

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS TO EFL STUDENTS: A TIMELY CHALLENGE OF CONTEMPORARY LABOUR MARKET

Developing Critical Thinking Skills to EFL Students: a Timely Challenge of Contemporary Labour Market

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Rezumat: În articol, se analizează conceptul de gândire critică în predarea limbii engleze ca limbă străină. Se reflectă modul în care gândirea critică afectează procesul de educație și cum se manifestă aceasta în situația noastră academică. De asemenea, se accentuează rolul și importanța abilităților de gândire critică în societatea modernă, care impune formarea unor membri activi, capabili să gândească critic pentru a reuși. În același timp, articolul propune sugestii de dezvoltare a gândirii critice a studenților – o serie de strategii și tehnici axate pe formarea abilităților de gândire critică în mediul academic.

Cuvinte-cheie: gândire critică, procesul de educație, mediu academic, abilități, strategii și tehnici, a reuși, societate modernă.

Abstract: The article focuses on the concept of critical thinking in teaching English as a foreign language. It shows how critical thinking affects the process of education, how it works in our native academic environment and stresses the role and importance of critical thinking skills in a twenty-first-century society, which requires active members able to think critically in order to succeed in the contemporary communication-business-oriented world. The article also offers suggestions of developing students' critical thinking abilities – a series of strategies and practical tips aimed to help students build on their critical thinking skills in an academic setting.

Key-words: critical thinking, skill, challenge, labour market.

Teaching critical thinking has always been part of education. However, now much more stress is put on it than ever before. Good thinking skills are the primary and underlying skills for making proper decisions – be it personal, professional or civic decisions. It is important to teach critical thinking as the personal advantages of the students and, consequently, of the society well, which is vital. Personal decisions, decisions within the professional activity and decisions made as members of a democratic society require critical thinking skills in order to succeed in the contemporary communications-oriented-business world. One may not need to apply critical thinking skills at every moment in life. Nevertheless, one should be endowed with these skills to be used when needed.

Critical thinking skills are strong skills. As stated by Marlys Mayfield, critical thinking “helps people to openly share the workings of their minds: to recognize and direct inner processes for understanding issues, to express ideas and beliefs, to make decisions and analyze, and solve problems. Critical thinking allows us to welcome life’s problems as challenges to be solved. And it gives us the confidence that we can make sense and harmony out of a confusing world” [5, p. 7]. Moreover, in a democratic society values are viewed in new discoveries and these discoveries can be executed by people who are aware of their freedom of choice. Without well-informed, critically thinking members democracy cannot last.

Thus, one of the major tasks of education is to help students to take a critical approach to various academic assignments and help them to build confidence in their capacities to analyze the material they are learning, interpret and evaluate the information they get and also state their own opinions and reflections.

However, the greatest majority of our students are more passive thinkers who can usually recognize what a text says and are able to restate the contents of the reading material pointing only to the surface features. Moreover, among our students we may observe many advanced students who, having acquired a rather good command of the language, are relatively untrained as critical thinkers and are not apt to face the requirements of the new curricula of regular university courses.

The present state of things can be partially assessed as a consequence of the former educational system which focused on rote learning more. Also, this can be assigned to the insufficient training of critical thinking skills. Therefore, our academic situation requires considerable improvement in this respect. Modern teaching must stress the need to support and stimulate students' active participation in the constant exchange of ideas and opinions they may face in an academic situation and beyond. In order to engage students in the critical thinking process they need to be provided with an understanding of critical thinking, first, as a concept and then, as a series of activities. In other words, students should be familiarized with the appropriate technique of the critical thinking process.

To understand the essence of critical thinking, first we should realize what the term “thinking” means in the sense of “critical thinking”. The word “thinking” practically means any kind of intellectual activity, from simple wondering of the mind to thorough examination using the power of reason and judgement. When the term “critical” is used together with the term “thinking”, it means looking for inferences, noticing and revealing various thoughts, ideas and, also, concluding what is most important. Lynn Quitman Troyka defines critical thinking as “a process that progresses from becoming fully aware of something, to reflecting on it, to reacting to it” [8, p. 111]. People are constantly involved in this process in their everyday activity even if they are not conscious of it, for example, when they read or watch something and try to create an opinion on the information they have got; when they learn something new and try to evaluate it; when they find themselves in difficult or awkward situations and try to find a way out; etc. Sylvan Barnet and Hugo Bedau in “Current Issues and Enduring Questions” remind about the comedian Jack Benny: “The comedian Jack Benny cultivated the stage personality of a penny-pincher. In one of his skits a stickup man thrusts a gun into Benny’s ribs and says, “Your money or your life.” Utter silence. The robber, getting no response, and completely baffled, repeats: “Your money or your life.” Short pause, followed by Benny’s exasperated reply: “I’m thinking, I’m thinking!” As Barnet and Bedau write, “Benny is using the word *thinking* in the sense that we use it in *critical thinking*” [2, p. 3].

The word “critical” comes from the Greek word “krinein”, which means “to separate”, “to choose”. It emphasizes the intellectual ability of the critical thinker. It means purposeful, deliberate inquiry. The essence of critical thinking is delving deeper into the core of things – beyond the pictures we see on the television screen, or the charming promises of the bright ads, or the manipulations of the slanted language and double speak, etc. In an academic situation the basic source of acquiring information is reading. When reading critically one has to take turns between trying to comprehend what the text is about and questioning the ideas expressed in the text. Authors often only give hints about what they really intend to convey. Much more is hidden beneath. A critical reader/thinker has to go beyond the literal meaning of a text, to be open to new ideas and different interpretation.

Besides, a critical thinker should approach every idea or thought sceptically. But this doesn't mean to take a negative attitude towards the facts and ideas exposed. In critical thinking we analyze an issue or a problem from all aspects before we come to a conclusion. In this process we constantly raise doubts about various ideas.

Critical thinking can be regarded both as an attitude and as an activity. Lynn Q. Troyka points to concrete situations in which one can prove a critical thinker: “If you face life with curiosity and desire to dig beneath the surface, you are a critical thinker. If you do not believe everything you read or hear, you are a critical thinker. If you find pleasure in contemplating the puzzle of conflicting ideologies, theories, personalities, and facts - you are a critical thinker” [8, p. 110].

Non-critical thinkers have a more simplistic vision. They regularly perceive the surface side of things. For example, when analyzing a story or a film about love and relationship between the main characters, on the simplest level one might say it is a story about a girl (or a young man) marrying the ideal partner in the end. Taking a critical attitude one will state it is about kindness winning over deceit and triviality.

In the teaching practice we can easily recognize among our students both critical and uncritical thinkers. Critically thinking students are active thinkers. They don't simply accept facts, they ask questions and analyze. Such students attempt to discover the hidden meaning and evaluate the reasons. Thus, they can refuse to accept poor reasoning and admit strong rationality. Critically thinking students are well-informed and open to new ideas and points of view. They can use appropriate evidence and objective data to support their arguments, make differentiations and clarifications, are able to defend a sensible position concerning an opinion or an action, and also to judge and accept different interpretations of the same facts. On the contrary, the uncritically thinking students (unfavourably these present the majority) are passive thinkers. As a rule, such students don't recognize the variety of possible understanding of the material; they cannot identify reasons and assumptions. They simply agree or disagree with interpretations which are often not understood by them. They fail to see the complex and subtle sides, they are not able to separate ideas and confuse different concepts being inclined to contradictions. These students usually take their own viewpoints as the only well-founded and applicable ones.

This state of things is to a great extent a consequence of the fact that our students don't possess good skills and techniques to analyze and evaluate the material. For that reason, one of our primary teaching aims is to develop our students' capacities of thinking for themselves, to help them discover the principles of critical thinking and arm them with the necessary technique in this respect, so that they could perfect themselves as good critical thinkers.

Further, the article gives a description of the main strategies and tactics used in teaching critical thinking, including some concrete steps and activities for developing students' critical thinking skills, which come from my personal teaching experience, observation, investigation and various recommendations. These may be regarded as main points and may be adapted to different academic situations.

As it was mentioned, critical thinking is used quite often in life in a variety of circumstances. In an academic setting the process of critical thinking stands not only for thinking critically, but also for reading and writing critically. Here critical thinking will be mostly regarded through the critical reading process, as one of the most effective ways of building critical thinking skills.

There are two basic strategies for reading critically: *reading for the literal meaning* and *reading to make inferences and evaluate a text*. When we read a text for its *literal meaning* we search for information, try to understand *what is said* in the text. Sometimes this type of reading is called *reading on the line*. We use our general knowledge and experience to get the meaning. We also imply our specific knowledge of the subject described in the text, our personal opinions and cultural values. In this way we discover various alternatives to reveal the meaning. A critical reader is not a passive reader. Students should be encouraged to see not only the surface features as they read a text. They should actively build the meaning of a text trying to understand the information properly.

The next basic strategy to read critically is *reading to make inferences and evaluate*. This reading is often called *reading between lines*. While reading for inferences the reader tries to see *what is implied* in the text. In other words, the focus of reading here shifts from grasping the meaning to the rhetoric, i.e., from *what* is said to *why* and *how* the meaning is presented. At this level the students are stimulated to analyze the ways the writers make their ideas clear and try to persuade the reader. It must be noted that some students who are more experienced readers may integrate these reading strategies, that is, they can read simultaneously for meaning and for inferences. However, for the majority of students it may appear more effective to separate these reading ways.

Besides, in order to reinforce students' abilities to use the above mentioned strategies, a series of concrete steps and activities are suggested which are meant to improve their critical thinking skills.

One of the most useful techniques of reading a text, both for meaning and for inference, is *annotating*. It is a rather helpful practice a reader can apply to prove that he/she has something definite to say about the text. It also helps to focus on the text, making records of different opinions and reactions that occur in the process of reading. In other words, the reader makes notes of what is most important and what questions the text puts forward. Annotating is a very functional and, at the same time, simple techniques. Everything that one needs is the text for reading and a pen or a pencil. “That pencil in your hand is crucial”, says Richard L. Epstein. [3: *Preface to the student*] This activity suggests marking the pages while reading, or, if preferred, making notes on a sheet of paper. Here are some most common mechanisms to make annotations: *ask questions and write comments and predictions in the margins; make a record of the main ideas and facts; note clarifications and conclusions; evidentiate important passages, sentences and key words; mark the words to find their denotations and connotations*. Some readers use annotations widely, others concentrate on most important things/facts. What it really counts is the fact that annotating makes one read closely and thoughtfully.

While making annotations readers are also advised to use *predictions*. In the process of reading the reader's mind is involved in guess-work, trying to find out what follows. Once the mind uncovers what follows, it either affirms or reconsiders the previous prediction and the action of guessing starts again. Usually the readers are not aware of the predictions their minds may produce during reading, as this is a very quick process. Still, predictions help us to narrow our expectations.

A rather productive and largely used technique in developing students' critical thinking skills is the *question-asking activity* on the content of the reading material. Most often to facilitate the interpretation of a text the teacher asks the question “Why?” whether when he/she agrees or disagrees with the students, as well as when he/she tries to find out what the students mean: “Why do you think so?”, “Why does it happen?”, “Why do you consider this is ...?”, etc. “Why” questions are the shortest and clearest way to help students build hypotheses and try to find suitable ideas to explain the facts. “Why” may sound aggressive sometimes. So, the teacher may try to ask questions in a milder note: “What is the reason?”, “How do you know?”, “Would you expand a bit on that?” Other questions that may be operated with in this activity can be: “What do you believe are the major problems?”, “How can you explain the word ...?”, “Do you agree with this?”, “What would

cause ...?", "What is important about the way the main character ...?", "How would you teach a child responsibility?", "What will happen if...?", "What is the effect of ...?", "What can you conclude about...?", etc. (This list can be continued). Like the "Why" questions other types of questions stimulate students' good reasoning for their opinions and contribute greatly to the formation of their critical thinking skills.

Sometimes the teacher may ask *students* to formulate and address questions, especially when the topic is controversial. The questions should be interesting and significant. Such questions, as well as the above indicated ones, are often called *thought-provoking*. Also, students may be advised to ask themselves a series of questions to check how they make inferences while reading: "What is there beyond the literal meaning?", "What is implied?", "What information (knowledge) is expected from me before reading?", "What information do I possess about the author's background and ideology?", "What words are used for their denotations and for their connotations, as well?", etc. In addition, students may be suggested to create *personal folders* where they could keep such checklists of questions and other practical schemes, principles and tips intended to help them in refining their critical reading skills. At the same time, it must be mentioned that the teacher should encourage and support students in providing their answers, no matter whether he/she agrees with the students' opinions or not. A positive attitude is rather beneficial in developing students' thinking skills. Many students may feel frustrated if they are stopped, told to take another point of view or even when criticized for their incorrect answers in front of their colleagues. Every idea stated by our students is valuable in increasing their capacity of reasoning. Or, when necessary, the teacher should hint or give his/her opinion on the students' unfit course of judgement in a more gentle way.

Another helpful technique used for a better understanding of the material is *rereading*. An active reader should reread the text. Novelists, short-story writers, dramatists, journalists, reporters write in a variety of styles and some of them may not be perceived at first reading. Academic reading often requires rereading. According to Vladimir Nabokov, novelist and teacher, "one cannot *read* a book: one can only *reread* it. A good reader, a major reader, an active reader and creative reader is a re-reader" [8, p. 113].

Equally important for developing critical thinking skills is the students' *readiness for alternative points of view, conclusions and explanations*. The teacher should focus students' attention on the importance of being open-minded, trying to see others' points of view. Students should be ready to reconsider ideas if other reasons and evidence exist.

It is also essential for students to *practise critical thinking skills in various context and realistic situations* (e.g. their personal and their friend's lives, films, literature, etc.). The teacher should lay stress on making parallels and connections; more specifically, the students should learn and practise to *transfer* the critical thinking principles to everyday life situations and to other subjects within which they could provide vivid examples. Moreover, students should be encouraged to practise *transfer applications*, especially when it comes to making parallels with other literary sources.

Another aspect that should be given consideration when developing our students' critical thinking skills is *wait time*. The function of the mind is a process of deep thought and thorough examination. It requires time. This process comes in contradiction with today's pace of life. Some teachers require their students to answer swiftly, without much delay. They don't allow the necessary time for students to think about questions and facts. As teachers, we should realize that a rapid pace is not always a standard or a test of intelligence, especially when it concerns critical thinking. There is a true anecdote about Albert Einstein in this respect: "The first time that Banesh Hoffman, a scientist, was expected to talk about his work to Albert Einstein, Hoffman was speechless and overawed. Einstein instantly put Hoffman at ease when he said: "Please, go slowly. I don't understand things quickly" [8, p. 111]. The same thing happens with students when they are involved in the critical thinking process. In most cases they cannot respond immediately. Hence, if offered sufficient time students *will* come up with answers.

At the same time, some students have the habit to give hasty answers. Usually such students are ready to present the first idea that comes to their minds. Sometimes students automatically agree with what is presented in the material. In such cases it is also the task of the teacher to advise students to *stop and reflect upon the information received*.

In the process of exchanging views implying critical thinking, for example, in question-asking activities, discussions, debates, etc. the teacher may *write the students' thoughts or points of view, their statements and conclusions on the blackboard*. In no case the teacher wastes time making use of such a method. On the contrary, this offers students the opportunity to think about the ideas and opinions discussed, as it provides them with time to order their thoughts. The teacher may also ask students to help him/her formulate what he/she writes. Generally, all students should be encouraged to express their own opinions on their colleagues' positions, providing reasons. Also, students may be asked to write down the stated ideas and observe the strengths and weaknesses of their own and opposing positions.

Next, students may be asked to *develop their personal positions on various issues in written form as part of their home task*. This may be given as a final assignment after a text discussion or as a post-reading activity. Reading and writing are indispensable. When assigned with a written task students reinforce their abilities of reasoning. They will have to present adequate support using good argumentation and, also, will have to show awareness of different opinions on the topic. The length of such an assignment may vary from a paragraph to one or two pages, depending on the students' level and the available time. From time to time the teacher may assign students with *peer-editing*. The students must read each other's works and give their opinions both on the strong and weak points of their group-mates. They may, as well, write suggestions in the margins. In performing this type of activity students should take a critical attitude and provide objective commentaries. After peer-editing students will have to revise their own papers again, taking into consideration these comments.

Students can also increase their understanding of a text and improve their critical thinking skills by *discussing the reading material with other students who have read the same text*. The teacher should offer this opportunity to students. They may work in groups, sharing ideas during in-class activities, or, they may talk about the given text after classes. Students work more productively and feel more confident and constructive when they debate and exchange views.

However, no matter how well the students can master the critical thinking skills, if a previous material is not assimilated, the teacher should postpone a new task. After all, the primary goal of teaching is comprehension.

Finally, to help students organize their ideas better and become more efficient in acquiring critical thinking skills it would be reasonable for the teacher to provide students with *a series of criteria and principles for critical analysis in various academic tasks*, such as, analysis of literary texts, essays, newspaper articles, reports, presentations, etc., which can also be included in the students' personal folders and which can serve as support for further use.

Concluding, we may remark that developing students' critical thinking skills is essential in the process of formation of modern specialists. The primary focus of contemporary education must lie in promoting the developing of students' intellectual skills in the frame of higher critical thinking values. If young people can think critically they will be able to succeed in their careers. Whatever place a young specialist begins to work at, when he or she proves that he/she is not only reliable, but is able to judge well, and can anticipate consequences, that person is sure to move forward. While perfecting their critical thinking skills students learn to reason well. But this is not merely essential. If a young person is used to reason well, this will prove much more beneficial in the end. According to Richard L. Epstein, critical thinking is "the part of the study of philosophy: the love of wisdom" [3, p. 2]. If the young generation possesses this wisdom it will also possess a positive and creative attitude in building a new society.

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