

ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: This article deal with enhancing critical thinking through assessment in English language teaching. There are many different methods to discuss and analyze.

Key words: critical thinking, foreign language, activities, communication ability, classroom engagement.

Enhancing critical thinking: There is no doubt that the way of assessment in foreign language classrooms highly influences what and how the learners learn. This influence of testing on teaching and learning is referred to as washback effect. Alderson and Wall state that —tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom. In his trichotomy of backwash model, Hughes’s (1993) describes test effects in terms of —participants such as teachers, students, administrators, materials writers, and publishers, —process referring to those actions taken by participants to complete teaching and learning tasks and —product referring to learning outcomes and the quality of learning. Hughes’ model implies that the quality of a test determines to a high degree the level and amount of washback (Pan, 2009). Assessment practices mainly influence learning through affecting the objectives the learners set for themselves in learning the foreign language. In fact, in many cases the way of assessment is determinant of the objectives of the language learning program. If in a language teaching context, assessment focuses on linguistic competence of the learners, mastery of linguistic competence becomes the learners' objective, while in a context emphasizing communicative competence, learners do their best to become communicatively competent in the foreign language. In the same way, if the focus of assessment is on integrating language and thinking skills, the learners do their best to achieve this objective. In fact, when the purpose of teaching is understanding the process of assessment, in addition to evaluation, is a substantive contribution to learning.

Assessment that fosters understanding needs to inform students and teachers about both what students currently understand and how to proceed with subsequent teaching and learning. Here are presented a number of suggestions for enhancing critical thinking among language learners through assessment practices:

1. Use ongoing assessment rather than one-shot exams at the end of the semester. While one-shot exams require the test taker to have a limited amount of knowledge, mostly linguistic, ongoing assessment carried out during the course gives the teacher

the opportunity to test a larger range of knowledge and skills, including critical thinking skills.

2. Use criterion-referenced (CR) testing rather than norm-referenced (NR) testing. NR testing encourages learners to attempt to be better than others without thinking about what they learn and how they use it. Moreover, CR testing welcomes the differences among learners and consequently, differences among learners lead to learners' learning from each other in a friendly non-competitive atmosphere. While the learners become more cooperatives than competitors, they become more concerned with understanding than with outcomes. As such the help each other in developing critical thinking skills.

3. Include activities in your assessment which encourage the learner to think about the major objectives of the course, including developing critical thinking skills. The type of activities used in assessing language learners determines the goals of learning. Those activities which can be carried out through simpler processes such as memorizing, substituting, etc. are not appropriate activities for enhancing critical thinking in language learners. Better activities for the purpose of promoting critical thinking skills are those which require the learners to think, cooperate, ask questions from themselves and others, etc. These activities also require the learners to the activities with the purposes of such activities.

4. Provide learners with feedback which gives learners understanding that thinking is an integral part of their learning experience. This integration of performance and feedback is exactly what students need as they work to develop their understanding of a particular topic or concept. Feedback needs to occur frequently, from the beginning of the unit to its conclusion, in conjunction with performances of understanding. Some occasions for feedback may be formal and planned; some may be more informal. Feedback also needs to provide students with information not only about how well they have carried out the activities but also how they might improve them. Furthermore, it needs to inform learners of the teachers' planning of subsequent classes and activities. Another requirement of feedback is that it must come from a variety of perspectives: from students' reflection on their own work, from classmates reflecting on one another's work, and from the teacher. Model for students how to provide feedback that both tells them how well they are doing and gives them information about how they might do better.

5. Co-develop criteria for assessment. Even if you have a sense for what the criteria for a particular performance should be, try inviting learners to develop the criteria themselves by looking at models of similar performances. Help students to see how the criteria relate to the goals of the activities.

The points suggested here are just a few among many points which if taken into account can help language learners think critically. In fact, what is highly important is

the teachers' understanding and having in mind that assessment is a key determinant of what is learnt in the language class and how it is learnt. In that case, the teachers can choose the most appropriate ways of language assessment with regard to the specific context of their own classroom.

Teachers' Critical Thinking Ability: Critical thinking has attracted much attention since teachers' way of thinking and beliefs has a pivotal impact on what students achieve in terms of academic success and attainments. Dewey (1933, p. 9), who can be regarded as the father of modern critical thinking, conceptualized it as “active, persistent, and careful of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” As defined by Chance (1986), critical thinking is conceptualized as the capability that one puts into practice to do the followings through this ability: facts which are analyzed, ideas that are generated and organized, opinions that are defended, comparisons that are made, inferences that are drawn, arguments which are evaluated, ideas that are organized, and problems that are solved. As stated by Vdovina and Gaibisso (2013), critical thinking is relevant to quality thinking that enables learners to communicate with others, gain knowledge, and deal with ideas, attitudes, and beliefs in a more skillful way. Based on what has been proposed by Shirkhani and Fahim (2011), critical thinking is an integral factor in many ways. The first reason that can be taken into consideration is that when language learners take responsibility for the way they think; they can evaluate the way they learn in a more successful way.

Secondly, critical thinking causes learners to experience a meaningful process of learning in which learning a language is meaningful to them. Thirdly, critical thinking and learners' achievement are positively correlated. If the learners are shown how to think critically, they get proficient in learning a language. Likewise, Liaw (2007) study indicated that when the content-based approach is implemented in the class, it promotes EFL students' critical thinking skills. It should be noted that in a content-based approach, attention is focused on the content and what can be perceived through it.

Besides, as Davidson (1998) noted, “the English teachers are expected to provide learners with the ability to communicate with native speakers, valuing overt comments, clever criticism, and intellectual claims.” In a similar manner, Meyers (1986) proposed that teachers can facilitate critical thinking through the activities that are assigned, the tasks that are set, and the feedback that is provided. A study done in a Chinese context by Li and Liu (2021) put forward the taxonomy of critical thinking ability in the EFL learning context and in this study, five skills through which critical thinking can be practiced, were proposed: analyzing, inferring, evaluating, synthesizing, and self-reflection/self-correction (Wang and Derakhshan, 2021). Li (2021) also indicated that the development of critical thinking in international students can be facilitated by

learning Chinese. According to a study done by Birjandi and Bagherkazemi (2010), a critical thinker has the following characteristics:

- problems are identified by them and relevant solutions are dealt with,
- valid and invalid inferences are recognized by them,
- decisions and judgments are suspended by them when there is not enough evidence to prove it
- the difference between logical reasoning and justifying is perceived by them
- relevant questions are asked by them to see if their students have understood
- statements and arguments are evaluated
- lack of understanding can be accepted by them
- they have developed a sense of curiosity
- clear criteria for analyzing ideas are defined
- he is a good listener and gives others feedback
- he believes that critical thinking is a never-ending process that needs to be evaluated
- judgment is suspended by them until all facts have been collected
- they seek evidence for the assumptions to be advocated
- opinions are adjusted by them when there are some new facts
- incorrect information is easily rejected by them.

Consequently, according to the characteristics mentioned above, teachers with the ability to think critically is good problem solvers and when facing a problem during the class, they can have greater reasoning skills so as to find a solution to the problem. They are curious and they also ask their students questions to create a sense of curiosity in them. Additionally, they do not accept the new ideas easily, instead, they analyze them and sometimes make them better.

The Relationship Between Teachers’ Critical Thinking Ability and Classroom Engagement: Critical thinking has been said to widen one’s horizon because it may shape students’ mindsets and help them take a look at items from a different viewpoint. When one has learned to think critically, they will never accept the status quo easily, he will welcome the opposing ideas and will evaluate the arguments. In the EFL context, when a learner has the capability to think critically, or he has been taught to think critically, he always looks for reasons learning new materials and in this respect, his curiosity allows him to learn everything in depth and challenge his schemata to make a link between the newly learned ideas and the ones he has already known. Critical thinking is not a term that can be utilized just for the specific type of people; it can be taught and practiced to be enhanced. The way ideas can be generated and the way comparisons can be made is highly relevant to what has been called critical thinking. Different items can be conceptualized in different ways when we look at them through the lens of critical thinking; therefore, it can have a positive effect on students’

mindsets and the way they live. From an educational point of view, the decisions that have been made by the students, the solutions that have been put forward to tackle a problem when it comes to a learning context, and the way through which their process of learning is ameliorated are all impacted by teachers’ critical thinking. When teachers think critically and they strive to see different skills from a different point of view, it is where students’ sense of curiosity is tickled and their imagination is stretched so as to think of things in a various way.

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