

## Critical thinking at the hands of literature, cinema and video

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### Abstract

*Learning is considered a fundamental skill for human development, without which no evolution is even conceivable. However, formal education from 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards was gradually transferred to states' hands and thus standardised schooling came to be. Despite enabling less privileged people to have access to culture at that time, it is a means to kill creativity and create a gap between those who follow academic pathways and those who don't, from Ken Robinson's viewpoint. However, education should also consist of a means to discovery, to exercise critical attitudes towards life and become the springboard for social changes. The concept of critical thinking is profusely discussed, although it exists for over 2500 years, according to the Critical Thinking Community. It is understood as a process that requires discipline and active engagement in analysing events and information, evaluating and reflecting upon them. We believe such events and information can be provided by literature, cinema and video, which we have extensively used in educational contexts at higher education with a view to developing students' critical thinking. Literature may appear as the starting point (or not) – Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" or "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley – complemented by classics in cinema, such as "Dead Poets Society" (Peter Weir, 1989) or "Invictus" (Clint Eastwood, 2009). A third part in this equation is played by "Ted: ideas worth spreading", where short talks can be accessed. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the power of this triad in enhancing critical thinking in young adults.*

**Keywords:** Formal higher education; Critical thinking; Cinema; Video; Literature.

### Introduction

Critical thinking is regarded as high-end thinking by Ritchhart & Perkins (2004: 776), "an activity that is crucial for acquiring quality education, for successful development, which, in its turn, would promote living in a meaningful way" (Turouskaya & Turouskaya, 2001: 51). Therefore, one might consider that, through formal education, these basic thinking skills could be acquired and enhanced (Richhart & Perkins, 2004: 775). However, this is "vexed matter", because "schools have mainly addressed knowledge and skill acquisition", "rote work" and "little thinking". Nowadays it is no longer "enough to consume pre-digested knowledge", thus one should "become a knowledge builder", in the words of Richhart & Perkins (2004: 776-777). For instance, people's (in)ability to focus attention may lead to "narrowness of vision and insight" and emotional responses as well as groupthink may also override deliberate and personal views (Richhart

& Perkins, 2004: 776). Facione (2015: 11) stresses this idea by claiming that "many of the experts fear that some of the things people experience in school are actually harmful to the development and cultivation of strong critical thinking".

We share this belief that education has turned out to be more harmful than beneficial and thus this paper is put forward in response to this concern about education in general, but particularly in Portugal and at higher education. It also intends to reflect on the way the process of becoming educated is conducted, taking into special account at what expenses this so-called education is achieved: what is it that one must "lose" in order to be socially accepted as an educated person?

Our experience has shown that much of the process lies in not thinking, not reacting and simply "spitting out" whatever is necessary at teachers' beck and call. Since we strongly believe that education has become unfocused from their original aims, we intend to gather data related to critical thinking, what it consists of and different perspectives in the teaching context, which shall be achieved in the first part of this paper. Secondly, we will deconstruct the mainstream current education system based on Ken Robinson's position, a pivotal figure in education criticism, and specifically on his talk "Changing Education Paradigms", which follows our discontentment towards education. The teaching context in which our experiment was put to the test will then be elicited, with a view to explaining some of the reasons that led us to integrate critical thinking skills in the English language classroom, even before we were aware of this fact. Last, but not least, we will attempt to demonstrate the way we made use of critical thinking materials, by describing the resources used and the plan we devised for implementing them.

### What is this thing called 'critical thinking'?

Thinking is the extraordinary process we use all the time to make sense of our lives and of the world we live in. (Turouskaya & Turouskaya, 2001: 51)

Wilkinson & Nanni (2014: 83) state that critical thinking can be traced back to ancient philosophy, specifically the western tradition of Socratic debate, being that "[q]uestioning and expressing doubt are the foundations of critical thinking" in itself. In line with this, Richhart & Perkins (2004: 775) argue that:

Beginning with the efforts of Plato and the introduction of Socratic dialog, we see attention to improving intelligence and promoting effective thinking as a recurring educational trend throughout the ages.

For these authors, "[c]ritical thinking is a key component of a liberal arts education (Wilkinson & Nanni, 2014: 85). This means thought-provoking, fruitful topics for discussion must be provided and, at the

same time, the incitement to “probing inquisitiveness, a keenness of mind, a zealous dedication to reason, and a hunger or eagerness for reliable information” (Facione, 2015: 10). In this context, it is of the utmost importance for one to have something to say, instead of having to say something (cf. Dewey, 1915 cit. Wilkinson & Nanni, 2014: 85).

In the words of Shirkhani & Fahim (2011: 11), “[c]ritical thinking refers to the individuals’ ability to think and make correct decisions independently”, which necessarily involves taking charge of their own thinking by means of “achieving understanding, and evaluating different perspectives, and solving problems”. Similarly, Iakovos (2011: 82) cites Beyer (1995) stating that “an important aspect of critical thinking is the ability to collect, evaluate and make use of information effectively and appropriately”.

Therefore, Iakovos (2011: 82) believes that effective conceptions of critical thinking must draw both on philosophy and on psychology, because:

the ability to think critically constitutes a kind of intelligence which students do not necessarily or naturally possess, but it is a skill which can be taught in the classroom (...) [as such is] not likely to develop spontaneously.

It is then no easy task to define critical thinking nor to grapple with it as a process and as a skill to be developed in whatever context. Iakovos (2011: 82) argues that definitions that rely on philosophical theories focus on the metacognitive side, namely the ability to think about thinking. On the other hand, we can assume that those which focus on psychology will depend more on issues such as motivation and engagement.

Based on various authors, Iakovos (2011: 82) proposes that critical thinking involves “questioning (...) taken-for-granted assumptions”, asking questions, based on evidence, evaluating and reflecting on ideas and distinguishing between opinions and facts. One of the authors he mentions is Lipman (1984, 1988), who establishes a difference between ordinary thinking (simple and straightforward) and critical thinking, which is far more complex and guided by standards of objectivity, unity and consistency. According to this author, teachers should shift their teaching strategies:

- a) from guessing to estimating,
- b) from preferring to assessing,
- c) from grouping to classifying,
- d) from believing to assuming,
- e) from inferring to inferring logically,
- f) from associating concepts to grasping principles,
- g) from noting relationships to noting relationships among relationships,
- h) from supposing to hypothesizing,
- i) from offering opinions without reasons to offering opinions with reasons, and
- j) from making judgments without criteria to making judgments with criteria.

Concomitantly, Ennis (1989 cit. Iakovos, 2011: 83) lists 13 features that usually define a critical thinker:

- a) be open-minded,
- b) take a position (or change a position) when they are convinced by evidence,
- c) take into account the entire situation, adopting a holistic approach,
- d) seek precision and objectivity in information, making use of credible and reliable sources of information, deal in an orderly manner with the elements of a complex whole,
- f) search for options and alternative solutions,
- g) look for reasons,
- h) seek a clear statement of the issue,
- i) keep the original problem in mind,
- j) remain relevant to the point, and be sensitive to the feelings and knowledge level of others.

As far as creativity is concerned, its relation to critical thinking is not consensual and many proposals are put forth by authors, one of which is Ornstein (1995 cit. Iakovos, 2011: 83). He suggests that the following are crucial features for enhancing creativity: demonstrating lack of conventionality, intellectuality, aesthetic taste and imagination, decision-making skills and flexibility, as well as perspicacity (“in questioning social norms”), and a drive for accomplishment and recognition.

Despite the apparent benefits of implementing critical thinking, it is obvious for Iakovos (2011: 83) that most teachers favour reactive thinking rather proactive thinking, correct answers instead of possible answers, leaving no room for alternative ways of thinking or of answering. Creativity and critical thinking demand learners to improvise, come up with (alternative) solutions, cooperate among themselves and take risks, activities which do not allow for critical thinking to occur.

Another author cited by Iakovos (2011: 84) – Ornstein (1995) – presents an extensive list of guidelines for teachers, which are as follows:

- a) make available different resources for working out ideas,
- b) foster a tolerant attitude toward novel ideas,
- c) encourage students to engage in tasks requiring them to apply exploration, testing, searching, and prediction skills,
- d) resist accepting one “correct” answer or a predetermined pattern,
- e) teach skills for avoiding peer sanctions,
- f) teach students to value and take pride in their own creativity,
- g) encourage autonomous and independent learning,
- h) look and listen carefully, stir up the unmotivated students, don’t accept superficial, “easy” answers,
- i) develop a spirit of adventure in the classroom,
- j) encourage the habit of working out the full implication of ideas,
- k) provide active and quiet places where students can “mess around” or “do their thing”, while at the same time providing guidance and direction,
- l) make students more sensitive to their environment,
- m) encourage manipulation of objects and ideas, and
- n) keep alive the excitement of learning and thinking, encourage, stimulate, motivate.

From this list, it is worth retaining some of its keywords: variety, tolerance, exploration, motivation, taking pride, autonomy, spirit of adventure and excitement. By doing this, lakovos (2011: 85) believes students must be made aware of their assumptions, prejudices and values by means of active tasks, such as creating diagrams and filling in tables, which will enable them to voice and discuss each other's opinions.

The crucial role of high-order thinking skills in the language classroom has been profusely discussed in the literature of foreign language learning and teaching, as Shirkhani & Fahim show (2011). These authors sum up the importance of critical thinking for language learners in the following way: they "can take charge of their own thinking, they can monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully" (2011: 112). Added to this, this skill will help them expand their learning experience and language will be presented in a more meaningful way. Rafi (n.d. cit. Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011: 112) claims that there is a high degree of correlation with learners' achievements, namely because they become more proficient in the language and simultaneously motivated, and thus improve their writing and oral communication abilities.

Based on the study by Mahyuddin et al. (2004 cit. Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011: 112), these students will then be:

- capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum;
- capable of making decisions and solving problems;
- capable of using their thinking skills, and of understanding language or its contents;
- capable of treating thinking skills as lifelong learning;
- and finally intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually well-balanced.

Nonetheless, as Shirkhani & Fahim (2011: 112) argue, in typical school settings, critical thinking skills are addressed separately as independent processes and have been traditionally peripheral in foreign language classes. Not even the communicative approach has been able to develop these skills. For students to become proficient, they need to think critically and creatively when actually using the target language, going beyond linguistic factors and regarding contents taught as purposeful and potentially broadening their horizons as language learners, but also as people. All in all, critical thinking skills should be integrated in lifelong learning skills.

In line with the above-mentioned, Shirkhani & Fahim (2011: 113) uphold that the best activities to implement in the classroom are those "which require the learners to think, cooperate, ask questions from themselves and others", which should also be followed by feedback so that students realise that thinking is a part of the process of learning.

Within language teaching approaches, lakovos (2011: 83) refers to project-based learning and problem-based learning (PBL), considering the latter the most appropriate for the purpose of critical thinking, because it gives difficulties a central place in teaching by presenting learners with an engaging problem, question or puzzle. PBL may foster critical thinking by

stimulating active learning. Taking Ennis's (cit. lakovos, 2011: 84) approach into account, PBL divides critical thinking into four components, consisting of specific skills which are susceptible to being taught: "a) defining and clarifying, b) asking appropriate questions to clarify or challenge, c) judging the credibility of a source, and d) solving problems and drawing conclusions". This approach undoubtedly demands other materials from teachers beyond traditionally set coursebooks and workbooks, and thus "a variety of strategies and materials" (Turouskaya & Turouskaya, 2001: 51). The issue of materials to cater for critical thinking will be discussed in more detail below.

Turouskaya & Turouskaya (2001: 52) suggest challenging questions to be posed to language students, according to specific skills teachers may wish to master but all directed to developing their views on either audiovisual or written texts:

- Checking for understanding, e.g.: "In your own words, explain..."
- Application, e.g.: "How can you..."
- Analysis, e.g.: "What reason ..."
- Synthesis, e.g.: "What would happen if ..."
- Evaluation, e.g.: "Agree ..., That's good ..., Well done ..."
- Extension of the response, e.g.: "Can you give me an example of ...", "Tell me how...", "How is that similar to ..."

Facione (2015: 8) considers critical thinking "a collaborative, noncompetitive endeavour", through which students listen to all sides, take all facts into account and decide what is most relevant, rendering then a thoughtful judgement. According to this author, critical thinking encompasses cognitive skills and dispositions, namely interpretation, analysis, evaluation, explanation and self-regulation. As a result, he presents a number of questions that are supposed to trigger off critical thinking skills.

Questions to Fire Up Our Critical Thinking Skills	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does this mean?</li> <li>• What's happening?</li> </ul>
Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would we understand that (e.g., what he or she just said)?</li> <li>• What is the best way to characterize/categorize/classify this in this context, what was intended by saying/doing that?</li> <li>• How can we make sense out of this (experience, feeling, or statement)?</li> <li>• Please tell us again your reasons for making that claim.</li> </ul>
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your conclusion?/What is it that you are claiming?</li> <li>• Why do you think that?</li> <li>• What are the arguments pro and con?</li> <li>• What assumptions must we make to accept that conclusion?</li> <li>• What is your basis for saying that?</li> <li>• Given what we know so far, what conclusions can we draw?</li> <li>• Given what we know so far, what can we rule out?</li> <li>• What does this evidence imply?</li> <li>• If we abandoned/accepted that assumption, how would things change?</li> </ul>
Inference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What additional information do we need to resolve this question?</li> <li>• If we believed these things, what would they imply for us going forward?</li> <li>• What are the consequences of doing things that way?</li> <li>• What are some alternatives we haven't yet explored?</li> <li>• Let's consider each option and see where it takes us.</li> <li>• Are there any undesirable consequences that we can and should foresee?</li> </ul>
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How credible is that claim?</li> <li>• Why do we think we can trust what this person claims?</li> <li>• How strong are those arguments?</li> <li>• Do we have our facts right?</li> <li>• How confident can we be in our conclusion, given what we now know?</li> <li>• What were the specific findings/results of the investigation?</li> <li>• Please tell us how you conducted that analysis.</li> </ul>
Explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you come to that interpretation?</li> <li>• Please take us through your reasoning one more time.</li> <li>• Why do you think that (was the right answer/was the solution)?</li> <li>• How would you explain why this particular decision was made?</li> <li>• Our position on this issue is still too vague; can we be more precise?</li> <li>• How good was our methodology, and how well did we follow it?</li> <li>• Is there a way we can reconcile these two apparently conflicting conclusions?</li> </ul>
Self-Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How good is our evidence?</li> <li>• OK, before we commit, what are we missing?</li> <li>• I'm finding some of our definitions a little confusing; can we revisit what we mean by certain things before making any final decisions?</li> </ul>

Figure 1 - Questions to fire up critical thinking (Facione, 2015: 8)

The debate is presented by Turouskaya & Turouskaya (2001: 53) as “a perfect problem-solving tool”, because it puts forth “a structured opportunity to address a controversial issue”, in which all students can participate and engage, “stand up for themselves and argumentatively present their position”. In line with this, Facione (2015: 27) puts forth a 5-step process directed to problem-solving exercises.

IDEAS	
A 5-Step Critical Thinking General Problem Solving Process	
<b>I</b>	= IDENTIFY the Problem and Set Priorities (Step 1)
<b>D</b>	= DETERMINE Relevant Information and Deepen Understanding (Step 2)
<b>E</b>	= ENUMERATE Options and Anticipate Consequence (Step 3)
<b>A</b>	= ASSESS the Situation and Make a Preliminary Decision (Step 4)
<b>S</b>	= SCRUTINIZE the Process and Self-Correct as Needed (Step 5)

Figure 2 - 5-step problem solving process (Facione, 2015: 27)

According to Thadphoothon (2005: 7, 22, 27), critical thinking has only been consistently used in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts from the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. As a result of her thesis work, Thadphoothon argues that thinking requires both language and communication and thus has devised a model for critical thinking in ELT, including communication (linguistic conventions, audiences and aims), reasoning (logical and ethical considerations) and self-reflection (learning environment, performance and learning strategies), the latter being a concept inspired in Dewey who spoke of “reflective thinking”.

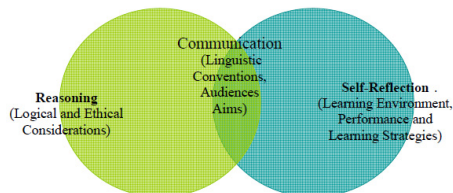


Figure 3 - Model for critical thinking (Thadphoothon, 2005: 27)

Regardless of the teaching approach followed in the classroom, it appears that the common feature of critical thinking is to be based on a problem-based query, i.e. it must develop from a problem or a question that is to be solved or answered by students, by means of various strategies: asking questions, assessing trustworthy sources, analysing information and applying it to different contexts, synthesising and drawing conclusions. The whole process should be grounded on a diversity of materials that can enhance students’ communication skills in both written and oral, as well as their motivation and engagement into the learning process.

### Deconstructing current education systems

In a context in which students’ reaction has been profoundly hampered, not to mention their proaction, as Iakovos (2001) puts it, it is essential to reflect upon

formal education and schooling contexts. In order to accomplish this, we will follow Ken Robinson’s position as presented in his video about the changes that education paradigms have been going through.

To being with, Sir Ken Robinson is a reputed speaker who has specialised in “creativity, innovation and human resources in education and in business” (cf. Sir Ken Robinson website). He began as a Professor of Education at the University of Warwick, UK, and is now an education advisor for various countries around the world. He has not only written several books, but also given numerous talks, some of which can be found on Ted Talks website (to be elicited below). As far as his books are concerned, the first to mention must be “All our futures: Creativity, culture and education”, also known as the Ken Report, from 1999, and the latest being “*Finding Your Element: How to Discover Your Talents and Passions and Transform Your Life*” (2013) and “*Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that is transforming education*” (2015), written with Lou Aronica.

As for his talks, the following must be alluded to: “Do schools kill creativity” (2006); “Education Changing Paradigms” and “Bring on the learning revolution” (both from 2010); and “How to escape education’s death valley” (2013). The first one became a much acclaimed talk and definitely an icon for those teachers, parents or citizens who are discontent with the way formal education is being led by national governments and become acutely aware of the changes it must undergo in the near future.

“Education Changing Paradigms” was Robinson’s talk selected not only for the purposes of deconstructing education systems and presenting the reason to pursue critical thinking in classes, but also to be used as a critical thinking material with students. The choice was due to several reasons: first of all, it is supported by visual aid in the form of live sketches; secondly, it provides a historical overview of formal education and of current practices and analyses and deconstructs what is incoherent for today’s patterns, making recommendations towards the future; at last, it is one of his shorter talks and thus students will experience less difficulties in coping with its content.



Figure 4 - Changing Education Paradigms (Ken Robinson, 2010)

Most countries have been attempting to reform their education systems for two reasons, in Ken Robinson’s view: one is economic and the other cultural. For graduates to occupy their place in today’s economy, they must present themselves as an asset. However, today’s economy is highly unpredictable and this brings about serious challenges for education systems. At the same time, education is one of the means to provide children with a sense of cultural identity which,

according to Robinson, “can pass on the genes of our communities”. But the hurdle lies in the fact that the whole world is part of an inescapable process of globalisation. He sums up this notion by asking the question “How do we square this circle?”

He responds by claiming that this has been done in the same way it was also in the past, being that the outcome is the alienation of millions of kids who can't see the purpose of going to school. In the old days, the formula was that if we worked hard and did well at school, we would go to college and get a job, probably for life. Children, teenagers and young adults do not believe this formula is infallible anymore. A diploma is no longer a guarantee for getting a job, especially when it means marginalising everything people think is important about themselves!

Consequently, Robinson explains that the current education system was designed and conceived for a different age, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Before these times, there were no systems of public education paid from taxation, compulsory for everyone and free to the point of delivery. This was a revolutionary idea and due to this fact many objections were raised at the time. For instance, the belief that children from the lower working classes would be incapable of making the most of this system and would not be able to read and write, at the end of this process. Bearing these assumptions in mind, the purpose of this investment was questionable: why should time be wasted and money spent?

Nonetheless, this education system was set up due to economic imperatives of the time which were based on a certain intellectual model of the mind, typical of the Enlightenment (i.e. deductive reasoning and knowledge of the classics). As a result of this mind set, there were two types of people: academic/ smart people vs. non-academic/ non-smart people, which ultimately led to chaos.

Robinson's idea of chaos is grounded on the fact that there is no longer any connection or coherence between the outset of this education system and the current moment in history. Children are experiencing the most intense stimulating period in the history of humankind; they're besieged with information from every possible platform: computers, I-pads, publicising, hundreds of TV channels and thus feeling distracted is no coincidence whatsoever. The Arts have been the victims of this mentality, because they are particularly directed to aesthetic experience, when people's senses are operating at their peak and resonate with the excitement of the experience, when they are “fully alive”. Anaesthetics, as Robinson puts it, is given to distracted students in the form of medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and results in shutting off people's senses and deadening them to the outside world.

For the above-mentioned reasons, Robinson believes that education is modelled on basis of the interests of industrialisation. Our schools are still organised on factory lines with ringing bells, dispersed facilities which are specialised into separate subjects. Moreover, people are put in “batches”, they go through

the system by age group. Robinson also questions this with a trace of irony: “Why is there this assumption that the only thing kids have in common is their age group or date of manufacture?” Children in the same age may be better at different subjects, work more efficiently in different times of the day, in smaller groups than in large ones or simply on their own. If governments and people in general are indeed interested in education, it is unwise to start from “this production line mentality” because it is merely based on conformity and standardisation and thus Robinson believes we should go the opposite direction.

Another issue Robinson raises is divergent thinking, which, for him, is not the same as creativity (i.e. process of having original ideas that have value), despite the fact that that is an essential capacity for creativity, the ability to see many possible answers to a question or ways to interpret a question, to think laterally and not only in a linear or convergent way, to find multiple answers and not only one. Longitudinal surveys have been conducted on divergent thinking, showing that we all possess this capacity and that most of it deteriorates as we become educated.

At the end of his talk, Robinson puts forth recommendations. From his viewpoint, we should think differently about human capacity, overcome the dichotomies of academic/ non-academic, abstract/ concrete, theoretical/ practical, vocational/ non-vocational, because these are nothing more than a myth. Collaboration is an essential part of education and this happens in groups, which is the very essence of growth. By atomising people, separating and judging them separately, we are creating a disjunction between people and their natural environment.

It is this thought-provoking perspective that we intend to present students with at the beginning of our approach. This video deconstructs education systems of which students are part and being given such a gloomy and critical view is expected to waken them up and engage them in expressing their personal opinions, based or not on their past experiences and putting forth their suggestions.

## Teaching context

Before presenting the experiment carried out and the materials used, it is essential to describe the teaching context in which it took place. My practice in teaching English at higher education both as a foreign language (FL) and as a second language (SL) goes as far as the year 2001, which amounts to nearly 15 years at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, in the northeast of Portugal. This period has encompassed many different stages not only in terms of the offer of different study plans at the school itself, but also of the students' profile, commitment and degree of engagement with the contents and the language.

As far as the first point is concerned, what started off as a school that was supposed to train teachers-to-be has had to go through in-depth changes in order to cater for new market demands and for new financing paradigms of the education system. Towards the end

of the last millennium, teachers' image worldwide was badly affected due to various reasons and Portugal was no exception. Several measures were taken by the consecutive Portuguese governments, such as that classes should be enlarged and teachers should have more work load, i.e. more classes and more red tape on their hands. This ended up disturbing higher education as well and the training of new teachers: if less teachers were needed at schools, less teachers were to be trained and thus the teaching profession began experiencing a dark age. Being a teacher was/is no longer socially prestigious nor considered to be relevant for **society**.

The most striking consequence for the School of Education was that it was forced to close down all teaching degrees and diversify its offer to areas that could maintain its many departments, without losing its competitiveness in the overall higher-education context. The Bologna process also gave a hand in this turmoil and now for one to become a teacher in Portugal, as in other European countries, one must hold a master's degree after having completed a bachelor's degree in a related area of studies.

The above-mentioned teaching context comprehended classes for teachers-to-be in the areas of Music, Physical Education, Mathematics and Sciences in the old days and, more recently, English classes directed to students of Music, Arts, Social Education and Environment Education, on the one hand, and English from levels B1 to C2 to students of the degrees in English and Spanish and in Languages for International Relations, on the other.

Related to the second point, Ken Robinson in his video "Changing Education Paradigms" referred to the fact that this is a time when students are greatly stimulated by all kinds of platforms and this has led to a world of difference between students and teachers, as if they speak different languages altogether. The role and place of human teachers in this context is highly questionable and requires serious reflection for the future of teaching as a whole, although this is not to be discussed in-length here.

As a result, throughout this decade and a half, we have witnessed higher education students' growing lack of interest, engagement and commitment in most of the activities developed in the classroom, regardless of their age group, origin or specific area of studies. This disengagement bears consequences on the way classes are conducted, the amount of work teachers are able to complete and the extent to which language skills are actually developed. We reach a deadlock: coursebooks are not appealing; various written materials are dull and boring; writing is difficult and time-consuming, as well as speaking, because it demands reflection, organisation of thought and interaction skills that many students do not hold; a stream of reactions and excuses which overwhelm teachers. On top of this, as a language teacher, I am overcome with the feeling that students may learn English without a teacher, a belief that jeopardises the teaching profession in itself and it is highly complex to **grapple with**. Therefore, these have been the underlying reasons for this paper.

## Putting it to the test

Taking the considerations from various authors into account, there are some ideas worth retaining about the implementation of critical thinking in language classes. Thus the following skills are supposed to be encouraged in students, not necessarily in this order: estimate; assess; classify; infer; hypothesise; make grounded judgements; have a holistic approach; be open-minded; find alternative solutions; improve; cooperate; take risks, but above all think and think about thinking.

In a nutshell, the Critical Thinking Community (online) presents a rather enlightening definition of critical thinking:

Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably and empathically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked. They strive to diminish the power of their egocentric and sociocentric tendencies. (Elder, 2007 cit. Critical Thinking Community: online)

Therefore, it is straightforward the fact that nowadays critical thinking must be a skill that foreign language teachers address in the classroom, according to Shirhani & Fahim (2011), an idea that Iakovos (2011: 82) vouches for since these classes present students with a richness of materials and interactive approaches that enables them to thoroughly work on this skill. In my experience as an **EFL teacher**, the language classroom is the place where these materials can easily be introduced for a number of reasons. Not only is there a wider availability and diversity of materials due to the fact that the language medium is English, and thus more productive, but also because students are naturally more responsive to these interactive and debating approaches.

The chosen materials are potentially conducive to critical thinking and have been used and put together according to the teacher and students' needs as if pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. They are flexible enough to enable the discussion of different topics, ranging from education (e.g. cultural education) and civil rights movements to generation gaps. The resources come from different sources and take on varied formats – video, cinema and literature –, making up a triad of the utmost importance, to which music might also be added (if not already integrated in film materials). They are also potentially interactive and are by nature subjective and biased, which should lead to discussion and meaning negotiation and allow for exchanging fully justified opinions and positions. The materials we are referring to are as follows:

1. "Changing Education Paradigms", Ken Robinson's talk on Ted;
2. Excerpt of "Dead Poets Society", the 1989 film by Peter Weir;
3. Walt Whitman's poem "Oh, Captain, my Captain" (1891)

4. A passage from Henry David Thoreau's "Walden";
5. The poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley (1888);
6. An excerpt of the film "Invictus" (Clint Eastwood, 2009), particularly the part in Morgan Freeman (who plays Mandela) reads this poem;
7. John Legend's song "Glory", produced for the film "Selma" (Ava DuVernay, 2014).

As far as TED is concerned, what started off, in 1984, as an outstanding idea of combining technology, entertainment and design, ended up withering and was only recovered in 1990 as an annual event in Monterey, California. Its video and podcast series has become "one of the intellectual and emotional highlights of the year" and its success is due to "the inspired format, the breadth of content, the commitment to seek out the most interesting people on Earth and let them communicate their passion" (Ted official website). This resource has been an inspiration for us as teachers but also as people and constantly enables the discovery of new topics presented in an appealing and straightforward way.

Ken Robinson's Ted talk might be used as a warmer when the teacher is starting to work with a class, in order to wake them up to the importance of (formal) education and encourage them to convey their personal opinion, not to mention making suggestions for future activities. It can be used as a means to negotiate contents and strategies with students. However, it can also be included in a (coursebook) unit on study or education.

A possible means of elaborating on this talk in class consists of following Facione's proposal (2015): an initial question is posed – What are current education systems doing to young generations? In order to answer it, a 4-stage critical thinking process is proposed to students: 1<sup>st</sup> stage – defining and clarifying the problem or object of study (i.e. assumptions gathered from the video); 2<sup>nd</sup> stage – putting forth questions that arise while watching the talk and freely discussing it; 3<sup>rd</sup> stage – assessing and judging the credibility of the source used; 4<sup>th</sup> stage – drawing conclusions and coming up with solutions.

As a follow-up to this discussion on education systems, their pros and cons, the timeless movie "Dead Poets Society" sets forth as an outstanding approach to this issue, filled up with renowned actors, such as Robin Williams (whose death can also lead to the discussion of celebrities, their lives and their many appeals), Ethan Hawke, Robert Sean Leonard, Josh Charles and James Watson, to name just a few. The film depicts a break with traditional education systems (set in a private school) and the way a teacher that stands out of the teaching staff is simply discriminated and dismissed, despite the fact that he managed to reach those that are the point of interest of all education – pupils and students!

As might be expected, "Dead Poets Society" is full of literary references, among which Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" should be stressed. There is a passage of extreme importance for the whole film message: *carpe diem*; seize the day or, in Thoreau's words, "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life", so that you might feel that you actually enjoyed life and,

at death's bed, look back and feel that life was actually worth it. The underlying idea is to take over your own life and make your own life choices, the ones that might cater for your own interests. In addition, this movie also makes use of a poem by Walt Whitman as its "slogan", portrayed by the scene when Professor Keatings (Robin Williams) is packing to leave the school: it has been used as a banner against education chains which bind us to tradition and insist on limiting our creativity and imagination – a cry for help! This poem is handed in to students for brief interpretation (since literary analysis is not the focus) and elicitation of the historical context in which it was written. Another video resource is available, which is an amateur video of high school students (cf. webgraphy) who created a rap version of this poem, which might be rather opaque for modern audiences if not given a different approach, as they managed to accomplish.

The central figure of a Captain is highlighted and provides us with the connection to another poem and film. It is the poem by William Ernest Henley entitled "Invictus", whose last two verses "I am the master of my fate/ I am the captain of my soul" represent another cry for resistance and for overcoming life's hurdles and mischief. The poem has provided the name for the film focuses on Nelson Mandela's life, especially from the moment he was released from prison (in 1990), became the first black president in South Africa (in 1994) and decided that blacks and whites had to be united by means of their national rugby team which simply had to win the World Championship (which they did in ). The highly emotional passage in which Nelson Mandela's (voiced by Morgan Freeman, who plays him) reads out this poem is put on for students to appreciate it and again the aim is not to conduct a thorough literary analysis, but rather to offer them another banner for resistance.

The idea of resistance is elicited, especially non-violent resistance or civil disobedience, of which Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi are worldwide representatives. This enables us to approach the topic of civil rights movements around the world, particularly those connected with black people's rights. A recent film on this topic is "Selma" which addresses the non-violent marches carried out by Luther King and other figures in Selma, Alabama. One of the most well-known songs in the film is by John Legend, along with Common, and it's called "Glory". Its lyrics is exceptionally powerful and offers itself to various exercises, of linguistic nature or other, and encapsulates "a" (possible) perfect ending for this journey through education and critical thinking.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed at approaching critical thinking from the perspective of teaching students to think in the field of languages. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to grasp the full meaning of critical thinking, what it encompasses and how it can be implemented in the language classroom by means of a pre-established process or through specific strategies and varied materials. This was accomplished by researching

on the works of authors such as Ritchard & Perkins (2004), Shirkhani & Fahim (2011), Iakovos (2011) and Wilkison & Nanni (2014), not to mention other renowned ones, namely Lipman (1984, 1988), Ennis (1989) or Facione (2015).

Our considerable experience in teaching English at higher education provided us with the ideal context for working on this skill, enhanced by our dissatisfaction about formal education or schooling. This feeling is reflected on our refusal to use traditional teaching resources (e.g. set coursebooks and workbooks) and also on the discomfort caused by students' traditional mind set towards what occurs in the classroom (e.g. demotivation and lack of interest), added to the fact that mobile technologies seem to be increasingly drawing their attention. This personal position is coherent with Ken Robinson's criticisms on current education systems and thus the need to deconstruct the manner in which these are built and developed and to bring about far-reaching changes.

As a way to break with outdated language teaching contexts and entice students to think a set of materials was put together, which includes films, videos and literature (i.e. poetry and narrative). This triad of resources was intertwined and resulted from consecutive isolated experiments conducted in the English language classroom. They present themselves as a possible means to enable students to think about, for instance, the crucial issues of education or civil rights movements. Therefore, instead of allowing them to shut their senses off and deaden themselves to the world, our aim was to wake them up and gradually force them to think on these topics and take a conscious and rational stand on modern world affairs.

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## Webgraphy

- Critical Thinking Community*. URL: <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766> (01.04.2016).
- Ken Robinson: Changing Education Paradigms*. URL: [https://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_changing\\_education\\_paradigms](https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms) (01.04.2016).
- Oh Captain! My Captain! (Rap version)*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAZLD11FtRw> (01.04.2016)
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## Filmography

- Dead Poets Society*. 1989. By Peter Weir. USA: Warner Bros.
- Invictus*. 2009. By Clint Eastwood.
- USA: Touchstone Pictures & Silver Screen Partners.**
- Selma – One dream can change the world*. 2014. by Ava DuVernay. USA: Cloud Eight Films, Celador Films, Harpo Film, Pathé and Plan B Entertainment.

## Annexes

"Oh Captain, my Captain" by Walt Whitman  
(in "Leaves of Grass", 1891)

- Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought  
is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and  
daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.
- O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle  
trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the  
shores a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces  
turning;  
Here Captain! dear father!  
This arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck,  
You've fallen cold and dead.
- My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed  
and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
But I with mournful tread,  
Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.



"Walden" by Henry David Thoreau (1854)



I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.

"Invictus" by William Ernest Henley (written in 1875 and published in 1888)



Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winc'd nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

"Glory" by John Legend (in the film "Selma")



One day, when the glory comes  
It will be ours, it will be ours  
Oh, one day, when the war is won  
We will be sure, we will be here sure  
Oh, glory, glory  
Oh, glory, glory

Hands to the Heavens, no man, no weapon  
Formed against, yes glory is destined  
Every day women and men become legends  
Sins that go against our skin become blessings  
The movement is a rhythm to us  
Freedom is like religion to us  
Justice is juxtaposition in us  
Justice for all just ain't specific enough  
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us  
Truant livin' livin' in us, resistance is us  
That's why Rosa sat on the bus  
That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up  
When it go down we woman and man up  
They say, "Stay down" and we stand up  
Shots, we on the ground, the camera panned up  
King pointed to the mountain top and we ran up

One day, when the glory comes  
It will be ours, it will be ours  
Oh, one day, when the war is won  
We will be sure, we will be here sure  
Oh, glory, glory  
Oh, glory, glory

Now the war is not over  
Victory isn't won  
And we'll fight on to the finish  
Then when it's all done  
We'll cry glory, oh glory  
We'll cry glory, oh glory

Selma's now for every man, woman and child  
Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd  
They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now  
Never look back, we done gone hundreds of miles  
From dark roads he rose, to become a hero  
Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people  
Enemy is lethal, a king became regal  
Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle  
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful  
We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through  
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany  
Now we right the wrongs in history  
No one can win the war individually  
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's  
energy

Welcome to the story we call victory  
Comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

One day, when the glory comes  
It will be ours, it will be ours  
Oh, one day, when the war is won  
We will be sure, we will be here sure  
Oh, glory, glory  
Oh, glory, glory

When the war is done, when it's all said and done  
We'll cry glory, oh glory