

THE SKILL OF INQUIRY: UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD THROUGH QUESTIONS

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Abstract: *This article examines an important issue in language education, namely, developing the EFL learners' **skill of inquiry**. Having acquired this skill, learners will be able to call into question almost any type of media text in a critical way, thus – consuming and producing independently reliable media messages. This research is based on an analysis of the tasks provided in the textbook “English for Life” for the eighth form.*

Keywords: *media literacy, skill of inquiry, question, education, student-centered strategy.*

Media literacy has become one of the key concepts of the 21st century education due to the growing amount of information and data that is being constantly produced and exchanged internationally. Books, films, paintings, social networks, news, magazines, podcasts, e-mails and thousands of other media outlets overwhelm constantly our studying and working space, as well as the more informal dimensions of our lives, such as our leisure places and homes. Countless information vents seem to reach out entire communities of people regardless of their backgrounds and environments, shaping fundamentally the ways in which they perceive and project the world around them. For this reason, an efficient educational instrument, such as media literacy, is needed to help people navigate and deliver information critically.

Media literacy is, in fact, continuously defined and redefined by scholars all over the world. Hobbs (2011), for instance, defines it as “a means to acknowledge the set of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind required for full participation in a contemporary media-saturated society.” The last, but not the least relevant definition we have chosen is provided by Duncan and it explains that “*media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques.*” [3, pp. 423].

Media literacy education is strongly connected to critical thinking. For this reason, when we ask ourselves what tasks would bring our learners closer to becoming media literate, we should, in fact, search for ways to challenge them to think critically first. Developing our learners' skill of inquiry may be among the most efficient ways to help them think critically in terms of media consumption and media production.

To possess the skill of inquiry means to be able to ask analytical questions. Accordingly, when students are used to reacting with a question to any uncertain or dubious facts that they encounter all over the media space or they simply want to learn more about a particular subject matter by researching it individually, they are more likely to have the skill of inquiry developed.

There are various strategies and techniques to motivate learners to call into question the information they are given. One of the simplest ways to do it is by focusing on the accuracy of the question itself, rather than on the answer to it. More specifically, we will tackle this relevant instance of developing the skill of inquiry provided by Deluty (2010): *"When asked why he became a scientist, the story goes, the physicist and Nobel laureate, Isidor Isaac Rabi, speaks about his childhood [...] He grew up in a devoutly Jewish home, the son of impoverished immigrant parents. Steeped in a religious tradition that values learning, his mother, who had little formal education, would inquire about his school day. Yet contrary to many parents who might try to discern what a child did or learned that day in school, Rabi's mother would inquire: 'Did you ask a good question today?'"*

What we see here is the fact that Rabi's parent indirectly initiated him into the skill of inquiry that nurtured his scientific journey because she understood that the roots of learning are cultivated in the process of questioning, not in the passive recitation of facts. Thus, initiation into the practice of inquiry conditions one to judge critically, regardless if he or she is a scientist, a scholar, or a citizen at large. Critical inquiry enables one to distinguish between fact and fiction, the essential skill required of any media-literate participant in a democratic society.

Nevertheless, teachers who pursue the goal of educating media-literate English-speakers may often find the process of designing relevant activities in this regard rather demanding. This is to say that developing some of the media literacy skills, such as analysis, deduction or synthesis that would match with the national Curriculum may often require extra time, extra materials as well as complex beforehand preparation for the lesson. However, the advantage of focusing namely on the skill of inquiry during the English classes lies not only in its high-level efficiency, but also in its practical adaptability to the national Curriculum and to the reliable recourses that teachers already have access to.

Indeed, many of the strategies and techniques that contribute to developing the learners' skill of inquiry seem to be easily adaptable to most of the topics and communicative areas provided in the English textbooks for schools in our country. The textbook *"English for Life"* [Burdeniuc, pp. 162] for the eighth form, whose authors are G. Burdeniuc, E. Onofreiciuc, L. Codeacova, E. Fabian, M. Calchei, A. Legcobit, S. Rotaru, T. Carauș, L. Labliuc, serves as a relevant example in this regard. It seems to be a reliable media source for learners providing them with a variety of useful

communicative topics to be inquired and examined during the English lessons. Some of such topics are: “Politeness”, “Who Am I”, “Body Image”, “Teen Bestsellers”, “Today Green Means Someone Who Cares about the Environment”, “Heroes of Our Time”, “Boredom Is Not an Option” and “The News You Care About”.

Many of these texts presented in the textbook may be tackled during the English lessons within certain activities that would prepare the ground for a more efficient acquisition of the skill of inquiry. Four of such activities are the following: *The Fishbowl*, *The Stand Where I Stand Debate*, *The Socratic Seminar* and *Choosing Reliable Sources*. In the following paragraphs, we are going to describe how these activities operate using some of the aforementioned communicative topics from the textbook.

The Fishbowl is an engaging and student-centered strategy that builds comprehension of complex media products while developing the inquiry skill within a group. It is suitable for organizing large group discussions. Within this activity, students are separated into an inner and outer circle. In the inner circle, or fishbowl, students have a discussion on a selected topic, whereas students sitting in the outer circle listen to the discussion and take notes. During every conversation session, the task of the students sitting in both circles is to discuss the topic addressing as many questions as possible to each other.

The topic “Today Green Means Someone Who Cares about the Environment” seems to be rather suitable for The Fishbowl activity. Thus, the eighth graders are to sit according to the fishbowl pattern. After the circles are formed, the students sitting in the inner circle answer the questions from the exercise 1, page 122, which are addressed by the moderator. The discussion takes place orally and loudly, so that the students from the outer circle can hear everything and take notes. After the inner circle finishes answering a question, the students from the outer circle assess critically this answer and come up with more questions to the participants of the inner circle in order to give them a more accurate final mark.

By performing this activity, the students will tackle an important, up-to-date topic of the natural environment, which is often interpreted in various controversial ways all over the media space, while inquiring each other politely and forming an individual opinion on the aforementioned topic.

The Socratic Seminar is another activity for developing the skill of inquiry that may require a more advanced level of English. Nevertheless, it is useful and can be easily adapted to the language level of the learners. Within this activity, learners help each other understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in a text through a group discussion format. Learners are responsible for facilitating their group discussion around the selected ideas; they shouldn't use the discussion to assert their opinions or prove an argument. Through this type of discussion, learners practice how to listen to each other's interpretations of a text, how to call into question other opinions in a polite, but direct way and to find common grounds while participating in a conversation.

This activity is appropriate for topics that do not have an exact answer and allow learners to digress to a certain extent from the selected topic. A suitable theme in this regard is “Body Image” provided in the textbook for the eighth form.

During The Socratic Seminar, the students will be asked to read, translate and analyze the text from exercise 3, page 42.

After getting acquainted with the text, some basic ground rules will be explained to the learners regarding the conversation etiquette of the lesson and they will be asked to discuss the text using some of these questions:

- (1) I'm not sure I understand this. What do you mean by . . . ?
- (2) Do you see gaps in my reasoning?
- (3) Are you taking into account something different from what I have considered?
- (4) What is some evidence for . . . ?
- (5) How does this (poem, book, incident, etc.) remind you of . . . ?
- (6) What do you think the author is trying to say?
- (7) How might she/he have felt . . . ?
- (8) How did you arrive at your view?
- (9) Do you have different conclusions?

At the end of the activity, learners will be asked to describe their impressions regarding this lesson and summarize some of the conclusion that they have come to. This lesson design is useful for various reasons. Not only does it contribute to the learners' development of the skill of inquiry, but it also provides them with useful communication patterns teaching them about different ways in which media may impact and shape our body image.

The Stand Where I Stand Debate is an activity for which learners are to come prepared. The learners are assigned beforehand the task to get individually informed on a topic. They come prepared for the lesson and the activity begins when the teacher writes a debatable statement on the board. For instance, Dylan Thomas' quotation: "*He who seeks rest, finds boredom. He who seeks work, finds rest,*" provided in the textbook at page 52, within the topic "Boredom Is Not an Option". The students are then asked to stand in a specific location in the room to indicate whether they strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree with it.

After learners have positioned themselves, they are called individually to explain their respective positions regarding the statement. Once a few students have answered, everyone must move to a different position to reflect any changes in their thinking. These steps are repeated once or twice. Finally, the students are asked to discuss the process, using the following questions: What arguments were the most compelling? Why? How did hearing different perspectives affect your thinking? What new questions were generated after changing your place?

This activity helps the students formulate their objective opinion on certain debatable or controversial topics as well as understand and empathize with others' unusual points of view while practicing the skill of inquiry.

Choosing Reliable Sources is another efficient TEFL activity in terms of developing the learners' skill of inquiry when analyzing media. While practicing it, the students are given a media product (i.e. a print or a virtual text) and are asked to assess its reliability according to a checklist that the teacher is going to provide them with. This reliability checklist may consist of as many questions as the

teacher chooses. Nevertheless, we have chosen five core questions for the students studying in the eighth form:

- (1) Who is the author of the source?
- (2) Who is the author's target audience?
- (3) What are the arguments that the author provides for his statements? (Are they reliable or not)
- (4) What is the author's purpose in writing it?
- (5) When was this piece of media published? (How current is it?)

An adequate topic for this activity is "The News You Care About" that can be found on page 84 of the textbook for the eighth form. Before beginning this activity, with the help of a media text (item of news/article) that the teacher chooses on his/her own, the students will be asked to do exercise 1, from page 84 as a warm-up activity. It is going to help them understand the nature of the lesson and prepare them for it.

After practicing this activity, learners will be able to locate reliable sources both on-line and off-line, evaluate independently these sources for reliability and bias and identify common reasoning errors while developing the skill of inquiry.

Drawing a final conclusion, it should be mentioned that the learners' keen awareness and critical understanding of the media impact on their mental patterns, self-perceptions and behaviors is an objective that each teacher must endeavor to accomplish, especially when it comes to language classes. This goal can be achieved by examining accurately the contents of the textbooks for tasks designed for media literacy purposes, by integrating some appropriate exercises as additional pedagogical strategies and by cultivating a question-friendly environment in the classroom.

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