

Critical thinking skills in EFL learning: what and how?

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ABSTRACT

Recently, English language teaching has been a room in developing critical thinking skills for EFL students. For many years, English has been an internationally accepted language allowing people from different countries to communicate and the need for critical thinking skills cannot be neglected in the communication. Exchanging ideas, opinions, critiques, and many more have become the main concerns on EFL learning over the past two decades. This paper overviews the issues and trends of critical thinking skills based on the literature reviews in EFL teaching and learning. It then deals with the practical implications of teaching critical thinking for English skills – speaking, reading, listening, and speaking. It firstly presents the theoretical framework of the critical thinking paradigm in EFL teaching and learning following the components and teaching pathways in EFL classes. Future directions for critical thinking research are also discussed.

Keywords: *critical thinking, EFL learning, English skills*

INTRODUCTION

It has been for many years that critical thinking has become ‘a buzz word’ among language teachers. The interest in teaching critical thinking other than content- based materials has been a major discussion and debate over the past decades. It is to contend that critical thinking itself has risen as a prominent component in language teaching recently. Theoretically, the critical thinking term was firstly introduced by the Greek Philosophers – from the Socrates era supported by Plato and then implemented by Descartes (Rfaner, 2006). These philosophers proposed a questioning method that cannot be verified logically by people on their arguments in knowledge. This was then a theme written by Montesquieu and John Locke.

Nowadays, critical thinking has been widely used as a parameter to assess graduates’ performances in the workforce after their graduation. Unfortunately, it has brought unsatisfactory reports such as a report from Hirose (1992), stating that:

Many of today's youth lack the basic skills to function effectively when they enter the workforce. A common complaint is that entry-level employees

lack the reasoning and critical thinking abilities needed to process and refine information (p. 1).

Hirose's remark has ascended some debates on critical thinking issues that are needed to be implemented by teachers in the class. The notion of critical thinking is essential for students since they prepare themselves in workplaces. Likewise, current international issues also construct importance to be implemented well.

Different perspectives of critical thinking are viewed by English teachers and linguists as a driving force in the teaching of English both in L1 and L2 classrooms. They believe that since English has become an internationally recognized and accepted language used by almost all parts of the world population, it is an urgency to insert the notion of critical thinking in language teaching for the students. They, on the same point, stated that English is a major tool to communicate among countries, discuss economic, commerce, and science development issues, and build up inter-nation relationships. It all can be done when university students master English and critical thinking skill.

This present article explores and overviews theoretical frameworks on critical thinking in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly, focusing on the teaching of English for non-native English speakers or EFL students. It firstly outlines the literature review from some studies on critical thinking. Further, it highlights the flow of critical thinking in education within its use and advantages. This paper also extends its overview of the components of critical thinking skills in relation to its practicality. In the last session, explores the present ways of teaching critical thinking in the EFL classroom - including promoting critical thinking in four English skills and the relationship between learning autonomy and critical thinking of the students.

Studies on Critical Thinking

Issues and trends in critical thinking seem to be intriguing for language teachers. It might be because globalization and modernization have affected people to think critically on national and international matters. Moreover, English is the international language for people worldwide to communicate and exchange their ideas (Lee & Lee, 2019). However, some research findings on critical thinking skills possessed by EFL students seem to be unsatisfactory. Stapleton (2002) claimed that Asian EFL students lack critical thinking and individual voice or opinion. This statement was then supported by Alagozlu (2007), stating that Turkish English students cannot express their own ideas in EFL writing. He further added that it is related to their low critical thinking skill. The alternative approach to these problems is to teach them critical thoughts in language learning to significantly foster their critical thinking in the writing class. This problem might show us that critical pedagogy is needed in EFL writing. Several scholars have argued for this idea (see Moffett & Wagner, 1983; Pearson & Tierney, 1984; Stanford & Roark, 1974; Staton, 1984), discussing the prominent use of writing and reading in enhancing thinking skills for students. Aside from this unsatisfactory report on EFL critical thinking and writing skills, Gorjian *et al.*, (2012) proposed a new concept on critical thinking instruction. Their studies, aside from gender

focus, showed that the instruction can effectively boost post-elementary male and female students' descriptive writing skills.

Many studies on critical thinking in EFL classrooms tend to focus on writing instruction. In contrast, EFL students have to master not only writing skills but also speaking, reading, listening, and language components such as grammar and vocabulary. These imbalanced implications are derived from language teachers' beliefs on writing as a prominent way of developing students' critical thinking. However, the present study still finds many other studies on critical thinking skills that were recently conducted. As mentioned by Masduqi (2011), that he proposed a critical thinking enhancement through reading activities in language learning. His study gives language teachers broader perspectives on how critical thinking should be effectively taught in reading class. He mentioned that:

The teaching of reading is chosen as an example since it provides ample opportunities to exploit students' skills in English learning arise through reading texts. In this case, the proposed reading lesson draws on the lexical approach, encouraging learners to notice language while reading followed by activities involving meaning discovery and critical thinking skills (p. 9).

It is another choice for language teachers to motivate their students in critical discussion through enjoyable activities. Eliciting the ideas in the reading passage may be useful for students to dig up their thoughts. The discussion activity in reading class will lead students to have ample exposure in their speaking skills (Moon, 2005). Yet, it is very important for language teachers to recognize that students' speaking practices in such a challenging discussion is not merely a matter of practicing the language but how they can express the ideas, opinions, arguments, and so forth (Spratt et al., 2005).

In the same condition, studies conducted by other language experts have evolved. As an example, a study done by Sharadgah (2014) emphasized critical thinking enhancement in an internet-based writing environment. His quantitative research finding revealed that an internet-based writing environment had a positive impact on students' critical thinking. This study then was supported by other scholars (see Caplan, 2004; Dinevski & Plenkovic, 2002; Grafstein, 2007), arguing that an internet-based writing environment is an appropriate tool to improve students' critical thinking. Evaluating the information critically browsed on the internet was done effectively by the students in such a writing instruction. This motivates their critical thoughts since the internet does not always provide them well-shaped information (Gilster, 1997). Thus, the quality of the extremely large information on the internet needs to be checked and verified by students to meet their learning needs (Li, Agarwal, Hadidi, & He, 2012).

Critical thinking in education

Cromwell (1992) argued that higher education aim isto create a higher thinking quality. Students develop their critical thinking within the educational levels. This idea underlies the concept of critical thinking in education. Students of primary and secondary schools are

considered to have started their critical analysis and thought on issues surrounding them. Then, this thinking concept is hoped to be continued in their university lives. Likely, university students are those who often think critically on new issues or trends. They have to analyze the concepts that they encounter. Unfortunately, these all lie on the contrary, students graduating in all levels of education seem uncritical in their performances (Masduqi, 2011).

Indonesian policymakers of curriculum design have innovated some new pathways to improve students' critical thinking and their scientific behavior in the schooling sectors. The well-established 2013 curriculum is one of the booming issues in Indonesian education since its first enactment in 2013. It is not that the government of Indonesia has no basic reasons for its implementation. Due to the need for critical thinking in the vast economic and commercial growth, the Indonesian policymakers then propose the curriculum as a tool for critical thinking development through a scientific approach.

The practical implications of critical thinking taught in education will enable students to be more autonomous in learning and they will be ready to face globalization and modernization. In second language learning, for example, students are hoped to use their critical thinking skills in understanding ideas both in printed materials such as texts, books, journals, newspapers, etc., and spoken activities such as symposium, seminar, conference, discussion, and so forth. It is because English is used as a medium of communication internationally by all people. Thus, the notion of critical thinking in English would be a very pivotal element that has to be mastered by EFL students.

The components of critical thinking skills

Teaching critical thinking in the EFL classroom should ultimately consider several components. It is essential since teachers are responsible for the assessment of the students' critical thinking skills. This assessment can only be conducted if each component constructing critical thinking is constructed by the teachers. For such a purpose, we also outline some components in critical thinking as follows.

1. Interpretation

This is to understand the importance and show the ideas of experiences, situations, judgment, events, conventions, beliefs, rules, procedures, and criteria. This component results in some sub-skills such as categorizing, decoding and clarifying the meaning of an issue.

2. Analysis

It is defined as identification to the relationships of intended and actual purposes of statements, concepts, descriptions, questions, or other kinds of representative feelings to convey ideas, beliefs, judgments, experiences, reasons, and information. The sub-skills are examining ideas, identifying arguments, reasons, and claims.

3. Inference

Drawing reasonable conclusions by identifying and securing elements is the definition of this component. Conjectures and hypotheses are formed in this session. Further, it can be said that inference is to consider information and consequences which are relevant from

data, statements, evidence, principles, judgments, beliefs, opinions, concepts, descriptions, questions, and other forms of representative feeling. Here are some of its sub-skills: concluding issues from inductive or deductive reasoning, query evidence, and conjecture alternatives.

4. Evaluation

The term 'evaluation' means assessing whether statements or representations coming from other people's perception, experiences, situations, judgment, principles, beliefs or opinions are credible. Further, it is also assessing the logical strength of relationships between the actual or intended inferential among statements, descriptions, questions, and so forth. The sub-skills are as follows: assessing the quality of claims and arguments from inductive and deductive reasoning.

5. Explanation

The explanation is stating and identifying reasons in terms of methodological, conceptual, evidential, logical criteria, and contextual considerations to present people's ideas in the form of persuasive and descriptive argument. The sub-skills are stating results, justifying procedures, and presenting arguments.

6. Self-Regulation

This component is used to monitor a person's cognitive activities in a conscious setting—including the elements and the results of the activities. Analysis and evaluation are the core value in this component. These are used in the view of questioning, confirming, validating, or reasoning both a person's reason and the result. This component has only two major sub-skills, those are self-monitor and self-correction.

These six components constitute critical thinking skills as an essential ability that students must have in this globalization and modernization. Language teachers especially are given so many opportunities to develop them in terms of second language acquisition. Though in the EFL teaching context, this theoretical framework is not well implemented yet in the practices. It happens simply because the students are lack a real- life language situation, appropriate language models, massive exposure to the language, and involvement in critical thinking activities (Dardjowidjojo, 1997; Marcellino, 2008; Musthafa, 2001; Sukono, 2004).

Teaching critical thinking in EFL classes: skill-based teaching lens

Many studies have been developed as critics on the need for critical thinking skills in EFL contexts including in the classroom and particularly, outside classroom in which students are demanded to show their critical thoughts on national and international issues. It is still obvious to us that Asian EFL students still lack critical thinking. In Indonesia, many language teachers complain about their students' low participation in classroom discussions. Most of them are still reluctant to express their ideas in speaking English or writing in English critically. Masduqi (2011) believed that it happens due to the small opportunities used in thinking critically during classroom instruction. Many of them are easily accept other opinions on issues without filtering them properly. He then added that

these students may be in primary and secondary schools are taught with a teacher-centered teaching method which hinders them to speak English communicatively (Masduqi, 2011).

In such a challenging condition, teaching critical thinking in English to foreign students seem intriguing. Teachers of English are highly demanded to bring content-based language teaching methods in the class - for instance - in teaching reading, teachers have to engage students in comprehending the passages and the issues discussed, not merely teach students how to read English passages fluently as what native speakers do.

In a writing class, the application of critical writing should be firstly prioritized. Expressing students' opinions in an argumentative paragraph, for example, can be optimized when they are given debatable topics that can arise their motivation to write. Unlike reading and writing, speaking is the easiest language skill that can be integrated with the notions of critical thinking. It can be practiced through debate, which mostly is done nowadays. However, it is not only a speaking practice but importantly, it is also a practice of meaningful speaking skill since it becomes an indicator of students' success in the communicational language. Students of L2 or L1 learning are seen to be successful if they can communicate well in the learned language (Riggenback & Lazaraton, 1991).

Listening is seen to be naturally learned and acquired by students (Widiati & Cahyono, 2009). Students have to be directed to criticize what they hear and listen to from type-recorder, TV, radio, CD players, and so forth. In short conversations, for example, students have to infer what the speakers intend to do. Or, in the lecture session script in which it is typically found in IELTS and TOEFL listening test, students are asked to summarize what the content of the lecture is and invited to infer meaningful contexts in the listening test. This teaching method should be done simply because language teachers are obliged to insert the notion of critical thinking in English. Additionally, teachers of English as a foreign language can also use the technology associated with language skills such as writing on blogs, reading on online journals, and teleconference for speaking practices. These all can be used to foster students' critical thinking with the help of technology-enhanced language teaching methods in EFL classes. For instance, the use of blog in language learning proposed by (Richardson, 2005). He argued that a blog is a platform in language teaching. Furthermore, some researchers also believed that technology offers more opportunities in language teaching and learning (Kozma, 1991; Rodzvilla, 2002).

Autonomous Learning and Students' Critical Thinking Skills

Lastly, the teaching of critical thinking has to always emerge in the classroom. With this perspective, teachers should firstly know and arrange the design of teaching materials related to the target skills that they will teach to their students. It can be assumed that giving more opportunities for students in learning the language will optimally foster their critical thinking skills rather than teachers' dominance exists in the class. The relationship between learner autonomy and critical thinking has been a practical issue in the teaching of English for EFL students.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In short, studies on critical thinking in ELT have been conducted by several researchers. It can be inferred that mostly, their researches lie in the areas of reading and writing skill as bridges to teach critical thinking in an English class. Yet, the studies were still insufficient to define and design critical thinking skills learned by mostly Asian EFL learners. On the same point, the six components of critical thinking are expected to be implemented in the class both in teaching English skills and open wider opportunities for EFL learners to be autonomous. It is then suggested for future researchers to do researches on critical thinking related to the other English skills – speaking and listening, for example as well as ELT curricula and or design critical teaching instructions in the class. However, one concern is that future research agenda should envision critical thinking skills within the realm of multiculturalism and a multilingual world. As such, looking at the interlink of these two emerging perspectives into how students construct their critical thinking skills is encouraged.

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