand what they know about a topic and how to improve their thinking process. If a teacher shows an image of an advertisement for "Ponds fair glow" skin whitening cream, and asks "Do you like this advertisement?" Their answer to this question would be yes/ no, which will limit their thoughts. But if the teacher can ask: "In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good advertisement? Explain with reference to this advertisement?" This will make them think, examine, and then come up with multiple perspectives. Therefore, it is vital to provide learners with activities and questions that foster and build a sense of responsibility for their action.

Critical thinking methods can be incorporated in lectures, home tasks, assignments, presentations, and exams. Before reading a text, the learners should be able to make sense of what it is about. The simple strategy includes seeing what they can learn from the topics, images or introductory materials. Teach them about asking open-ended questions so that they know there is not one right answer. This requires them to think and answer creatively. EFL teachers should give the students controversial topics and present problems so that learners argue, agree, and disagree and provide alternative thoughts, summarize teacher's points of view, write journals, and give responses to become independent learners. To answer any question or to solve any problem in the class, learners should be given enough time to concentrate so that the conclusion is not reached instantly. If they get time to inquire and reply, it encourages them to explore their arguments consciously. They can express themselves very clearly and with great detail without shyness which helps them improve their accuracy in a second language.

If we engage learners intellectually with clear, systematic, and relevant instruction, only then they will be able to transfer the knowledge and skills they gain from the English language classroom to the outside world. Students need to give their points of view to interact with the materials they encounter in different subject context areas. Teachers should encourage students to ask questions which create conflict and confusion. In both written and oral work, teachers need to emphasize logic and clear development of ideas. Students should be trained to think, discuss, debate, and learn so that there is more than one way to interpret an issue. If critical thinking is effectively used, it will allow learners to communicate properly, as they have their own opinions, learn, and question discrimination conventions, and injustices. Active involvement needs to be emphasized for learning. EFL teacher's main intention should be to engage learners in how to think reasonably by doing tasks to create new concepts out of modified old understanding instead of transferring the knowledge. Thus, meaning is created individually by every person and is interpreted in his / her own ways.

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