

On the Pedagogical Implications of Critical Thinking Skills and EFL

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***Abstract:** While it is difficult to predict what specific skills will be important 20 years from now in our society as technology and globalization are increasingly taking a more important role in our society, it is possible to observe trends in the recent past that will continue in the future: we want our students to become autonomous, critical thinkers. Proof of this are the curricula of English teaching training programs around the world, where the importance lies not only in training future teachers with a proficient English level, but also professionals who are able to analyze and judge their own teaching practice in order to enrich the teaching-learning process of their students. Having said this, crucial questions arise: What is critical thinking? Why is it relevant to develop critical thinking skills in our students? Are we helping our future in-service teachers to develop such skills? Is critical thinking being incorporated at school? The present paper intends to give an overview of what critical thinking is and show the in-service and novice teachers that incorporating critical thinking skills within the EFL classroom context is not as hard as it may seem.*

***Key Words:** Critical thinking skills and EFL, HOTS*

Introduction

Apart from being one of the most modern issues in education around the world (Sanavi and Tarighat, 2014), critical thinking has long been acknowledged as a valuable skill, both in education and within the world of English language teaching in particular. Critical thinking (Partnership, 2009) has been identified as one of the 21st century skills that students need to develop in order to succeed in modern society. At present, most of the graduate profiles of the English teaching training programs worldwide describe the future teachers in terms of two areas: one that corresponds to the mastery of the English language, and other one that relates to the pedagogical practice itself. Thus, the future professionals are expected to master the English language at a C1 level ('Effective Operational Proficiency' according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages-CEFR), as well as individuals who are able to reflect,

criticize, analyse, and evaluate, among other characteristics, their own teaching practice. In a few words: professionals who are critical thinkers.

Literature review

Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) or critical thinking skills (CTS) have been broadly defined by many authors over the last 30 years, and its multi-dimensional nature makes it impossible for scholars to consider one single unanimous designation. One of the first approaches considered by academia was the one provided by Furedy in 1985, in which he would state that all human beings have the inner capacity to question all assumptions, and, at the same time, an inner ability to recognize when it is necessary to question a given issue. Years later, Elder and Paul (1994) claimed that critical thinking is “the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking. This requires that they develop sound criteria and standards for analyzing and assessing their own thinking and routinely use those criteria and standards to improve its quality.” (pp. 34-35). More recently, the same authors have presented a wider definition which also includes elements of intellectual engagement and thought, such as purpose of the thinking, interpretation and inference, assumptions, and implications and consequences, among others (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2007). According to the authors, students who are intellectually engaged are aware of such elements become “routinely engage in critical reading, critical writing, critical listening, critical speaking, and, as necessary, critical observing or performing” (p.2). Along these lines, Costa and Kallick (cited in Grosser and Nel, 2013) would emphasize the fact that critical thinking is related to the development and application of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills which are interconnected in the processes of: problem solving, understanding and communicating meaning, recognizing relationships, assessing reliability of statements, identifying elements needed to draw conclusions, presenting the results of what one has been analyzing, and self-monitory our own cognitive processes, among others.

The relationship between CTS and foreign language teaching can be tackled from different perspectives as critical thinking is, as sated before, multi-dimensional in nature. Considering the previous definitions, it can be said that, in general terms, critical thinking involves not only cognitive skills at an initial level (as remembering, recognizing, exemplifying, inferring, etc.) but

also higher order thinking skills and meta-cognitive skills. Such abilities were also considered by Benjamin Bloom, a worldwide known educational psychologist, when he published his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in 1956, recognizing three domains of learning: the psychomotor domain, the affective domain, and the cognitive domain; the latter being the one that correlates with CTS and HOTS.

The cognitive domain in Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) rests on the foundation of knowledge; in consequence, there are six major categories of cognitive processes, starting from the simplest to the most complex cognitive skill that students should develop in order to reach higher forms of thinking. Such categories are: 1) Remembering; which is the retrieval of relevant knowledge from one's long-term memory, 2) Understanding; which is the ability to construct meaning from knowledge, 3) Applying; considered as the ability to use what has been learnt in new and concrete situations, 4) Analyzing; which is related to the ability of breaking down information and knowledge into its components, 5) Evaluating; related to the ability of assessing the value of new knowledge for a given purpose, and 6) Creating; which is putting various elements together to generate a new, coherent and functional whole.

CTS/HOTS and EFL: The (real) classroom connection

Helping our students to develop their CTS is not as difficult as some teachers may think; nor as simple either. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and other issues we may face in our everyday teaching practice, we do not have the opportunity to include activities in which our students must analyze, evaluate and create (stages 4, 5, and 6 in Bloom's Revised Taxonomy). As a way to support the idea that incorporating the development of CTS is not as complex as it seems, let us take a look at the following example in which all stages are covered:

Let us imagine that we are in a communicative grammar class in which we are dealing with the different uses of formulaic language and idiomatic expressions.

- 1) Remembering: For this stage, we would probably deal with the teaching and learning of formulaic language, idiomatic expressions, and grammar rules.

- 2) Understanding: At this stage we could be dealing with the form and function of words within the sentence.
- 3) Applying: The most obvious activity at this stage would be to ask our students to apply what they have learnt so far to communicate effectively and accurately.
- 4) Analyzing: At this stage, we could ask our class to analyze formulaic language and idiomatic expressions in English and Spanish and establish the differences and similarities between the two languages.
- 5) Evaluating: We could ask our students to do some research on the topic analyzed in stage 4; for example, they could evaluate the use of formulaic language and idiomatic expressions in students from other grades or even from other schools.
- 6) Creating: Our students could present their findings from stage 5 in a creative way, such as in a magazine designed and made by themselves, or in a more traditional way such as an oral presentation.

Along the same lines, students must be given opportunities to apply critical thinking skills and abilities in a wide range of contexts and subject areas. This is, for our students to truly develop their CTS there must be a real connection among school subjects when incorporating activities for the development of CTS/HOTS. It is crucial that we work as a collaborative community that aims at the same goal, rather than being the English teachers that ask students to perform difficult tasks that no-one seems to understand.

Another important point is that we should integrate HOTS into our activities; thus our lessons should include teaching strategies to promote CTS, such as classify and categorize, compare and contrast, problem solving, and most importantly: we should provide group opportunities; that is, collaborative learning.

Collaborative -or cooperative- learning is one of the teaching strategies that has evidenced to be the most positive in relation to the development of CTS. Some of its benefits are:

- 1) Students are taught how to analyse and criticize ideas, not people.
- 2) It stimulates CT as it helps students clarify ideas through discussion and debate.
- 3) It uses a team approach to problem solving while keeping individual responsibility.

- 4) It gives students the confidence to explore and discover their own CTS through meeting those of their peers.

Evaluation is also a crucial element to consider at the moment of dealing with CTS development. Some of the universal standards when evaluating the ‘quality’ of the reasoning about a given issue, problem, or situation are:

- a) **Clarity:** we should check that student’s ideas and arguments have been clearly organized and presented, that arguments are strong and go beyond pure description.
- b) **Preciseness:** we should determine if the student has presented thorough, complete ideas that support their reasoning; or, if on the contrary, their ideas are ambiguous.
- c) **Relevance:** as teachers, we ought to check that our student’s ideas are relevant; accurately expressed to support their arguments.
- d) **Broadness:** we should verify that our students’ reasoning does not stray off topic; quite the opposite, it should allow a complete, precise analysis.
- e) **Logic:** we must check that the work is presented in a logical, effective way; that is, for example, conclusions are based on the results of the analysis, not new information.
- f) **Importance:** it is always good to include in our rubrics criteria related to metacognitive knowledge; that is, criteria to see if our students are aware of the importance of their work.
- g) **Argumentation:** we should verify that the student has provided enough arguments and counter arguments supported on reliable sources and evidence, as confirmation of critical, careful thought and analysis.

Thus, when designing evaluation rubrics, it is equally important to consider linguistic elements so as to consider elements to evaluate our students’ CTS development. It is vital to mention at this point that this should happen only if we have been incorporating activities and strategies to develop CTS throughout a considerable period of time (i.e. a semester) and our students are already familiarized with these strategies.

Some other alternatives for enhancing CT among EFL learners through assessment practices are a) the use of ongoing assessment, b) providing feedback, and c) co-developing criteria for assessment. One-shot exams (standardized tests) require EFL learners to have a limited amount of knowledge, which is most of the times linguistic; whereas ongoing assessment (performance-

based assessment) gives teachers the opportunity to check a larger range of knowledge and skills, including CTS.

When it comes to feedback, this needs to occur frequently, from the beginning of the unit to its conclusion, in correspondence with performances of understanding. In addition, feedback may be formal or informal, planned or spontaneous, and it must come from a variety of perspectives: from students' reflection on their own work (self-evaluation), from classmates reflecting on one another's work (peer-feedback), and from the teacher. It must be mentioned here that, as in any other new activity, self-evaluation and peer-feedback need to be guided and regulated the first times that they are implemented, as students may get confused and/or may not understand the purpose of the activity at first.

Finally, it is a good idea to co-develop criteria for assessment; that is, to invite our students to develop the criteria for a particular task/performance themselves by looking at models of similar tasks/performances. By doing this as a learning community, we are helping our students to see how the criteria relate to the goals of the activity, guiding them to comprehend what is expected from them as EFL learners.

Conclusions

The present paper has evidenced that in order to successfully encourage the development of CTS/HOTS, explicit instruction in CT needs to be included in the curriculum, from the moment our pre-service teachers are being taught at university till the moment they become in-service teachers at school. For this reason, academics should implement activities and strategies to foster CTS in their pre-service teachers; so they can later on foster CTS in their students as well.

When it comes to assessing students' performance, there should be a balance between standardized instruments (one-shot tests) and performance-based assessment (ongoing assessment) so as to truly encourage CTS development.

Finally, by guiding our students in the process of their CTS development we are not only helping them to achieve their academic goals; but also helping them to become critical, autonomous human beings who have a valuable opinion –supported by arguments- to share with other people in order to make positive changes in our society.

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