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CRITICAL THINKING PRACTICE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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Abstract:
Critical thinking education is, generally, the act of recognizing the student as a full human being in all aspects of teaching and learning, with the ultimate purpose of creating creative, authentic, and critical individuals who can solve problems and make decisions for themselves. It holds that students should be engaged in the development and practice of varied creative and critical thinking skills and that they should be encouraged to personalize connections and transfer these skills from the classroom and school contexts to other life situations. This article addresses the issue of critical thinking practice in language education classrooms. It presents some relevant definitions of critical thinking education and discusses some critical thinking skills that students should be encouraged to develop and practice and some barriers to their effective and successful implementation in language education classrooms. To this end, this article suggests some classroom activities and patterns of communication which could help teachers cope with these impediments, and engage their students in the development and practice of these skills.

Keywords: critical thinking, EFL, education, soft skills, communication

1. Introduction

Ultimately, education should aim to support the development of independent critical thinkers. In his paper entitled "Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts" Peter Facione (2010) argues that education should be a public good that values and encourages critical thinking and informed decision making. To support his stand on the importance

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of critical thinking education he offers the following guidance: "*Teach people to make good decisions and you equip them to improve their own futures and become contributing members of society, rather than burdens on society. Becoming educated and practicing good judgement does not absolutely guarantee a life of happiness, virtue, or economic success, but it surely offers a better chance at those things. And it is clearly better than enduring the consequences of making bad decisions the unwanted and avoidable consequences of those poor choices*" (Facione, 2010: 2). Critical thinking is then an essential aim and overriding ideal of education.

A number of educators and politicians agree that critical thinking education is fundamental for the knowledge age. For example, Dirk Ifenthaler, J. Michael Spector, Kinshuk, Pedro Isaias, and Demetrios G. Sampson (2011: 144-145) point out that "*Critical thinking is now recognised as an essential component of education and a vital resource in personal and civic life*." They report that "*over the last two decades, American educators and politicians have acknowledged critical thinking as a desired outcome of K-12 and post-secondary education. The importance of critical thinking has now been recognised in New Zealand and has been embedded as a key competency in the New Zealand curriculum*" (2011: 145). In Morocco, critical thinking is implicitly recognised by the National Charter of Education and Training, which stresses that the goal of education is to develop students as independent citizen who is able to take initiatives and be innovative. It is also recognised and recommended by researchers and practitioners who participated in the MATE 33RD National Conference on the theme of Critical Thinking (2012).

In this context, the aim of education in general and language education, in particular, should be the development of authentic critical thinkers who are able to solve problems effectively, deal with choices successfully, make effective decisions, cope in life, and be effective in their school and professional as well as their personal and public lives. Critical thinking education is then the act of recognizing the student as a full human being in all aspects of teaching and learning, with the ultimate purpose of creating authentic, critical, and creative individuals who can solve problems and make decisions for themselves. It holds that students should be engaged in the development and practice of varied creative and critical thinking skills and that they should be encouraged to personalize connections and transfer these skills from the classroom and school contexts to other life situations.

Within this perspective language education is no longer meant to provide learners with a body of knowledge that they have to receive and consume, it is rather meant to develop their personal authenticity, that is, awareness of different aspects of their learning experience and the constraints that surround it and the resources available to them. For example, Van Lier writes that "*In personal authenticity, all the elements of awareness, autonomy, and authenticity come together. Authentic persons know what they are doing, and attend in relaxed or focused ways, in accordance with the demands of the situation. Authentic persons are also autonomous, in the sense of feeling responsible for their own actions, and able to deal with choices"* (1996: 144). To achieve these educational long-term purposes, it is essential that language teachers help students develop and practice critical and creative thinking skills. However, different variables may come into play to foster or hinder successful practice of critical and creative thinking in language education

classrooms. This focus on critical thinking practice in language education classrooms is based on the assumption that the teaching of critical thinking skills is different for language teachers than for other teachers. In this regard, there is a general agreement in the literature on the strong relationship between language and thought. For example, Lund points out that "*There are four main views about the nature of this relationship between language and thought: 1) The language we speak determines or influences the way we think. 2) The way we think determines the use of language. 3) Language and thought are independent but gradually become interdependent during infancy. 4) Language and thought are independent*." (2003: 9-10). This relationship would certainly have far-reaching implications for both language and critical thinking education.

This article addresses the issue of critical thinking practice in language education classrooms. It presents some relevant definitions of critical thinking education and discusses some critical thinking skills that students should be encouraged to develop and practice. It also highlights some barriers to an effective and successful implementation of these skills in language education classrooms. To this end, this article suggests some classroom activities and patterns of communication which could help teachers cope with these impediments, and engage their students in the development and practice of these skills.

2. Defining Critical Thinking

There are many and widely different definitions and views of critical thinking. The definitions presented and discussed here highlight the basic and common definitional elements of critical thinking that remain the same or complementary across all disciplines and perspectives. John Dewey, one of the leading researchers and thinkers in the field of philosophy of education, offered the following definition more than a century ago: "*thinking in its best sense is that which considers the basis and consequences of beliefs*" (1910: 5). This means that what we believe influences what we think, and we base our beliefs on the evidence we have evaluated. This definition of the nature of thinking in education has been considered by many researchers as a foundational one. It highlights the evaluative nature of thinking and connects evaluation to beliefs and actions. Dewey's philosophy of education particularly his writings about this essential aspect of education constitute the theoretical ground from which leading definitions of critical thinking have developed. John Dewey, who is widely accepted as the 'father' of modern critical thinking, called it reflective thinking and defined it as: "*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends*" (1933: 118). He emphasised reflective thinking as being active rather than passive and stressed the importance of questioning the basis of supposed forms of knowledge.

Glaser (1941) extends the evaluative nature of thinking which is also logical and reasonable. He adds the component of knowledge of the methods of logical and reasonable thinking or reasoning. Fisher and Scriven (1997) introduce more conceptual and practical insights about critical thinking as an academic competency that requires

academic knowledge and training. Therefore, they define critical thinking as a "*skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information, and argument*" (Fisher and Scriven 1997: 21). This definition highlights this academic perspective and the issue of critical thinking education. It is concerned more with the evaluative, interpretive, and argumentative nature of critical thinking. Fisher (2001) moves one step further from theory into practice, particularly the what and how of educating and training students on critical thinking. He states that "*estimating, evaluating, justifying, classifying, hypothesizing, analyzing, reasoning are elements of critical thinking*" Alec Fisher, 2001: 8). This definition is essentially descriptive and points to the elements and skills that can guide critical thinking education and its application in the classroom.

Robert Ennis, one of the leading researchers on critical thinking education, defines critical thinking as "*reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do*" (Ennis, 1991). This definition implies the kind of characteristics and abilities a teacher might wish students to develop, the most important of which are being able to: 1) clarify (which involves identifying, defining and analyzing), 2) decide (about credibility), 3) infer (through deducing, judging and explaining), 4) consider, reason and be able to integrate all these abilities to defend decisions. It would also imply the long-term personal characteristics critical thinking education should instil in students, particularly personal autonomy and authenticity. In this respect, Hunter comments that "*by thinking critically, one can make up one's own and making up one's own mind is essential if we are to be the masters of our own lives. Critical thinking is essential to personal autonomy*." (2013: 2) It is also essential to personal authenticity, which is extended by Van Lier (1996) to include the characteristics of autonomy, independence, and responsibility.

Similarly, Scriven & Paul synthesise a definition of critical thinking as "*the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action*" (2007: 1). Today, definitions of critical thinking abound. The Delphi Report (1990), compiled by a panel of more than forty of the world's leading critical thinking experts, defines critical thinking as: "*Purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based*" (1990, 2). Critical thinking skills are important because they promote students' ability to deal successfully with social, scholastic, and practical problems, make thoughtful choices; and develop as authentic, independent, and long-life learners.

3. Critical Thinking Skills and Disposition

A wide range of critical thinking skills have been expressed, the most important of which are: inferring, explaining or reasoning, analyzing, synthesizing, generalizing, summarizing, and evaluating or judging. Facione (1998) explains the idea of core critical thinking skills, and provides much more detailed descriptors of associated characteristics. He identifies these as analysis, inference, explanation, evaluation, self-

regulation and interpretation. Analysis is *"to identify the intended and actual inferential relationships' between things (including statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, evidence, experiences, information or opinions)"*. He describes good critical thinkers, as those who are as able to interpret, analyse, evaluate and infer from information or evidence given and then also explain what they think and how they arrived at their conclusion. In so doing they are making and explaining reasoned judgments. He also highlights how development and practice using these six core cognitive skills is important. Critical thinking is pervasive in the sense that as long as people have purposes in mind, have to decide how to accomplish things, wonder what is true or not and consider what to believe and what to reject, good critical thinking is essential.

Swartz et al. (1998) argue that critical thinking is crucially important to ensure that the judgements to be made are more likely to be correct than incorrect, and that sound judgements cannot be made if all information is heard and read is uncritically accepted. Good critical thinkers scrutinize ideas (with an open mind) and consider the positive and negative aspects of propositions before making judgements. Swartz et al. (1988) distinguish between two types of thinking skills: skills relating to assessing the reliability of basic information (from the Internet, textbooks, other people, personal observations and so forth) and skills relating to how conclusions are developed from inferences about evidence. They highlight to engage skilfully in causal reasoning that students need to reflect on evidence with the following processes in mind: generating ideas about possible causes; considering what evidence would be necessary to show which is the probable cause; considering the extent of the evidence; making a judgement about the cause based on the evidence (1988:195). Swartz et al. (1998) also highlight how causal explanation, prediction, generalization and reasoning by analogy are all strategies based on evaluating and using the evidence available.

Alec Fisher (2001: 8) further elucidates the core constitutes of critical thinking skills, which he defines as fundamental to: "*1) identify the elements in a reasoned case, especially reasons and conclusions, 2) identify and evaluate assumptions, 3) clarify and interpret expressions and ideas, 4) judge the acceptability, especially the credibility of claims, 5) evaluate arguments of different kinds, 6) analyse, evaluate and make decisions, 7) draw inferences, and 8) produce arguments*." He describes how skilful critical thinking contrasts with 'unreflective thinking', which accepts evidence, claim or decision at face value. He suggests various critical skills which are essential to be clear, relevant, adequate, and coherent. He stresses that critical thinking requires interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications and other sources of information. This type of thinking, he argues, also requires skills in thinking about assumptions, in asking pertinent questions, in drawing out implications, reasoning and arguing issues through. (2001: 194)

Regardless of the way they are classified and referred to, there is a general agreement on the most important traits; characteristics, and dispositions of good critical thinkers. Robert Ennis (2004) points out that critical thinkers have a tendency to: "*be clear about the intended meaning of what is said, written, or otherwise communicated, determine and maintain focus on the conclusion or question, take the total situation into account, seek and offer reasons, try to be well-informed, look for alternatives, seek as much precision as the situation*

requires, try to be reflectively aware of one's own basic beliefs, be open-minded: seriously consider other points of view and be willing to consider changing one's own position, withhold judgement when the evidence and reasons are sufficient to do, use one's critical thinking abilities, be careful, and take into account the feelings and thoughts of other people." (quoted in Ifenthaler, Spector, Isaias, and Sampson, 2011: 145-146)

4. Barriers to Critical Thinking

The major skills and characteristics of critical thinking teaching revolve around the teachers' and learners' role relationship, classroom management, teaching practices and materials, and patterns of classroom interaction. What happens in language classrooms should foster learners' engagement in the development and practice of critical thinking skills and dispositions. However, various restrictions may come together to hinder the implementation of critical thinking education. The major constraints that have generally been pointed out in the literature are related to: "*(1) lack of training, (2) lack of information, (3) preconceptions, and (4) time constraints*" (Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder and Mark J. Snyder, 2008: 93). They are also related to the formal nature of the classroom, the perceptions that both teachers and learners may have of themselves and of each other, and the nature of the assessment procedures used. In spite of teachers' efforts to engage students in critical thinking activities, students seldom use critical thinking skills to solve complex, real-world problems. Clement explains that the answer may be that while "*we should be teaching students how to think, we are teaching them what to think*" (1979: 1). Similarly, Norman (1981: 1) points out "*it is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them anything about learning*."

Effective implementation of critical thinking education requires professional training because no one can successfully teach specific knowledge, skills, and virtues to students if he or she has not learned them. Teachers often are not trained in critical thinking methodology (Broadbear, 2003). Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder and Mark J. Snyder (2008: 93) state that teachers "*know their content and receive training in the methods of instruction, but little if any of their training is devoted specifically to how to teach critical thinking skills*." Moreover, few instructional materials provide critical thinking resources (Scriven & Paul, 2007). The formal nature of the classroom and school contexts bears a negative impact on teachers′ attempts to implement more critical thinking activities in their classes, where both they and their students have to conform to certain institutional, administrative and disciplinary routines, and where they have to restrict themselves to certain specific, predetermined and overloaded programmes which they have to finish in a limited amount of time. To quote Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder and Mark J. Snyder (2008: 93), "*time constraints are barriers to integrating critical thinking skills in the classroom"*. Instructors often have a great deal of content to cover within a short time period. Another problem that has been found to restrict the implementation of critical thinking education is the lack of consistency between the assessment procedures used and critical thinking education. Examinations focus on testing students′ grammatical competence, whereas their critical thinking abilities are not accounted for. This fact explains students′ interest

in exam-oriented activities because they are interested only in what they will be tested on.

Additionally, lack of motivation on the part of students and their personal characteristics are other problems that teachers encounter in this respect. Students' traditional and conservative conceptions have been found to constitute another constraining factor in the implementation critical thinking education in general and language classrooms in Morocco in particular. This refers to the learners' perceptions of their role and that of their teachers. Learners may perceive themselves as passive recipients of knowledge, the only source of which is the teacher. In this case, the learners assume that the role of the teacher is to provide them with a body of knowledge that they have to receive and consume. In language education classrooms with learners having such perceptions, rote learning is considered as the most successful learning strategy. Therefore, 'good' learners are those who adopt this strategy and successful ones are those who have good memories. Moreover, the 'good' teacher for students is the one who spends most of the time lecturing and dictating. Such perceptions and such learning and teaching strategies are inconsistent with the principles of **critical thinking education** discussed in the previous sections. Consequently, the implementation of these principles with a group of students having such conceptions would be a difficult task because learners' perceptions would shape and determine their reactions to **critical thinking** activities as well as their conceptions of classroom participation. In brief, these are some of the restrictions that are generally imposed on the implementation of critical thinking education in this context.

4. Implications and Suggestions

Scholars, textbooks authors, and practitioners have expressed various activities and practices to effectively implement critical thinking education and successfully engage students in the development and practice of critical thinking skills. Problem-based learning activities have been widely recommended for it promote "*critical thinking and problem-solving skills; active participation in the learning process including self-direction, identification of own learning needs, teamwork, creative discussion, and learning from peers; and the integration and synthesis of a variety of knowledge*" (Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder and Mark J. Snyder (2008: 93). Problem-solving, opinion-gap, and information-gap activities would help to engage students in active learning situations that require critical thinking skills. While engaging in these activities they are presented with a scenario and asked about their opinions, experiences, and what they would do in a particular situation. These activities allow students enough space to share or defend their attitudes or preferences about an idea with their partners, and exchange information with their partners (Nunan, 1988).

Teachers need to vary their questions with an emphasis on challenging open-ended questions which have been found to require students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to solve problems and make decisions rather than merely to repeat information. The use and integration of these critical, challenging, and problem-posing

questioning techniques into class discussions has been found to stimulate students' critical thinking skills, to engage them actively in the learning process, and to support an educational environment where students can demonstrate and practice critical thinking skills. The use of such questions is an important way of making teacher-students interaction communicatively-oriented. Open ended questions challenge students to think critically about the information available to them, analyse it, deal with choices, and make decisions about appropriate answers. In so doing students develop a sense of personal autonomy, independence, authenticity, and the traits associated with them.

To motivate students to engage in critical thinking activities, teachers need to reconsider their error treatment practice because students are encouraged students to "*learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on [their] own, as by experimenting, evaluating possible answers or solutions, or by trial and error*" (Dictionary.com, 2007, p. 1). Teachers need to assume a tolerant attitude towards learners' errors, which have to be considered as a natural part of the process of learning); otherwise, an extensive correction of learners' errors on the part of the teacher is likely to restrict their active involvement in critical thinking and problem-solving activities, which require a high degree of motivation and risk-taking. The teacher must be aware that excessive correction will encourage learners to shift their focus from learner-learning centred activities to traditional practices and learning strategies. In this respect, Lisa Gueldenzoph Snyder and Mark J. Snyder (2008) argue that instructors should be aware of students' initial resistance and guide them through the process to create a learning environment where students feel comfortable thinking through an answer rather than simply having an answer. A closely related implication of critical thinking education is that assessment procedures should be reconsidered in such a way to emphasize thinking rather than facts and to become intellectual challenges rather than memory recall (Ennis, 1993 and Schafersman, 1991).

Finally, teachers have a vital role in the effective implementation of critical thinking education and they are considered the most important change agents. Therefore, the focus has to be put on promoting their sense of animation in the classroom context in order to be able to create a relaxed and safe atmosphere in this context and make it as open a space as possible where students could feel self-confident and self-dependent and ultimately develop and practice the skills and dispositions of critical thinking. In this respect, it argued in the literature that to support the development and practice of critical thinking skills and traits, educators must try to create learning situations that encourage students to become actively involved. For example, David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith (1998) argue that cooperative learning is one of the key components of critical thinking education and explain that in whole-class processing, teachers give the entire class feedback and focus on students' attention on discussing the whole class's overall effectiveness. They suggest that if educators want students to engage actively in meaningful reasoning, they need to make sure that students spend more time thinking this way and less time sitting and passively receiving information.

This would clearly suggest the importance of training teachers on how to animate rather than control the class. Such training may help them assume the role of ice-breakers in order to make the class a whole group where uninterested sub-groups, unmotivated

and shy students could be integrated in the group on the basis of assuming some responsibilities towards their classmates. It may also help them create an atmosphere of familiarity, friendship and mutual trust in the classroom through the maintenance of more group-work, pair-work and class discussion where students could collaborate and cooperate, and engage in deliberate and purposeful practice of critical thinking skills, with the ultimate purpose of promoting their sense of personal autonomy, responsibility, and independence. In this way, the negative impact of the formal nature of the classroom and its institutional context, characterised by rigid disciplinary routines and pre-distribution of power and role relationships, could be reduced to its lowest effects.

5. Conclusion

Teaching critical thinking skills should aim to encourage students to personalize connections and transfer these skills from the classroom and school contexts to other life situations. Critical thinking skills are important because they promote students' ability to deal successfully with social, scholastic, and practical problems, make thoughtful choices; and develop as authentic, independent, and long life-learners. Moreover, to be effective in their personal and public lives, students must be able to solve problems to make effective decisions. A wide range of critical thinking skills have been expressed, the most important of which are: inferring, explaining or reasoning, analyzing, synthesizing, generalizing, summarizing, and evaluating or judging.

What happens in language classrooms should foster learners' engagement in the development and practice of critical thinking skills and dispositions. However, various restrictions may come together to hinder the implementation of critical thinking education. The major constraints are related to lack of training, lack of information, preconceptions, and time constraints. They are also related to the formal nature of the classroom, the perceptions that both teachers and learners may have of themselves and of each other, and the nature of the assessment procedures used. Scholars, textbooks authors, and practitioners have expressed various activities and practices to effectively implement critical thinking education and successfully engage students in the development and practice of critical thinking skills, the most important of which are problem-solving, opinion-gap, and information-gap activities. To motivate students to engage in critical thinking activities**,** teachers need to focus on critical, open-ended and challenging questioning practice; indirect and tolerant error treatment patterns; open patterns of communication and social organisation, and the creation of a safe environment in the classroom.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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