

Teaching Critical Thinking in Asian EFL Contexts: Theoretical Issues and Practical Applications

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This paper considers theoretical issues and practical applications of teaching critical thinking in Asian EFL contexts (e.g., Japanese and Korean). In the first section, I present a definition of 'critical thinking' and argue that misconceptions regarding this definition have limited the teaching of critical thinking skills in Asian EFL contexts. The second section focuses on a specific critical thinking skill (separating facts from inferences), explains its significance in Asian EFL contexts, and presents a detailed explanation of its application in the classroom.

1.0 Introduction

Starting as early as the 1980s, universities in the US have begun to make critical thinking courses a part of their undergraduate general education requirements. This trend has been paralleled to some extent within the fields of ESL/EFL both inside and outside of the United States. However, unlike the trend within the US, ESL/EFL educators outside the US (particularly in Japan) have been engaged in an ongoing debate regarding the validity of teaching critical thinking skills (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Davidson, 1998; Day, 2003; Kubota, 1999). Central to this debate is the issue of whether or not the skills associated with 'critical thinking' are culture specific, and therefore an inappropriate subject of instruction in non-Western contexts (e.g., Asia). Atkinson (1997), in a his much cited article, argues that critical thinking is in fact a social practice that embodies Western cultural values, many of which are inappropriate for non-Western (e.g., Japanese) students. In contrast, Kubota (1999) argues that Atkinson's claims are a form of cultural stereotyping. She presents a view of critical thinking as a universal skill that can be accessed with equal ease by students from all cultures.

Clearly, there is some truth in both of these positions. However, it can be argued that they each view the issue from an idealized standpoint, which has limited application to the practical needs of students in EFL/ESL classrooms.

As Atkinson's claims, the foundation of critical thinking lies in Western societies. The culture of Greece, their schools of academic thought, and their philosophers in many ways gave birth to the modern day concept of critical thinking and the Western academic tradition upon which it is based. In contrast, it has been argued that the social structures and values that developed in the East (e.g., China and Japan) embodied a different value system from the West. In the West, individualism led to public debate, the science of logic, and a focus on objective observation (i.e., the scientific method). In the East, collectivism and a focus on the group, led to a suppression of individuality and generally a more holistic view of reality (for a discussion see Nisbett, 2003; Davidson, 1998).

Many of these differences continue into the present day where 'individualistic' and 'collectivist' values influence personal relations and educational systems in the West and East, respectively. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to predict that aspects of critical thinking (essentially a Western construct) may not 'fit' with cultures that have developed different value systems from the West (e.g., Japan and Korea). In fact, based on the anecdotal accounts of ESL/EFL educators in Japan, this it would seem to be an accurate conclusion.

Interestingly, a similar argument has been made regarding education within the US. That is, formal education in the US has developed in large part from the socio-cultural traditions of specific groups (e.g., the Anglo middle-class) (e.g., Heath, 1982; Philips, 1983; Rose, 1989), and that critical thinking courses are an expression of cultural imperialism within the American education system.

Regardless of this argument, for minorities to succeed in mainstream society, they must master the academic skills embodied in critical thinking, a point frequently emphasized by minority leaders in the US (e.g., the reverend Jesse Jackson). For example, consider the case of the Ebonics

controversy in the United States. In 1996, the Oakland Unified School District proposed that speakers of Black English (Ebonics) be classified as ESL students. Although the ultimate goal of this proposal was to access unused funds that were reserved for ESL students, the proposal sparked a nationwide debate. At the heart of the debate was not only the linguistic question of whether Black English was a separate language, but also the issue of how to accommodate individuals with backgrounds that do not match the expectations of academic institutions. Interestingly, many Black leaders in the US spoke out against the proposal. Notably, the reverend Jesse Jackson criticized the proposal as ‘an unacceptable surrender, bordering on disgrace’ (CNN.com, 1996). He substituted this evaluation with a more positive stance, however, after meeting with school board members who convinced him that the goal of the program was to help students gain proficiency in standard English and not to promote the use of Black English in schools. The reason for such opposition to the proposal was that minority leaders saw the move as ultimately hurting the students that it sought to help. Their position was that in order for students to succeed, they must master the skills of the academic environment. Opponents of bilingual education in California have taken a similar stance. They argue that by sheltering students from the mainstream (i.e., English), students are denied the opportunity to develop the language skills they need to succeed in mainstream American culture.

The same argument can be applied to the critical thinking debate in Japan and other Asian contexts. That is, although there are certain aspects of critical thinking that may be ‘foreign’ in non-Western contexts, if students are not exposed to these skills, they will be denied the opportunity to complete in the global community.

There are the signs that Japanese government agrees with this line of reasoning. According to the Japanese Ministry of Education website, the goal of recent educational reforms at the elementary school level (e.g., the addition of a ‘Sougoutekina Gakusyu no Jikan’ or the ‘Period for Integrated Study’) is to ‘create independent thinkers’ who ‘learn, think and act for themselves’ and ‘develop problem solving skills’ in students. As noted above, these are some of the basic skills of critical thinking. Although the media has characterized educational reform in Japan as the beginning of English education at the elementary school level, clearly the government has set a larger goal. In addition to English education, the new reforms include instruction in Japanese, with the explicit goal of encouraging students to develop their self-expression skills. Following this example, one of the goals of ESL/EFL education in Japan should be to help students develop critical thinking skills and thereby become more competitive in the world system.

2.0 Defining Critical Thinking

Although Atkison (1997) argues that critical thinking is a ‘social practice’ that often defies definition, such criticism is in many ways unwarranted. In what follows, I review common definitions given for critical thinking and underscore the point that critical thinking is made up not of a single skill, but rather a set of skills. Furthermore, I argue that ESL/EFL educators often lack a firm understanding of the multiplicity of the definition of critical thinking and, as a result, misconceptions have tended to limited educators in their application of critical thinking pedagogues, particularly in Japan.

Scholars offer a variety of definitions for critical thinking. As Mayfield humorously notes, ‘there are as many definitions of critical thinking as there are writers on the subject’ (Mayfield, 2001, p. 4). The following sampling of definitions from the literature illustrates this point.

- a. Critical thinking is a ‘process of evaluating statements, arguments, and experiences’ (D’Angelo, 1971)
- b. Critical thinking is ‘reasonably and reflectively deciding what to believe or do’ (Ennis & Weir, 1985)
- c. Critical thinking is ‘the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, more defensible’ (Paul, 1992)

d. Critical thinking is ‘a process which stresses an attitude of suspended judgement, incorporates logical inquiry and problem solving, and leads to an evaluative decision or action’ (National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Committee on Critical Thinking)

There are many differences in the above definitions. D’Angelo (1971) defines critical thinking primarily as an evaluation process. In contrast, Ennis and Weir (1985) see critical thinking as a means (i.e., reflection) to an end (i.e., action), a definition that seems to focus on the final product (i.e., action). Paul (1992), in his much cited (somewhat humorous) definition, focuses on the thought process. His point seems to be that critical thinking is a means to improve ones thinking. The final definition, offered by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Committee on Critical Thinking (2003), is in some ways the most comprehensive. It defines critical thinking as a ‘process’ of evaluation (like D’Angelo), a process of thinking (like Paul), and a means to an end (like Ennis and Weir).

Although the above definitions differ in focus (e.g., the evaluation process, the thought process, or the end product), they all characterize critical thinking as a ‘process’ (i.e., a purposeful mental activity). Moreover, from all of these definition it follows that critical thinking is a set of skills rather than any single skill; for no single skill (e.g., saying one’s opinion) can sufficiently capture the multiple demands of complex a process. While there is no recognized authoritative list of skills that make up critical thinking, the following list summarizes the skills (or abilities) that many consider basic to the process of critical thinking (based on Mayfield, 2001).

The ability to...

1. separate facts from opinions, inferences, and evaluations
2. recognize own and other’s assumptions
3. question the validity of evidence
4. prepare persuasive arguments using evidence
5. ask questions
6. verify information
7. listen and observe
8. resist jumping to conclusions
9. seek to understand multiple perspectives
10. seek ‘truth’ before being ‘right’

These skills can be divided into sections that correspond with the above definitions. For example, number 1 (the ability to separate facts from opinions, inferences, and evaluations) seems to be part of the evaluation process discussed above. However, no one skill is necessarily more important than the others.

2.1 The Effect of Culture

It is commonly observed that Japanese have difficulty expressing their opinion (one likely result of the collectivist nature of Japanese society). This is often discussed in contrast to Americans, who are typically characterized as highly opinionated (a likely result of the individualistic focus of American society) (for a discussion see Nisbett, 2003). While, this characterization seems to be largely accurate, it unfortunately contributes to the common misconception regarding Japanese (and other Asian) EFL students that they have poor critical thinking skills. As shown above, critical thinking is a process that consists of a set of skills. These skills guide individuals in a number of key processes, including evaluating, forming opinions, and taking action. Just as the ability to express opinions (i.e., preparing persuasive arguments) is an important critical thinking skill, so are the skills of observation, resisting jumping to conclusions, and understanding multiple perspectives.

Regardless, it is not uncommon for educators to associate critical thinking with being opinionated. This misrepresentation likely leads some to accuse Asian students of being less critical than their Western counterparts. However, there is more to critical thinking than voicing one’s own opinion. It is equally important to listen and observe, seek to understand multiple perspectives, and resist jumping to conclusions. Interestingly, Davidson (1998) observes that his

Japanese students seem more apt at these skills than Western students. This point should be kept in mind when assessing Japanese students' critical thinking ability. Moreover, studies indicate that even when Japanese students are not voicing their opinion, they are not necessarily passively accepting all that they hear (e.g., Littlewood, 2000; Stapleton, 2002).

For the reasons discussed above, it is inaccurate to characterize Japanese (and other Asian) ESL/EFL students as somehow critical-thinking-impaired. However, we can not overlook the fact that Japanese students do seem to have a hard time with expressing their opinion. Based on these observations, our goal as educators should be twofold. On the one hand, we have the responsibility to resist evaluating Asian students through the lens of Western expectations. We must recognize the strengths that our students have and evaluate them accordingly. On the other hand, however, we have the responsibility to encourage them to develop the skills they lack.

3.0 Practical Application

In what follows I outline an activity designed to encourage the expression of opinions in students. The activity focuses on distinguishing between facts and inferences.

3.1 Facts vs. inferences

Distinguishing facts from inferences is a key skill for developing one's own opinion; for, opinions themselves are nothing more than a form of inference based on observation. However, because students are often not aware of this distinction, it can prevent them from effectively identifying and expressing their own opinions. One problem that commonly results when students fail to distinguish facts from inferences is that they mistake the opinions of others (or even their own opinions) for fact. This activity is designed to raise students' awareness of this distinction and thus aid them in recognizing and expressing their own opinions.

For the activity, students view a photograph and then decide whether a list of statements is true or false based on what they see. They must also consider whether they have sufficient information based on what they see, to determine the validity of the statements. The photograph used for the current description is taken from Mayfield (2001, p.2). It is a black-and-white photograph showing four individuals facing forward as they are walking down an outdoor corridor with stone arched columns visible in the background. The center-most individual is a young man who appears to be in his early 20s. He is wearing a dark gown that resembles the type worn at graduation ceremonies. He is holding hands with a girl on his right, who appears to be 14 or 15 years old. She is wearing a white dress with dark fringe around the collar and waist and is dangling a dark purse from a strap held in her right hand. The two are looking at each other and smiling as they walk. Behind the young man, slightly to the right, walks a man who appears to be in his mid 50s. He is taller than the young man and dressed in a dark suit and dark tie. He has his left hand on the left shoulder of the young man and is looking at him and smiling. To the left of the young man is a woman who also appears to be in her mid 50s. She is dressed in a light colored flower-print dress with a light colored overcoat and dark pumps. A dark colored purse is hooked on the elbow of her bent left arm and a long pearl necklace can be seen from under her coat. She is holding onto the young man's left arm as she walks, and is looking at him and smiling.

Based on the above image, students must evaluate the following statements individually and then discuss their responses in groups to arrive at a single group response (invariably, there is great variation among student responses and thus often groups can not agree on a single response). After the groups have had sufficient time to discuss the statements, the instructor leads them through a detailed analysis of each, highlighting the difference between fact and inference.

1. This is graduation day for the Thomas family.
2. The father is proud of his son.
3. The sister looks up to her brother.
4. This is a prosperous family.
5. The son has just graduated from law school.

3.2 Picture Analysis

Based on the photograph it can not be determined if any of the statements is true or false. However, because it is common for students to confuse fact and inference (i.e., fact and opinion), invariably, students will argue that some of the statements are true. By working through students' opinions, the instructor can lead the students to a greater awareness of this distinction and thereby help foster a critical thinking skills that underlies the ability to express one's own opinions (a need that seems particularly important for Asian EFL students).

As an example, let us consider statement 1. When working through the examples, it is advisable to lead the students through an exploration of their own ideas. Use questions such as 'Why do you think so?' In the case of the first statement, the most common reason that students provide as evidence is the gown that the young man is wearing. However, let us consider this reason in detail. It is important to separate the facts (i.e., the visual image) from the inference (i.e., the student's opinion). The fact is that the young man is wearing a gown typically associated with graduation ceremonies. However, this fact alone is insufficient proof that he has recently attended (or will attend) a graduation ceremony. For one, there are other possible circumstances under which such a gown could be worn (e.g., a choir performance). Moreover, it is possible that the photograph is posed (in fact it is). Upon learning this, students often protest that they have been tricked. However, it is important to remind them that the ability to analyze information out of context (accounting for all possible interpretations) is a valuable skill to develop. Also, there is the often-overlooked claim that this is the 'Thomas family.' Although they appear to be a family (their apparent ages and gender), we cannot know this for sure, and thus it remains an inference, a hypothesis, or an opinion. Furthermore, there is absolutely no way to verify the name of the individuals based on what we see in the photograph. Consequently, there is no way to determine the validity of a number of aspects of statement 1: the nature of the event; the nature of the relationship between the individuals; and the names of the individuals.

In a similar fashion, it is possible to analyze each of the five statements and determine that in fact none of them can be determined as either true or false based on the image presented. In statement 2, the older man's body language (his hand on the young man's shoulder and his smile) lead to the inference that he is proud of the young man. This, combined with the relative ages of the individuals, suggests that they are a family and that the older man is the father. Likewise, the young woman (who we infer to be a sister) is holding hands with the young man and smiling at him. From this we infer that she admires (i.e., or looks up to) him. In the same way, we can see how each of the statements is an inference based on facts, but none of them are verifiably true. In other words they are all opinions.

This activity draws attention to a seemingly micro-level aspect of critical thinking: the ability to distinguish fact from inference (or opinion). Nonetheless, it is a fundamental skill of critical thinking because it is the first step in formulating one's own opinions. Moreover, as discussed above, there is reason to believe Japanese EFL students have a marked need to develop the skill of expressing opinions. Thus, the activity described in this section has potential application in a number of academic contexts (e.g., writing and debate).

4.0 Summary

In this paper I have considered the issue of critical thinking in ESL/EFL contexts. I have argued that critical thinking is a process that consists of a set of skills rather than a single skill. Moreover, I have criticized the tendency of educators to assess Asian students using a single skill (voicing opinions) as the primary evaluative measure. This paper has also discussed the issue of cultural differences and emphasized the need to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of students and to incorporate such an understanding into curriculum planning. To this end, I have introduced an activity designed to encourage students' awareness of the difference between facts and inferences. This skill is fundamental to developing an ability to express one's own opinions and is also a skill that Asian EFL students, in particular, can benefit from.

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