



Keynote

A framework for implementing critical thinking as a language pedagogy in EFL preparatory programmes



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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a framework for infusing critical thinking as a language pedagogy into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) preparatory programmes for the purpose of facilitating the transfer of critical thinking skills. The idea for the framework came out of a recognition of the limitations of the existing literature on critical thinking in the EFL context, where implementing critical thinking was limited to one or two language skills, mainly reading and/or writing. Evidence of transfer were rarely tracked and identified in available studies. This paper suggests that critical thinking need to be implemented as a holistic language pedagogy across all language skills and courses, and it provides a framework that might facilitate the implementation processes. The paper starts with a brief introduction on the application of critical thinking in the EFL context. Then, it highlights limitations in studies, based on systemic review conducted by the author, that have implemented critical thinking into post-secondary school EFL programmes and courses. Following this, a framework for implementing critical thinking in EFL preparatory programmes is proposed.

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1. A glimpse at the implementation of critical thinking in foreign language contexts

The concept of critical thinking has been widely emphasised in the field of education and it underpins various educational interventions that have been concerned with the development of cognitive skills and curriculum. Halpern (1999) provides a broad definition of critical thinking, which identifies the components of this notion, as follows:

Critical thinking refers to the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. Critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed. It is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions. Critical thinkers use these skills appropriately, without prompting, and usually with conscious intent, in a variety of settings. That is, they are predisposed to think critically. When we think critically, we are evaluating the outcomes of our thought processes—how good a decision is or how well a problem is solved. (Halpern, 1999: 70)

As appears in this definition, Halpern includes the cognitive skills and dispositions as the two components of critical thinking. The definition also identifies the different types of cognitive skills. The ultimate goal of critical thinking is the transfer of critical thinking skills. "Transfer of learning is our use of past learning when learning something new and the application of that learning to both similar and new situations. . . Transfer of learning. . . is the very foundation of learning, thinking and problem solving" (Haskell, 2001: xiii).

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Among the many effective educational interventions that have employed critical thinking are [Lipman's Philosophy for Children \(1981\)](#) and [Adey and Shayer \(1994\)](#) Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education programme (CASE). The participants in these studies were usually children. The issue of applying critical thinking skills with post-16 learners has not received sufficient attention ([Moseley et al., 2004](#)), and thus it seems to be difficult to fully evaluate the employment of thinking interventions with this group of learners.

The application of critical thinking for teaching and learning foreign languages is a new area of investigation. Critical thinking pedagogies are underpinned by the theory of critical language awareness. This theory explains the role of the learners' cognitive and metacognitive domains in developing his awareness of the new language and the world around him ([Fairclough, 1999](#)). In Europe, some researchers and educational bodies have incorporated critical thinking into foreign language classrooms. For instance, in UK schools, the National Curriculum NC ([DfEE, 1999](#)) introduced thinking skills into Modern Foreign Language classrooms (MFL), and it was found that teaching students to think can help them to communicate in the new language, to produce various types of spoken and written language and to demonstrate creativity in using the foreign language. In addition, it has been found that thinking skills can facilitate language learning, as in the case of drawing inferences from unfamiliar language items and reflecting on links between languages ([DfEE, 1999; Lin & Mackay, 2004](#)). Such incorporation of thinking skills could develop learners' awareness of their progress and develop language autonomy (Lin and Mackay, *ibid.*). Another example is a study by [Allen \(2004\)](#). The study investigated the engagement of US university students who were learning French as a foreign language in writing portfolios where they examined French cultural stereotypes. Findings revealed that the students appreciated writing portfolios which made them more aware of their metacognitive processes.

There was a debate regarding the implementation of critical thinking for teaching EFL in non-Western contexts. [Atkinson \(1997\)](#) claims that critical thinking is applied in particular subjects in Western contexts, where critical thinking is a social practice. He excludes the teaching of EFL in non-Western contexts from those subjects that might benefit from the critical thinking approach, his reason being that critical thinking is culture specific. [Davidson \(1998\)](#) refutes Atkinson's claim by stating that critical thinking could be found in any culture or context, but it is the degree to which this concept is applied that varies. Therefore, critical thinking should not be related to a particular culture (*ibid.*). This debate seems to be the start of relating critical thinking in non-Western contexts to EFL teaching and learning. In some contexts, English becomes the language of instruction at some universities, and this requires learners to enrol a compulsory English preparatory programme before starting their undergraduate degrees. Most universities follow international Quality Assurance criteria where critical thinking is emphasised. Some language institutes run by universities have realised the necessity of familiarising their students with the concept of critical thinking through introducing critical thinking reading and argumentative writing courses. These language institutes face two challenges: improving learners' language proficiency and familiarising them with critical thinking. These challenges increased my curiosity to examine the infusion of critical thinking in language institutes.

I have conducted systemic review of studies on implementing critical thinking in EFL classrooms with post-16 learners, with specific focus on EFL preparatory programmes to evaluate the implementations. Most studies started early 2000s, and the majority of existing studies were published between 2010 and 2012, as will be seen in the next section. I used varieties of sources to access published studies. The following journals were included in the search:

TESOL Quarterly, ELT (English Language Teaching), Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, Foreign Language Annals, The Modern Language Journal, Language Teaching Research, International Journal of Applied Linguistics, Asian EFL, TESOL Journal and Thinking skills and creativity.

Adding to these journals, databases were used such as Proquest and ProCedia Journal for conference papers was included. Also, DART was considered for European theses and e-thos for UK theses. Google scholar engine was employed for more results. The search focused only on studies carried out between 1990 and 2013; the reason for limiting the search to these years is that most key references on critical thinking emerged in the 1990s. I will focus now on the limitations associated with these studies.

2. Limitations associated with existing studies on critical thinking

The search results came up with limited number of studies that employed critical thinking with post-16 language learners during their English preparatory year (e.g., [Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Alnofaie, 2012; Cross, 2011; Dantas-Whitney, 2002; Pessoa & Freitas, 2012; Roether, 2004; Turuk, 2010](#)). Most of existing studies applied critical thinking with university students majored in English as an undergraduate degree. Many studies, whether conducted in EFL preparatory programmes or university majors, have introduced critical thinking for developing writing and reading skills (e.g., [Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Chooa & Singha, 2011; Cross, 2011; Daud & Husin, 2004; Hashemia & Ghanizadeh, 2012; Rahimi, 2013; Tabrizi, 2011; Turuk, 2010](#)). Only a small number of studies, however, have examined the effects of applying critical thinking as a language pedagogy on the quality of classroom dialogue (e.g., [Dantas-Whitney, 2002; Fairley, 2009; Li, 2011; Alnofaie, 2012](#)). It seems that the reason for this focus on literacy skills in most of the existing studies is that these skills are prioritised in higher education. It should be noted that university students are required to engage with others in critical thinking discussions where they negotiate ideas and solve problems, and it is the role of universities to provide their students with these skills. For this reason, the quality of talk should be considered by academic researchers when applying critical thinking to facilitate high quality learning.

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