

The role of critical thinking in developing speaking skills

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is one of the major and rapidly growing concepts in education. Today, its role in second and foreign language learning and teaching is of great importance. Critical thinking skills and the mastery of the English language are expected to become essential outcomes of university education. To become fluent in a language and must be able to think critically and express thoughts, students need practise speaking activities using critical thinking skills. In this article, we define the concept “critical thinking” and discuss the role of critical thinking in the development of speaking skills through some practical activities that can be used in the classroom for students to practice critical thinking skills.

Keywords: critical thinking (CT), speaking skills, ability, discussion, EFL teacher, Ted Talks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking (CT) is a widely debated concept in education nowadays. In language teaching, teachers use CT to help learners not only discuss and run negotiations about meaning of words, grammar, dialogues and discourse but also analyze, synthesize, assess, question and become skeptical of topics, data and evidence brought into classroom environment (Bedir, 2013). In this sense, CT is not only about acquisition of knowledge including grammatical constructions and a list of words or collocations but about ‘a complex set of abilities and a process of dealing with ideas’ (Cromwell, 1992, p. 39). In this sense, language teachers should apply thought-provoking tasks that can stimulate learners to come up with articulate and evidence-based ideas.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

First, let us define the term what the critical thinking skill is. There are a wide range of definitions of critical thinking have been presented by many writers where all of them are agree that critical thinking has many dimensions: it involves knowledge, cognitive skills, and a disposition (a state of mind to be a critical thinker). Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (2004) define critical thinking as, “that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.” This definition includes an attitudinal element of volition, and self-efficacy, and the metacognitive skill of evaluating one’s own thinking processes. Brookfield (1987) describes critical thinking as a process of identification and questioning of certain assumptions, being skeptical of one’s own ideas, striving to find new alternatives and debating the given context. Another inclusive definition of critical thinking was prepared by a group of researchers (Jones et al., 1995) who refer to critical thinking as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, presenting, arguments, reflection, and dispositions. Diane Halpern (1998) defines critical thinking as, “the use of cognitive *skills or strategies* that increase the probability of a desirable outcome ... where desirable is defined by the individual, such as making good career choices or wise financial investments.” She says critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed. Critical thinking is the type of thinking used in problem solving, determining probable outcomes, formulating inferences, and making decisions. Wade (1995) identifies eight characteristics of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves asking questions, defining a problem, examining evidence, analyzing assumptions and biases, avoiding emotional reasoning, avoiding oversimplification, considering other interpretations, and tolerating ambiguity. According to Radhakrishnan (2009) when EFL teachers become familiar with these characteristics of critical thinking and do their best to apply them in their teaching career, and they will become successful.

- He/she asks pertinent questions to see whether his students have learned or not.
- He/she assesses statements and arguments.
- He/she is able to admit a lack of understanding or information.
- He/she has a sense of curiosity.
- He/she is interested in finding new solutions for becoming teaching problems.
- He/she is able to clearly define a set of criteria for analyzing ideas.
- He/she listens carefully to others and is able to give feedback.
- He/she sees that critical thinking is a lifelong process of self assessment.
- He/she suspends judgment until all facts have been gathered and considered.
- He/she looks for evidence to support assumption and beliefs.
- He/she is able to adjust opinions when new facts are found.
- He/she looks for proof.
- He/she examines problems closely.
- He/she is able to reject information that is incorrect or irrelevant.

Ur (1996) believes that good teachers know how to challenge students. They know their students thoroughly and understand each student's leaning styles, thus they teach in a way that students will not only learn but also be intrigued by the information provided to them. Quality teachers understand students and have the capability to reach them, and know them on a personal level, to help and mentor them. From these different definitions, critical thinking is that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them. Having the ability to think critically is the best way to solve problems since it requires looking at an issue from several stands before reaching a final decision. Critical thinking helps students to enhance language and presentation skills. Thinking clearly and systematically can improve the way they express their ideas in an argument. Critical thinking also helps each student decide him/herself what is right or what is wrong. It also helps them find out their own ways in thinking about an issue or topic. Critical thinking is the art of generating ideas on the given issue. Critical thinking isn't about thinking more or thinking harder; it's about thinking *better*.

There are some techniques which help students to develop critical thinking in speaking English. Elicitation tasks: watching short animated videos, the BBC newscasts, posters, documentaries, TED talks, YouTube videos, dramas and even educational clips on the internet or on different massager programs can serve as authentic real-world and up-to-date educational content which can create unique, relevant and fun lessons to immerse students in their learning. Ted Talks (www.ted.com) offer us authentic listening where many hundreds of amazing TED speakers make their ideas worth sharing. Semi-academic Ted Talks are influential videos from expert speakers on education, business, science, medicine, technology, sport, health, art, culture and other fields. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation of Ted Talk speakers, the speaker's presentation style, main ideas and supporting examples, arguments presented such as weaknesses, strengths, facts and data promote students to work in group discussions where are asked to reflect upon the tasks composed of speaker performance, classroom interaction, peer evaluation and self-criticism. Each participant should present a topic on PowerPoint individually within ten minutes reflecting on the same process above is repeated. Critical thinking is crucial for self-reflection. In order to live a meaningful life and to structure our lives accordingly, we need to justify and reflect on our values and decisions. Critical thinking provides the tools for this process of self-evaluation. Through these above mentioned tasks students evaluate new ideas, selecting the best ones, and develop the ability to think critically and engage in reflective and independent thinking.

Another useful and ready-to-go format (see the table №1)to use in the classroom in order to reinforce critical thinking skills is the *KWL format* namely: *know / want to know / learnt*. This exercise can be used countless times but requires clear instruction, clarification and modeling the first time when it is used.

I know	I want to know	I learnt
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.

Table 1.

- What do we KNOW about this topic?
 - What do we WANT to know about this topic?
 - What did we LEARN about this topic?
- a. In pairs, students list what they know about the topic – DISCUSS
 - b. In pairs, students list what they want to know about the topic – DISCUSS
 - c. Paired groups read prepared material to answer questions
 - d. Teacher circulates among the pairs to monitor and question their progress

If most pairs are struggling, remind the class how to summarize and question.

3. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the role of critical thinking in developing speaking skills is crucial and critical thinking help foreign language learners to gain awareness of academic discussions by bringing different perspectives into learning environment and questioning data and evidence presented by speakers discussing various semi-academic topics. In this sense, teachers as practitioners should often find new ways to create differentiation in classroom setting. Since development of critical thinking skills necessitates a never-ending process where teachers select activities and tasks that bring differentiation into discussion environment need to be constantly updated and developed to promote critical thinking skills.

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