

“RESEARCH-BASED TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHER EDUCATION: TRADITION AS A BASIS FOR INNOVATION”

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ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AT THE LESSONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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***Abstract.** Critical thinking denotes individuals' capacity to autonomously think and make accurate decisions. Presently, fostering critical thinking among learners is regarded as a crucial responsibility of foreign language instructors, given its significant role in language classrooms. Numerous factors influence the critical thinking skills of language learners, with assessment methods being one of them. Thus, by effectively managing how language learners' abilities are assessed, instructors can facilitate the development of their critical thinking skills. This presentation will offer suggestions for language teachers to select appropriate assessment methods and activities.*

Introduction

In recent times, critical thinking has emerged as a prominent aspect of foreign language teaching (FLT), with a focus on enhancing learners' critical thinking abilities becoming a key task for foreign language educators. Numerous factors influence the development of learners' critical thinking skills, among which the methods of assessment used in both classroom settings and at the conclusion of courses play a significant role. This paper posits that by effectively managing assessment methods, language instructors can aid learners in honing their critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking

Various educators, including Lipman (1991), Norris and Ennis (1989), and Siegel (1988), have proposed different definitions of critical thinking. However, these definitions share a common essence. According to Elder and Paul (1994), critical thinking involves individuals taking control of their own thought processes and establishing appropriate criteria and standards for evaluating their own thinking. Furthermore, as suggested by Maiorana (1992), critical thinking is aimed at fostering comprehension, evaluating diverse perspectives, and problem-solving.

Critical thinking in language instruction

The integration of critical thinking into foreign language teaching (FLT) classrooms holds significant importance for several reasons. Firstly, when language learners assume control over their own thought processes, they can effectively monitor and assess their learning methods. Secondly, critical thinking enriches the learning experience for learners, imbuing language acquisition with greater meaning.

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Thirdly, critical thinking demonstrates a strong correlation with learners' academic achievements (Rafi, n.d.). Various studies have underscored the pivotal role of critical thinking in enhancing ESL writing proficiency (Rafi, n.d.), language competency (Liaw, 2007), and oral communication skills (Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.). Proficiency in language usage can be attained when learners possess motivation and are instructed in applying critical thinking to their foreign language utilization. This necessitates learners' reflection on their idea generation and the critical substantiation of these ideas with logical reasoning (Rafi, n.d.). The nexus between language development and cognition underscores the importance of incorporating higher-order thinking skills into second language (L2) curricula. Educators have stressed the significance of cultivating higher-order thinking skills in FLT contexts (Chamot, 1995; Tarvin & Al-Arishi, 1991), with empirical studies supporting the efficacy of teaching critical thinking alongside foreign language acquisition (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1994, 1995).

Indeed, language learners equipped with critical thinking abilities exhibit capabilities surpassing those of their peers. Implicit in Mahyuddin et al.'s (2004) study is the notion that language learners endowed with critical thinking skills demonstrate prowess in critical and creative thinking to fulfill curriculum objectives, make informed decisions, tackle problems, utilize their cognitive abilities, and grasp language and its nuances. Such learners also embrace thinking skills as lifelong learning tools, fostering intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual equilibrium.

However, despite widespread consensus among theorists and educators regarding the significance of thinking skills in language development, conventional school environments often treat language learning and thinking skills as separate entities (Miraman & Tishman, 1988; Suhor, 1984). Essentially, as Pica (2000) suggests, the integration of language and thinking skills has historically been on the periphery within traditional English language teaching methodologies. Even communicative language teaching, which prioritizes language use as a means of communication, is criticized (e.g., Kabilan, 2000) for not adequately fostering proficiency in the target language. Kabilan argues that true language proficiency requires learners to engage in creative and critical thinking while using the language. Thus, it is suggested that even communicative approaches to language teaching may not effectively cultivate critical thinking among learners.

Given the benefits associated with enhancing critical thinking in language learners and the limited focus on this aspect in FLT settings, as Brown (2004) asserts, an ideal academic language program should extend its objectives beyond linguistic

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aspects to include the development of critical thinking skills. Indeed, the efficacy of language instruction hinges not only on linguistic instruction but also on fostering critical thinking as a purposeful and relevant expansion of learners' intellectual horizons (Widdowson, 1990).

Language educators wield significant influence over the learning experiences of language learners and, therefore, bear the responsibility of nurturing their critical thinking abilities. Perhaps more so than teachers of first languages, second language (L2) instructors have compelling reasons to introduce their students to critical thinking aspects (Davidson, 1998). According to Lipman (2003), teachers are accountable for fostering critical thinking in learners beyond merely facilitating their progression from one educational level to the next. Consequently, foreign language instructors are tasked with helping learners acquire critical thinking skills alongside language proficiency. As Mahyuddin et al. (2004) assert, there remains ample room for improvement in integrating thinking skills into our curricula.

Enhancing critical thinking through evaluation

Undoubtedly, the method of assessment in foreign language classrooms significantly shapes both the content and manner of learners' acquisition. This influence of testing on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as the "washback effect." Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 115) assert that "tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom." In his trichotomy of the backwash model, Hughes (1993) delineates test effects in terms of "participants," including teachers, students, administrators, materials writers, and publishers, "process" denoting the actions undertaken by participants to fulfill teaching and learning tasks, and "product" signifying learning outcomes and the quality of learning. Hughes' model suggests that the quality of a test significantly determines the extent and nature of its influence (Pan, 2009).

Assessment practices primarily impact learning by shaping the objectives learners set for themselves in acquiring a foreign language. Indeed, in many instances, the method of assessment dictates the objectives of the language learning program. For instance, in a context where assessment focuses on linguistic proficiency, mastery of linguistic skills becomes the learners' primary objective. Conversely, in a context emphasizing communicative competence, learners strive to attain fluency in communication in the foreign language. Similarly, when assessment prioritizes the integration of language and critical thinking skills, learners endeavor to meet this objective. Indeed, when teaching aims to facilitate understanding, assessment, in addition to evaluation, serves as a substantive contributor to learning.

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Assessment geared towards fostering comprehension should provide both students and teachers with insights into students' current understanding and guidance on subsequent teaching and learning strategies.

The suggestions provided here are just a selection from a broader array of points that, if implemented, can facilitate critical thinking among language learners. It is crucial for teachers to recognize that assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping what and how students learn in the language classroom. Therefore, teachers should carefully consider the most suitable methods of language assessment tailored to the specific context of their classroom.

In conclusion, the enhancement of critical thinking skills among language learners is paramount for effective language acquisition. Consequently, it is incumbent upon language teachers to promote critical thinking as part of their pedagogical responsibilities. This can be achieved through various means, including the judicious use of appropriate assessment methods, as assessment practices often dictate the learning objectives for language learners.

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