

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH CRITICAL THINKING

Dina PUIU, University Lecturer,
Alec Russo Balti State University

Living in times of advanced technology and the widespread expansion of information means that each individual should possess a vital ability of being a critical thinker which helps to distinguish between facts and opinions, judgements and inferences, and objective and subjective impressions.

Sometimes, we come across with the fact that our students lack the critical thinking skills. This happens as they explain, because from the very beginning they are taught to view their teachers as the embodiment of knowledge. The authority and control that teachers exercise can deter students from freely expressing their opinions. In this firmly established teacher-centred system, it is often offensive for students to contradict the teacher's point of view. As a result students display a passive attitude and an unequal relationship appears in the classroom.

Littlewood (2000, 33) believes that if students display passivity, it is more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been or are now provided for them, than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves".

Critical thinking appears as a challenging idea for teachers and students. To promote critical thinking means to observe how students produce knowledge rather than how they merely reproduce knowledge. "Producing knowledge requires the use of a number of thinking skills such as analytical, lateral, problem solving, critical, creative and reflective thinking, judging ambiguity (Rose and Nicoll 1997).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that changing the teacher-centered style into learner-centered makes students more reluctant to question ideas or to express their opinions or individual preferences.

For Marshal and Rowland (1998) critical thinking occurs when students express their own beliefs of what they are told. I consider critical thinking an important feature for the improvement of teaching and learning. Learning to think critically can produce enthusiastic language learners. Marshal and Rowland (1998, 34) describe how critical thinking produces "joy, release, relief and exhilaration as we break through to new ways of looking at our personal, work, and political worlds".

To encourage critical thinking in the classroom we have to incorporate elements of it into materials, use more techniques that make activities different from only one-way questions from teachers and answers from students.

One of the activities used to do develop critical thinking is the use of wh-questions. They require students to think deeply and use complex language to respond avoiding the questions that require 'yes' or 'no' answers. That is the questions should be meaning based, and not focused solely on form, to rely on reason rather than emotion, to be aware of one's own prejudices and biases (Kurland, 1995).

In a language classroom, we should elicit meaningful students reactions to texts and also signal that they are permitted to disagree with the text and to ask questions as well.

Richard and Rodgers (2001, 210) write that 'language learning is also motivating when students are focusing on something other than language, such as ideas, issues, and opinions. "To achieve this, one can follow Paran's (2003) suggestion to construct activities that train students to distinguish fact from opinion, supported opinions from unsupported opinions, texts with factual mistakes in them, corroborating information within and between texts. I noticed that these activities develop higher thinking skills and make students active participants in the acquisition of knowledge.

To stimulate critical thinking we can also provide two articles that present totally different views on the same matter and invite students to discuss and debate. The materials that are used to work with students should be authentic because students learn not only English but also other skills beyond the language.

The EFL teaching environment presents a special problem, and teachers face great challenges to counter-act passive learning and make students more thoughtful and engaged. The learner-centred approach permits to create a classroom environment that supports interaction and critical thinking.