



Assessments' Techniques to Enhance Critical Thinking in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: At university level, it is not only what students know that is important; it is what they can do with that knowledge. In other words, students need to be assessed on their problem solving and critical thinking skills. Recently, enhancing critical thinking in learners has become one of the teachers' main tasks in English language classrooms. There are, in fact, various factors affecting language learners' critical thinking skills among which assessment methods are of great importance. Therefore, the present study seeks to find out the different methods and techniques used to promote critical thinking in EFL classes. The study reveals that if language teachers manage their ways of assessing their learners' language abilities, they can help them develop critical thinking skills. The study presents some suggestions for language teachers to choose the appropriate strategies and methods for good assessment. The paper includes the results of a small scale survey of EFL students' opinions of testing methods

Keywords: *critical thinking; assessment; EFL; enhancing; teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers at universities are always looking for better ways to evaluate their learners in order to satisfy quality enhancements' objectives. Thus, assessment quality is considered one of the challenging areas in education theories and practices. Assessment is used to achieve a range of purposes by using different methods and techniques; each method has its own characteristics and properties; it can be used as a basis for reporting a particular student's performance as well as to evaluate the performance of the entire system.

Recently, fostering language learners to be critical thinkers is valued in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching; yet how to achieve the objective

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remains a challenge. New tendencies in English as a foreign language (EFL) have highlighted the importance and necessity of developing critical thinking (CT) as an integral part of English language curriculum (Tang, 2016). In EFL classes, learners need CT skills to read beyond the texts, to write good essays, to express their ideas with appropriate supporting arguments, and to challenge the others positions and point of views. To check and evaluate all these practices, educational instructors are asked to administer in addition to usual objective examinations subjective examinations or combine between the two types. Objective testing has either a right or wrong answer and thus can be marked objectively. Objective tests include multiple choice or true or false questions. However, subjective tests can provide various answers to the same question. This type of evaluation requires the student to do a fair amount of writing. As far as marking is concerned, the same question, in subjective tests can result to various possible answers but some are more accurate or convincing than others. Therefore, when marking, the examiner has to take into consideration the learners' judgments. At university level, students need to be assessed on their problem solving and critical thinking skills and objective testing are generally used to measure students' progress within a course.

2. The Conceptualization of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has been defined and explored in various ways among philosophers, researchers and educationalists. It has generally been considered as a concept difficult to define and specify. In his study on critical thinking and education, Glasser (1941) explicates critical thinking as "the ability to think critically" (p.409). According to Glaser, critical thinker is able to make reasonable judgments that are logical and thought out. Critical thinking is a way of thinking in which people do not simply accept all arguments and conclusions they are exposed to, but rather possess an attitude which involves questioning such arguments and conclusions along with accepting two sides of an idea. In fact, several specialists in the field refer while defining critical thinking to the skills, practice and the need for reflection by both the student and the teacher. Discussing critical thinking issue, Scriven and Richard (1987) refer to some attributes of critical thinking: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness. Fairness and empathy have also been considered as important criteria for critical thinking by Elder and Paul (2009).

CT has been regarded as a concept difficult to define and specify with precision. From a cognitive psychological perspective, Sternberg (1986) defines CT as “the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts” (p. 3).

Among the most prominent philosophical theorists in the field of CT, Ennis has noticeably contributed to the conceptualization of CT. According to Ennis (1993), CT is “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 180). Furthermore, the author investigates what CT theory implies. He offers a comprehensive list of thirteen CT dispositions and a set of CT skills. Moreover, Elder and Paul (1994) maintain that, critical thinking refers to individuals’ ability to think independently and develop appropriate criteria and standards for analysing their own thinking. In the same vein, Maiorana (1992) argues that critical thinking aims at achieving understanding, and evaluating different perspectives, and solving problems. However, Ennis (2011) claims that having requisite CT skills is not enough to clarify, to judge well, and to infer wisely, an ideal critical thinker must also have the tendency to use these skills willingly.

3. Critical Thinking as a Teaching Strategy

Critical thinking has been an important issue in education, and has become quite the buzzword around schools and universities. Experts in the critical thinking movement have argued that effective and meaningful teaching and learning processes require that curricular, pedagogical and assessment strategies at all levels of education be coordinated so as to foster in learners those cognitive capacities and habits of inquiry associated with critical thinking. A lot of authors in the field of CT (critical thinking) claim that CT can be taught, although there may be some disagreements on how to teach its skills. Mc Peck (1981) argues that critical thinking is “teachable, namely, through drills, exercises or problem solving in an area” (p.18). Educationalists have asserted that teaching learners to be critical thinkers is vitally important for the students themselves and for society in general. While teaching critical thinking, instructors focus on how students approach a question and reason about it. Pedagogical strategies focus on promoting in students such cognitive capacities and affective dispositions which make of them good critical thinkers (Facione, 1990).

As for assessment, critical thinking insists on the quality of the critical thinking the learners develop to achieve a certain answer rather than targeting

whether an answer is correct. Therefore, to ensure success, critical thinking strategies must continue to approach some fundamental academic concerns. What exactly are those skills and dispositions which characterize critical thinking? What are some effective ways to teach critical thinking? And how can critical thinking, particularly if it becomes a state-wide requirement, be assessed?

Critical thinking movement requires teachers to raise-up their learners' mental workflow beyond just memorization—which is a really good step forward. Critical thinking is a skill that young minds will undeniably need and exercise well beyond their school years. Specialists in the field believe that in keeping up with the ever-changing technological advances, students need to get, understand, and analyse information on a much more efficient scale. In this respect, Hader (2005) states that “if students are to function successfully in a highly technical society, then they must be equipped with lifelong learning and thinking skills necessary to acquire and process information in an ever-changing world” (Hader, 2005, p.16). It is our job, then, as educators to equip our students with the strategies and skills they need to think critically in order to cope with all the tech problems and obstacles they face elsewhere.

Some researchers (Paul, 1995; Savage, 1998; Hannel & Hannel, 1998; and Elder & Paul, 1998) believe that the best method for teaching critical thinking is using questioning (or Socratic questioning). Savage (1998), for example, argues that “it is common knowledge that the strategy that can have the greatest impact on student thinking is teacher questioning” (p. 291). Supporting the same view, Hannel and Hannel (1988) provide seven steps to critical thinking. They explore a framework for the types of questions to ask students during the learning process. In the same vein, Paul (1995) considers questioning (especially Socratic questioning) as crucial to the teaching of critical thinking. He also explains that the questioning method can be used to fulfill three different functions: 1) they help students organize their thoughts for writing assignments, 2) they help students think more deeply about basic ideas, and 3) they help students think carefully about difficult social issues.

4. Critical Thinking in EFL Classes

At present time, enhancing critical thinking in foreign language classes has become one of the fundamental English language teacher's preoccupations. This is due to the high position it gains in foreign language classrooms. A lot of factors are found to affect language learners' critical thinking skills. Among these factors

is the assessment techniques employed. Therefore, if EFL teachers succeed in managing the assessing techniques, students will develop critical thinking skills.

If language learners can think independently and in their own ways, they inevitably succeed in controlling and evaluating their own ways of learning. In addition, critical thinking expands the students' learning experience and the language becomes more meaningful for them. In fact, various studies have discussed the important role of critical thinking in improving writing ability (Rafi, 2009); language proficiency (Liaw, 2007); and oral communication ability (Kusaka & Robertson, 2006).

EFL students may become proficient if they are taught critical thinking skills in foreign language usage, which means that learners must have production while expressing ideas, and they may critically support those ideas with logical details (Rafi, 2009). EFL students who have been instructed critical thinking skills may have more capacities for doing activities than others. According to Mahyuddin et al (2004), those students with critical thinking abilities can think critically and creatively to achieve the curriculum objectives and become intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually well- balanced.

Theorists and educators have stressed the importance of thinking skills in developing language learning process. Kabilan (2000), for example, argues that even communicative language teaching approach, which focuses on language as a communicative tool does not really help language learners to become proficient in the target language. He explains that to be proficient in a language, learners must be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language. Therefore, it is implied that communicative approaches to language teaching are not sufficient to develop critical thinking among learners. It is the task of language teachers to help their learners improve their critical thinking abilities. According to Davidson (1998), foreign language teachers have more reasons than L1 teachers to introduce aspects of critical thinking. Furthermore, Lipman (2003) asserts that teachers' responsibility is not just helping students to move from one educational level to another but rather promote critical thinking in their learners.

5. Assessing Critical Thinking

Assessment tests are the preliminary and fundamental technique to evaluate students' mental ability, problem-solving skills, and technical knowledge and so on. According to Glaser, Chudowsky and Pellegrino (2001), assessment has three main objectives: to assist learning, to measure a particular student's achievement

and to evaluate the whole program. Thus, without good assessment techniques it is difficult to ascertain whether reforms in instruction and curriculum are working.

Evaluating tests are the best way of filtering out the average performers to shortlist the others for further rounds. These tests help instructors recognize how talented and skillful learners are based on their marks.

Activities promoting critical thinking allow teachers to assess whether their students are, indeed, reaching their teachers' critical thinking goals. Thus, it has generally been argued that critical assessment can be done, but also that it should vary according to the purpose and the format of the task and the topic being taught. It is important to state explicit criteria for evaluating critical thinking. The following are the most important objectives and criteria stated by Paul (1995, p. 107-109) for assessing higher order thinking, which is linked to critical thinking.

- 1-It should assess students' skills and abilities in analyzing, synthesizing, applying, and evaluating information.
- 2-It should make clear the inter-connectedness of our knowledge and abilities, and why expertise in one area cannot be divorced either from findings in other areas or from sensitivity to the need for interdisciplinary integration.
- 3-It should account for the integration of communication skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking and it should assess all of them without compromising essential features of any of them.
- 4-It should test for thinking that is empowering and that, when incorporated into instruction, promotes the active involvement of students in their own learning process.
- 5-It should be of a kind that will assess valuable skills applied to genuine problems as seen by a large body of the populace, both inside and outside of the educational community.
- 6-It should contain items that, as much as possible, are examples of the real-life problems and issues that people will have to think out and act upon.

These objectives for assessment are extremely important in deciding how to evaluate critical thinking. Importantly to note that instructors can assess their students throughout a course, not just at the end. In fact, it is more useful to assess students throughout a course to check if criteria require further clarification or explanation and students can test out their

understanding of the criteria and receive feedback. It is also important to provide the students with the criteria in addition to the assignments so that students receive guidance about their teachers' expectations. This will help them to reflect on their own work and improve the quality of their thinking and writing.

6. Promoting Critical Thinking through Assessments in EFL Classes

Assessment is very important to measure achievement of learning objectives. In fact, assessments in foreign language classrooms are crucial to measure what and how students learn. Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 115) state that "tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom". Assessment activities have a special impact in learning through affecting the objectives traced by the learners themselves in learning a foreign language. In many cases, it is the learning program objectives which determine the way of assessment. If during a teaching process, the focus is on the linguistic competence of the learners, mastery of linguistic competence becomes the learners' principal objective; however, if in the teaching context, the emphasis is on communicative competence, learners' major aim is to become communicatively competent in the foreign language (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). Similarly, if in a teaching context, the assessment's focus is on integrating language and thinking skills, learners do their best to achieve this objective (ibid).

The following strategies are suggested to enhance critical thinking among language learners through assessment practices:

- 1- Using an ongoing assessment rather a summative one that is done at the end of a specific instructional period. The latter requires the language learner to have a limited amount of knowledge which is mostly linguistic, however when learners are tested during the lecture, a large amount of knowledge and practices including critical thinking skills could be tested. Ongoing assessment focuses more on the process of learning rather than the products of learning by measuring the test taker's performance at a particular time in addition to the progress made by the learners since the last test.
- 2- Using criterion-referenced (CR) testing rather than norm-referenced (NR) testing. The concern in norm referred testing is to identify whether the tested learner performed better or worse than others; it does not care about what they learn or how they use their knowledge, it does not

measure the needed knowledge of the material necessary for a given purpose. Criterion referred test, on the other hand, focuses more on the differences in a non-competitive atmosphere. The test encourages learners to learn from each other in a non-competitive and friendly atmosphere. Using CR testing, teachers help their language learners to develop critical thinking through understanding the material rather than caring about the outcomes of the others.

3- Avoiding the use of activities which can be carried out through simpler processes such as memorizing, substituting, learning by heart, etc. which are not beneficial for enhancing critical thinking and focus rather on activities which make the test takers think, cooperate, ask questions, etc. Thus, such types of activities encourage learners to think about the main objectives of the lecture and learning in general, including developing critical thinking skills.

4- Providing the learners with frequent feedback which implies that thinking is not an independent but rather an integral skill of the learning process. The feedback is crucial to develop learners' understanding of a particular topic or concept. Moreover, feedback informs learners about how well they have managed with the activities and how they might improve them; in other words, the feedback tells the students how well they are doing and inform them about how to do better.

The strategies stated above are just few among many strategies which might be adopted in foreign language classrooms and which if used by teachers can help foreign language learners develop their critical thinking. Teachers in general and those of foreign languages in particular should know that assessment is the key determinant of what is learnt and how it is learnt. They can employ appropriate ways of assessment depending on their classroom's context.

What follows are the results of a small scale survey that has been used to elicit EFL students' opinions about assessments methods used in EFL classes.

7. The Method

Thirty two EFL students at the university of Ain Temouchent (Algeria) have been surveyed on their opinions on testing at tertiary level.

The respondents are master-one students and they already have knowledge about critical thinking skills since they are taught a module named critical thinking and problem solving. The study has used 5 point Likert scale questionnaire. The results of the survey have been analysed through data descriptive statistics (percentage of responses).

8. The Results

The following section presents the results of the survey questionnaire and the descriptive statistics of the data (see Table 1)

Table 1

The results from the survey (Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Neutral=3, Disagree=2 and Strongly Disagree=1)

| Statement | 5 sa | 4ag | 3n | 2d | 1 sd |
|--|-------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| 1-I like to use critical thinking skills | 20% | 42.55% | 20.45% | 9% | 8% |
| 2-Assessment is an important tool to measure critical thinking skills | 30% | 54.55% | 15.45% | 0% | 0% |
| 3-I like problem solving questions | 13.92% | 39.90% | 35.18% | 8% | 3% |
| 4-I like to be assessed regularly during the learning process | 36.94% | 47.76% | 12.16% | 3.14% | 0% |
| 5-Multiple choice questions are too easy to Answer | 13.63% | 61.36% | 25% | 0% | 0% |
| 6-Synthesising questions show the instructor what I know | 13.63% | 61.36% | 25% | 0% | 0% |
| 7-I like critical thinking activities to be infused in the exam sheet. | 10.16% | 19% | 31.84% | 22% | 17% |

The results of the survey show that a large number of students like to use critical thinking skills and problem solving questions. The majority of the students, 54.55% strongly agree and 30% agree that assessment is an important tool to measure critical thinking skills. An important number of students (36.94% and 47.76%) claim that they like ongoing assessment during their learning process. A large number of students feel that multiple choice questions are too easy to answer. 61.36% of the respondents think that synthesising questions show the instructor what they know. However, while asking them if they like critical thinking activities to be included in their exams, a noticeable number of participants are of neutral opinion and 22% disagree to have such types of activities.

9. Discussion of the Results

In fact the result for this survey match with what has been said previously concerning the appropriate and useful techniques for assessing critical thinking in foreign language classrooms. Students have positive attitudes towards critical thinking assessment methods except for the last question when they are asked if they like including critical thinking activities in their exams, students feel afraid and avoid supporting the idea. Here, such results may be interpreted to the fact that critical thinking assessments' grades might not be satisfying for them because of the subjectivity of the questions; they rather prefer objective questions and this can be confirmed by their answers of question 5 when the majority of respondents claim that multiple choice questions are easy to answer.

10. CONCLUSION

Recently, an interest has been given to the implementation of critical thinking skills in language classrooms. Critical thinking has become so significant in developing effective language learning that it needs to be promoted among language learners. It is, then, the task of instructors to enhance critical thinking criteria either in the learning process or in assessment practices. Therefore, teachers can use a variety of appropriate assessment methods to identify the learning objectives in language learning classrooms.

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