

Critical Thinking and its Place in Iranian English Classrooms

Zahra Jamaledin ¹, Mohammad Golshan ¹

1. Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Yazd, Iran.

* Corresponding Author's Email: zizijamali@yahoo.com

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of schooling should be to improve students' critical thinking at each level of education from pre-elementary to academic programs. Critical thinking (hereafter CT) in teaching paves the way for students to become involved in reflective thinking to a topic, text or social injustices through the processes of awareness, reflection, and argumentation and become as independent thinkers (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 147). CT is an ability that leads the learners to think critically and is a cognitive skill. It enables the learners to grasp the connections between ideas, to evaluate the ideas, to distinguish the mismatches between them, and to reflect their own values and opinions (Lau & Chan, 2004-2015). Most of us use only a little capacity of our thinking. We can improve it like other abilities by practicing. Becoming an extremely good thinker does not occur an overnight, it needs many months or even many years. Some stages can help our students and us to improve this skill: 1. we do not know that there are some problems into our thinking, 2. we can distinguish the problems, 3. we make an attempt to start thinking but not regularly, 4. then we change this non-regularity practice into regularity, and 5. our improvement starts and finally CT becomes part of us (Paul & Elder, 2001). A person who is not skillful in thinking in every situation or position encounters a lot of problems, wastes a lot of time and energy and gets bored. Every day we face a lot of situations when we have to make choices with some questions that occupy our minds. But the first step is to learn how to become an influential critic of our thinking. We should learn how we think, we should study our thinking and also have some information about how mind processes the information and how it evaluates, analyzes and reconstructs our thinking (Paul & Elder, 2001). Based on some models of CT, this paper was going to investigate the place of CT in Iranian English classrooms and also reveal which levels of CT were absent in our classrooms. Why didn't Iranian English classrooms benefit from this skill and why most students were not excellent critical thinkers?

II. WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

From the time of Socrates CT has been a means for teaching and learning. (Alexander et al., 2010) Fairclough (1985) argued that the word "critical" is related to "critique and idea" and means "making visible the connectedness of things" (cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 90). As mentioned earlier, educational systems are going to enhance learners' CT, in other words we want to make them think about their knowledge, actions, and beliefs. It is going to

enable them to notice different dimensions of an issue, to be open-minded to the proofs that rebut their ideas, to support their ideas with evidence, and to be able to infer the facts (Willingham, 2007, p. 8). Walker (2003) stated that CT leads the learners to engage in the thought process and "not only is the person evaluating, analyzing, and interpreting the information, he or she is also analyzing inferences and assumptions made regarding that information. "Education systems in the USA, the UK and in Asia Pacific countries, such as Singapore and Australia have started to include CT as a key component of their educational goals (Kadir, 2007, P. 1). Why is it important? Nowadays every society faces complex problems and needs perfect critical thinkers and people who can think of solving these difficulties creatively and also be in competitive with gifted people of other countries. There are some misunderstandings about CT. Some believe that critical thinkers always criticize other people but the real meaning is that they deny false and improper opinions and are going to find only the truth and they are criticism of other people's wrong actions in order to remind people of their mistakes (Lau, 2011). Researchers have examined to grasp whether there is a relation between willingness to think critically and CT skills and most of them have concluded that inclination is necessary but not enough (Bailin et al. 1999). Dewey's sentence supported this claim that pure knowledge does not suffice for the ability to think best, the learners should aspire to think too. Dewey believed that in addition to willingness to think critically other elements such as "open mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility were important to develop the habit of thinking"(cited in Walker, 2003). He also argued that CT can be a base for all kinds of thoughts (Fahim et al. 2012). Facione (2015) adds other factors that affect CT such as "curiosity, diligence, analyticity, self-confidence and maturity that learners should use them to form and to make judgments." Cognitive scientists express that CT is those activities that are concerned with reasoning, problem solving, and deciding. But most students do not feel comfortable in the classrooms that need these processes such as math classroom, English classroom, for example when they are asked to answer the questions of reading comprehension where they face the questions that are not fact questions and cause them to infer or to evaluate they express their inconvenience. Unfortunately it seems that we as teachers have not been successful to train the learners to obtain these skills.

III. METHODS TO PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING

The instructors who apply lecture formats have reported that they promote students' CT because when lecturing the students should decide which parts contain important information. Some argue that students should face the ambiguity of some materials that motivates them in order to enhance CT, but we have to consider an essential point that the materials in which the students are interested should be selected. "Why" questions result in interpreting, analyzing, and based on some assumptions the learners reach a conclusion. But these questions must be a little beyond their knowledge level because they should evaluate and put the facts together to make greater concepts (Walker, 2003). Bloom's taxonomy shows a model for CT and classifies learning objectives and also is a framework for exam questions. It includes six levels from knowledge to evaluation that shows the lower level of CT to the higher level. All kinds of questions must be included in classroom discussions and

examinations, (i) " Knowledge" level, the learners memorize or recall; (ii) "Comprehending", they explain or compare; (iii) "Application", they can solve a problem and can use what they know; (iv) "Analysis", they decipher the structure of a communication and recognize the intended meanings among the statements, in other words they can see the parts and how components work; (v) " Synthesis", they can amalgamate ideas, events; (vi) "Evaluation", in this stage they evaluate, make value decisions and can defend their opinions, in other words they assess the accuracy of people's statements (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 59). The last levels of this taxonomy, that is, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation can foster CT more. Bloom's taxonomy (1956) has been revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), they considered "create" as the highest level and classified the taxonomy as the following "(i)Knowledge, (ii)Understanding, (iii) Application, (iv) Analysis, (v)Evaluation, (vi)Creation" (cited in Thomas, 2011.p.28) Another method that can boost CT is negotiation and classroom discussion .Bernstein (1985) believes that when the learners are challenged to tension, it causes heated debates between them that finally they increase CT (cited in Walker,2003). In English classrooms interaction and negotiation (conversation) has an important role in the development of a second language. Long (1980) followed the Wagner-Cough and Hatch's research (1975) to explain the notion of negotiation structure. They put stress on the role of interaction between NSs and NNSs and between two NNSs. So interaction is not only a medium for learning a second language but also a tool by which CT happens (Doughty & Long, 2005, P. 232-34). Reasoning tasks and activities also contribute to raise CT. Prabhu (1992) distinguished three kinds of tasks, (i) information gap task which the learners can convey information to complete a task. It can be considered a kind of negotiation and debate that was mentioned as one of the methods that can develop CT. (ii) an opinion gap, when learners express their ideas and attitudes. As mentioned earlier, if learners can defend their ideas and attitudes it results in increasing CT. (iii) in reasoning task, based on given some information they deduce new facts (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, P. 148). It is very interesting that these three kinds of tasks are necessary in acquiring a second language and have a great role in raising CT. Scriven and Paul (1987) argued the processes of CT in which learners get involved consist of "synthesis, analysis, comprehension, evaluation," the stages that Bloom also has mentioned, through observation, expression, reasoning and communication (cited in Alexander, 2010).As you observe one of the ways that learners can gain CT is communication, what the new language methods place stress to happen in language classes. So by communication, learners not only arrive at final goal, that is, acquiring a second language but also reach CT too. We can draw a conclusion that there is straight correlation between communication and CT. Facione (2015, p.3) claims that critical thinkers can collaborate with one another rather than compete, like a team of lawyers who work(s) together to defend an innocent person in a criminal case so that they arrive at the truth. Facione (2015) presents a model of CT, he considers some elements that can be some criteria to separate strong critical thinkers from weak critical thinkers. These elements are almost similar to Bloom's taxonomy, he lists them as "interpretation, inferences, self-regulation, evaluation, explanation, analysis." He calls them cognitive skills and dispositions that people use in different contexts when coming across the problems. He explains that interpretation is to comprehend and to express the meaning what Blooms calls it comprehending and Anderson and Krathwohl call it understanding. Analysis and evaluation

can be found in Bloom and Anderson et al.'s taxonomy too. Explanation means learners can defend the results of their statements and reasoning. The learners present "their full and well-reasoned arguments in the contexts of seeking the best understanding possible." The last item of Facione 's taxonomy is self-regulation that he considers to be the most crucial one, What Schmidt (1994) names it "noticing hypothesis" and Krashen (1977) calls it " monitoring" (Facione, 2015, p.5-7).

IV. THE PLACE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN IRANIAN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

There is a correlation between the questions of examination and the activities done and the materials used in the classrooms. The question is how much CT takes place in English classrooms and which levels of the CT model gain much attention in these classes. I teach English in high school in grade 9th to 12th in Iran, the examinations of grade 11th are administrated in the form of National exams. In an educational session all the teachers teaching English in the district 3 in Shiraz, Iran, surveyed the English questions of final exam of grade 11th .The findings revealed that from 13 parts of this exam, 3 parts related to knowledge, 8 parts related to comprehending or what Facion (2015) called it interpretation and Anderson et al. called it understanding, 2 parts contained questions which assessed application level. The final exam was devoid of other cognitive levels such as synthesis, analysis, and evaluation, or what Facion (2015) named it inference, explanation, and evaluation. Anderson et al.'s last part (2001) that they believed it was very important, that is, creation was also absent whereas we know that the last three levels of the above taxonomy model can assist the leaners in boosting CT more. We can conclude that because our English exams do not contain important levels of CT and the exams are in accordance with educational materials and syllabuses so we should create a shift in our methods and materials. Pure grammar translation methods should be replaced by communicative methods. As said earlier, new activities of communicative methods like negotiation and tasks such as gap, reason, opinion ones help to raise CT in the classes a lot. The time of the classes which is limited, 90 minutes every week, needs to be increased. During this limited time the teachers have to only cover the materials of the books in order to prepare the students for exams, they rarely apply questions such as application or evaluation that require a lot of time. Educational systems should train teachers who become proficient in this field. Grosser et al. (2013) argued that teachers' proficiency should be in high level that they can increase learners' thinking abilities. Sometimes there are some learners who have this skill and are strong critical thinkers but are not aware of it or they do not try to develop it. It means that they need to practice this skill until it develops as Önen et al. (2010) claimed that critical thinking skills come from birth but they need to be developed through training. Fahim et al. (2012) reported that teaching techniques of CT to Iranian English students caused the students to become critical thinkers, although these strategies did not help them to write more argumentative essays. Kamali et al. (2013) purported that CT strategies influenced reading ability when there were a lot of unknown words in the texts .The findings showed that using CT techniques developed learners' reading ability.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper made an endeavor to further our comprehending of CT, its levels, and its place in Iranian English classrooms. This skill has obtained a lot of attention in modern countries, it means that our classes and society should put emphasis highly on CT. Unfortunately, as you observed we are far from the universal standards so it is required all levels of CT to be learnt and taught. This skill aims to engage learners in activities that they can reflect their opinions, support them, criticize others' wrong actions and ideas and create some solutions to problems, these problems can be math ones or problem solving tasks in English classrooms or problems of society. There are some models that show levels of CT, after analyzing the questions of the final exam of grade 11th we noticed that because of various reasons only levels of knowledge, understanding, and application get attention in our English classrooms. The materials and syllabuses are chosen and designed in a way that learners do not need to work at the higher levels of CT. Since materials and activities are in harmony with tests so we draw a conclusion that there should be a shift in designing materials, activities, and tests in this case all levels of CT can be embedded in materials, activities, and tests that result in growing learners' abilities. It necessitates a change in the methods used in classrooms if a method like procedural method replaces grammar translation one, it will have a lot of merits. The activities of procedural method are problem solving, gap, opinion, and reasoning tasks that they not only help to foster CT but also to contribute to learning a second language. The goal of this method is to engage learners in communicating, final end of learning a foreign language, and we noticed that communication was a procedure to foster CT. Consequently, the time of English classes needs to be enhanced and we should consider that CT activities do not fit with large classes. Proficient teachers must remove barriers that decline students' inclination and willingness to CT and also elements that postpone the progress of CT. The context of the class, relationship between teachers and students are very crucial. Teachers should encourage them to ask questions and not to block the flow of their thinking because of some minor errors in their questions or explanations. Improvement of thoughts needs practicing and a lot of time and energy. The final goal of improving this skill is to fit learners for future life, to be independent thinkers, to be able to criticize a text or unfair situations in society, to create a relation between their learning and practice and to become competent members of society and successful in life and career.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, M., Commander, N., Greenberg, D., & Ward, T. (2010). Using the four-question[s] technique to enhance critical thinking in online discussions. *MERLOT Journal of online learning and teaching*, 6(2).
- Bailin, S., Case, R., Coombs, J., & Daniels, L.B. (1999). Common misconceptions of critical thinking. *J curriculum Stud*, 31, 269-283.
- Doughty, C.J., & Long, M.H. (2003). *The handbook of second language acquisition*. Blackwell publishing Ltd.
- Facione, P.A. (2015). Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts. *Insight assessment*.

- Fahim, M., & Hashtroudi, P. (2012). The effect of critical thinking on developing argumentative essays by Iranian EFL university students. *Journal of language teaching and research*, 3(4), 632-638.
- Grosser, M., & Nel, M. (2013). The relationship between the critical thinking skills and the academic language proficiency of prospective teachers. *South African journal of education*, 33(2).
- Johnson, K., & Johnson, H. (1999). *Encyclopedic of dictionary of applied linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Kadir, M. (2007). Critical thinking. *Education and human development*, 1(2), 1-11.
- Kamali, Z., & Fahim, M. (2011). The relationship between critical thinking ability of Iranian EFL learners and their resilience level facing unfamiliar vocabulary items in reading. *Journal of language teaching and research*, 2(1), 104-111.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lau, J. (2011). *An introduction to critical thinking and creativity: Think more, think better*. A John Wiley and Sons, INC., Publication, Hoboken, New Jersey.
- Lau, J., & Chan, J. (2004-2015). What is critical thinking? *Directory of open access journals*, <http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/ct.php>.
- Önen, A., & Kocak, C. (2010). Determining the critical thinking levels of student teachers and evaluating through some variables. *International online journal of educational sciences*, 2(3), 865-882.
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2001). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: prentice Hall.
- Richards, J.C., & Schmidt, R. (2010). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- Thomas, T. (2011). Developing first year students' critical thinking skills. *Asian social science*, 7(4).26-35.
- Walker, S.E. (2003). Active learning strategies to promote critical thinking. *Journal of athletic training*, 38(3), 263-267.
- Willingham, D. (2007). Critical thinking: Why is it so hard to teach? *Journal of experimental psychology: learning, memory*, 109(4).