ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENTS’ CRITICAL THINKING ABILITY

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Abstract
Critical thinking is the mastery of a set of skills such as knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and applying the best when faced with a novel situation; furthermore, the three higher levels, i.e. analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, are frequently reported to reflect CT. It is a cognitive skill which influences the way of our thinking. It includes the ability to think clearly and rationally, to engage in reflective and independent thinking; the ability to decide what to do or what to believe. Nowadays, critical thinking is one of the major concepts under consideration in education. Its role in second and foreign language learning and teaching is of great importance. It has a significant role in higher education and the professions and can be considered as a core of higher education and as a fundamental goal of learning. If critical thinking is clearly expressed in higher education, then students who are achieving those levels of qualification will be critical thinkers. The aim of the paper is to examine university teachers’ perceptions related to the development of critical thinking skills and students’ critical thinking abilities in teaching English language in their classes. The paper aims to answer such questions as: How do ESL university teachers promote critical thinking in their classes? What are ESL university teachers’ perceptions towards students’ critical thinking abilities? Are students critical thinker? (Bloom’s Taxonomy).

Key words: critical thinking, critical thinker, English teaching, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION
Critical thinking is a cognitive skill which influences the way of our thinking. According to Ennis (2011) critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking; the ability to decide what to do or what to believe. Nowadays, critical thinking is one of the major concepts under consideration in education. Its role in second and foreign language learning and teaching is of great importance (Atkinson, 1997). Moon (2008) asserts that critical thinking has a significant role in higher education and the professions. It can be considered as a core of higher education and as a fundamental goal of learning. She believes that if critical thinking is clearly expressed in higher education, then students who are achieving those levels of qualification will be critical thinkers. Concerning the importance of critical thinking in education, Gelder (2005) and Willingham (2007) agree that a primary goal of education is to enable the students to think critically. They believe that the aim of higher education is to teach students critical thinking skills. According to Halpern, (1999) critical thinking is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, calculating likelihoods, formulating inferences and making decision. Researchers (e.g. Halpern, 1999; Gelder, 2005; Willingham, 2007) believe that critical thinking should receive more attention and all of its possible effects on language learning should be investigated. They indicate that learners who think more critically are more successful in language learning.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical thinking is the mastery of a set of skills such as knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and applying the best when faced with a novel situation; furthermore, the three higher levels, i.e. analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, are frequently reported to reflect CT. (Bloom, 1956). According to Ennis (1989) critical thinking involves a practical process in which a sequence of critical thinking skills will be implemented. In accordance, he developed many critical skills. Bartlett (1985) defined critical thinking as “the extension of belief, practice or evidence into new regions so as to make more widely available and fill up gaps in the belief or evidence”. Lipman (1988) indicated that skillful and reflective thinking can make one wise in judgment for it highlights self-evaluation and regulation based on certain standards and understanding of context. Later Richard Paul (1990), an internationally-recognized authority in critical thinking expanded the conception of critical thinking, and introduced the metacognition model into the critical research, and considered that critical thinking is a kind of individual thinking model in which thinkers stipulate the inner structure of thinking and apply knowledge to assess them so as to improve their thinking. Paul (1992) further explained that as people get accustomed to thinking critically, dispositions of mind will be formed such as “intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, and confidence in reason”. Ruggiero (2012) defined thinking as “a conscious mental process performed to solve a problem, make a decision, or gain understanding” and critical thinking as “the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not”, with its essence being evaluation. Accordingly, critical thinking ability is concerned with the ability to analyze and evaluate things and then make due judgments about them. These abilities were also emphasized by Cambridge Assessment which defined critical thinking as analytical thinking with its explicit focuses on the processes of “analyzing arguments, judging the relevance and significance of information, evaluating claims, inferences, arguments and explanations, constructing clear and coherent arguments, and forming well-reasoned judgments and decisions” (Black, 2012). In a second language context, ways in which critical thinking might be interpreted and taught have become highly debated concerns for L2 learning scholars and practitioners in recent years (Thompson, 2008). Convergent and divergent teaching methods are from these ways of education. Divergent thinking is the process to create several unique solutions intending to solve a problem. Convergent thinking is systematic and logical while the process of divergent thinking is spontaneous and free-flowing. When using convergent thinking, we use logical steps in order to choose the single best solution. By using divergent thinking, we search for new options. Convergent thinking stands firmly on logic and less on creativity, while divergent thinking is mostly based on creativity. We use divergent thinking mostly in open-ended problems that creativity is a fundamental part. (Williams, 2003).

Teaching of higher-order thinking skills should be an integral part of an L2 curriculum. Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills along with the foreign language (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1994, 1995). The promotion of critical thinking into the FLT classrooms is of high significance for several reasons. Firstly, if language learners can take charge of their own thinking, they can monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully. Second, critical thinking expands the learning experience of the learners and makes the language more meaningful for them. Thirdly, critical thinking has a high degree of correlation with the learners’ achievements (Rafi, n.d.). Language learners with critical thinking ability are capable of thinking creatively and in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum; capable of solving problems and making decisions; capable of using their thinking skills, and of understanding language or its contents; capable of treating thinking skills as lifelong learning; and finally physically, intellectually,
emotionally and spiritually well-balanced. (Brookfield, 2012). Pica (2000) suggests that for learners to be proficient in a language, they need to be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language. Brown (2004) asserts, in an ideal academic language program, the objectives of the curriculum should go beyond linguistic factors to develop critical thinking among learners. In fact, the effectiveness of language teaching will depend upon what is being taught, in addition to language, which learners can consider as a purposeful and relevant extension of their horizons (Widdowson, 1990). Language teachers should help learners develop critical thinking abilities. Maybe even more than L1 teachers, L2 teachers have reasons to introduce their students to aspects of critical thinking (Davidson, 1998). As Lipman (2003) says, teachers are responsible for promoting critical thinking in the learners other than helping them to go from one educational level to the next. The responsibility of foreign language teachers is to help their learners acquire critical thinking skills while learning the language.

In all, critical thinking is an active logical process, it involves a set of skills, it is a kind of attitude and has an effective role on the processes of foreign language and learners who are more critical are more successful in language learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is used a descriptive research method. The study will try to examine university teachers’ perceptions related to the development of critical thinking skills and students’ critical thinking abilities in teaching English language in their classes. The participants in this study are 15 teachers from different faculties. The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions is used as an instrument in order to get feedback related to teachers’ perceptions regarding the following questions as:

1. How do ESL university teachers promote critical thinking in their classes?
2. What are ESL university teachers’ perceptions towards students’ critical thinking abilities?
3. Are students critical thinker? (Bloom’s Taxonomy)

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: General questions about critical thinking skills in English language teaching and questions based on the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, which classifies thinking as containing six cognitive levels of complexity: (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001):

- Remembering: Retrieving, recognizing, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory
- Understanding: Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining.
- Applying: Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing.
- Analyzing: Breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organizing, and at attributing
- Evaluating: Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.
• Creating: Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing

RESULTS

In connection with teachers’ training in fostering critical thinking skills in language class, most of the teachers stated that they were not involved in any training which valued the importance of critical thinking in language class. A large number of participants also agreed that critical thinking in the class can improve English language learning. In general, the results show that ESL university teachers make much effort to foster critical thinking in their teaching practices which means that English classes are not teacher-centered, teachers do not spend most of their time lecturing, and the class provide students with necessary opportunities to develop their critical thinking. More than 65% of the teachers most of the time involve students in problem-solving tasks, use different styles of learning or use open-ended questions. The majority of the teachers (80%) often incorporate activities that stimulate students’ imagination and more than 70% of them encourage students to evaluate what they read or allow for debating views and ideas. More than half of teachers (80%) encourage students to express their views and differences. According to the results obtained from the questions based on the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy teachers pointed out that most of the students use only the first two levels (creating and evaluating) which means they are only capable of absorbing pre-planned amount of knowledge which is transferred to them and could not be focused on enhancing their higher-level cognitive abilities. Although teachers integrate critical thinking skills in classes, students’ cognitive abilities are not developed enough to be critical thinkers. Given the fact that critical thinking is a long-term process, teachers have to work very hard to lead students to be active learners.

CONCLUSION

Critical thinking has a significant role in developing effective language learning and it needs to be enhanced among language learners. Critical thinking skills are cultivated through training and practice and developing them involves a process of intellectual and cognitive practice. English teachers should involve courses with specific focus on critical thinking that will result in educating intellectual students with analytical abilities that are precise, clear, helpful and well reasoned. Critical thinking skill must be taught, teachers has to lead students from the most important skill of thinking to the most complex form of cognitive skills.

REFERENCES


