

## Putting the critical cat among the patriotic pigeons: guiding principles for the teaching of critical thinking as a precursor to critical writing in the Japanese EFL classroom

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**Abstract** : Whatever the veracity of the claim that East Asian students are deficient in critical thinking (CT) due to its incompatibility with Confucianism, it is incontrovertibly true that they do not typically conform to the modes of execution and expression that have emerged as the global standard. This has placed East Asian graduates at a disadvantage in the global marketplace and induced the Japanese government to redress a perceived CT deficit—an objective that implies a profound pedagogic shift away from rote learning and towards active learning and the development of higher order thinking skills. This paper aims to facilitate this shift by distilling a set of guiding principles through which to devise a contextually-appropriate methodology for the practice of CT and its expression. The paper also examines the sociocultural ramifications of a more CT-inflected Japanese education system and the assumption that it will be counteracted by a more prescriptive form of moral education. Future research will test each of the individual guiding principles set out by this paper in terms of its ability to inform a CT-facilitative methodology. Future commentaries, meanwhile, will presumably focus upon the Japanese government’s attempts to limit the fallout as it moves to imbue its populace with the ability to hold state-sponsored patriotism and other facets of Japan’s socially conservative value system to critical account.

**Keywords** : critical thinking, CT-integrated EFL, CT-facilitative principles, moral education, patriotism

### List of abbreviations

	L1	First language; one’s native language	
EFL	English (as a) Foreign Language	L2	Second language; a language to some

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extent acquired in addition to one's native language

TESOL Teaching English (to) Speakers  
(of) Other Languages

**1. A statement of the problem: reconciling the globally-prevalent conception of critical thinking with contemporary Japanese society**

The primary objective of this paper is to articulate a set of guiding principles for the integration of a deceptively-esoteric abstraction, namely critical thinking (CT), into the Japanese EFL classroom. That a theoretical model first propounded in 1956 and claiming to elucidate critical thinking should still be in use today, and in something akin to its original form, is remarkable. Cynics might point out that Bloom's Taxonomy will likely remain impervious to refutation until that space between thought and expression ceases to be opaque and its abridging processes conjectural. This, however, would be to diminish a perspicuity that belies the taxonomy's speculative nature. By identifying a cogent series of cognitive junctures and emphasizing the application of knowledge as the sine qua non of creative and critical thinking (DeWaelsche, 2015, p.137), Bloom et al. ensured that their mapping of CT from inception to articulation would retain its relevance and survive more or less intact. Revisionism

has been confined to the renegotiation of specific points of emphasis and the striking of taxonomical variations no more distinct from each other (or indeed the original) than that corresponding plethora of sound bites seeking to further distill the essence of CT (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Huitt, 2011). Of this latter accumulation, Robert H. Ennis's 1993 definition of critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (as cited in Jenkins, 2012, p. 96) is representative. For the purposes of this paper and its emphasis on procuring written proof of CT from Japanese EFL learners, however, the following from Osman Z. Barnawi (2011) is preferred:

[T]he concept of critical thinking in L2 writing is defined as an ability to analyze facts, produce and organize ideas, maintain opinions, make comparisons, judge arguments, and solve problems by the use of existing information, previous knowledge, experience, and world knowledge when writing. (p.191)

Linguistic proficiency aside, a variety of institutional and sociocultural factors may impinge upon a student's ability to fulfill all or even any of Barnawi's criteria. East Asian students in particular are widely perceived to have been rendered deficient in CT due to its incompatibility with Confucianism (DeWaelsche, 2015, p.131; Oda, 2008, p.146; Rear, 2008, "Introduction,"

para. 1; Rear, 2017a, p.18; Shaheen, 2016). Originally the preserve of a few foreign TESOL instructors, this observation has, in the past 20 years or so, gained ground among a sizeable and hugely influential domestic audience. In Japan as in South Korea, national policy makers have been coerced into addressing a CT deficiency not by educators but by leaders in the private business sector for whom the emergence of a workforce equipped with the corresponding skills is “a matter of economic survival” (Davidson, 2001, p.16. See also MEXT, 2016, “Vision for society and required capabilities”; Goharimehr & Bysouth, 2017, p. 229; Okada, 2017, p.96; Rear, 2008, “The business community view,” para. 4; Timsit, 2018). The nature of their criticism, and the government’s response to it, would seem to suggest that the deficiency awaiting redress is a by-product of the national education system (Davidson, 2001, pp. 7, 51; Rear, 2008, “The business community view,” para. 3). This, however, would be a harsh assessment neglecting other more pervasive factors and the fact that any education system reflects social mores just as emphatically as it reinforces them.

Critical thinking’s peripheral status as a potentially disruptive foreign construct is apparent even in the manner of its accommodation by the Japanese language. Its translation as *bihanteki shiko*, literally “looking for faults in others”

(Gunma Kokusai Academy, n.d., para. 2), foregrounds its adversarial aspect and effectively stigmatizes CT as a form of antisocial behavior. One can only speculate as to whether the alternative phonetic rendering of *kuritikaru shinkingu* is any less jarring to Japanese sensibilities (it certainly presents a different emphasis—the explicitly alien as opposed to the implicitly chaotic). What is beyond dispute is that the Japanese language is no more inclined, and no better equipped, to assimilate CT than Japanese society per se. What prevails instead is an inclination, “extraneous to reasons and evidence” (Stapleton, 2002, p.254), to edit or avoid any contentious issue in an effort to preserve harmony. This involves a conscious and voluntary abdication of personal autonomy, often accompanied by the exculpatory expression *sho ga nai*. A reflexive response to almost any disadvantageous situation, *sho ga nai* (translated here as “it can’t be helped”) invalidates self-determination by asserting that “the locus of control does not rest in one’s own powers but with fate or in the surrounding environment, forces, or societal structures” (Sato, 2004, p.209). Attempting to challenge or change the situation is therefore not merely egotistical and antisocial but also utterly pointless. This conformist mindset was fundamental to Japan’s postwar recovery and subsequent economic ascendancy in the latter half of the twentieth century and continues to

contribute to the nation's extraordinary capacity for perseverance in the face of adversity. That it also harks back to a less egalitarian age is apparent in Japan's eschewal of some of the attendant features of democracy. The Japan Today headline of April 7, 2016 ("Amnesty disappointed at lack of debate in Japan on death penalty") alluded to this state of affairs and raised eyebrows among its predominantly expatriate readership not because Amnesty International was "disappointed" by Japan's low level of engagement with a life-or-death issue but because it was apparently surprised ("Amnesty disappointed," 2016). Amnesty would presumably be less taken aback by the suggestion that any so-called democracy with a diminished capacity for debate, protest, satire and CT is susceptible to manipulation by those seeking to subvert or circumvent the democratic process.

It is no coincidence that Japan has "plummeted in press freedom rankings" (Kingston, 2016, para. 13) in the five years since the restoration of the right-wing Liberal Democratic Party under Shinzo Abe in 2012, recovering only slightly in recent months due to deteriorating conditions elsewhere ("'Era of propaganda,'" 2016; Tanaka, 2018). Of the known instances of media interference and intimidation perpetrated by his administration, the appointment of a government crony as chairman of Japan's only public broadcasting company

and the enactment of a law enabling the revocation of broadcasting licenses for violations of "fairness" are only the most brazen (Kageyama, 2016; Kingston, 2016). Generally speaking, the government has no need to resort to such flagrant abuses and is not held properly to account when it does. One might be inclined to think, for example, that the near-simultaneous departures of three relatively outspoken left-wing TV anchors would set alarm bells ringing and incite a media revolt or lead to some form of independent enquiry. In the event, however, the circumstantial evidence pointing at government coercion aroused little more than a collective shrug (Kingston, 2015a; McCurry, 2016; Mie, 2016). This is indicative of the extent to which Japanese journalism has been and continues to be complicit in its own emasculation (Tanaka, 2018). One can hardly single out the government for criticism when the media is also in thrall to institutions as diverse as the entertainment agency Johnny & Associates and the Imperial Household Agency. These institutions typically act as virtual or actual monopolies and have a vested interest in the suppression of potentially damaging information. Each has its own subtle (and only subtly different) means of procuring media compliance, most typically by threatening to deny access or by threatening to invoke the wrath of a vengeful fan-base in response to any perceived slight against their charges (Sims,

2000; Tinianow, 2000, pp.199-200). This latter threat alludes to social dislocation and conflict and is exploited by the media itself in order to justify preemptive self-censorship. The inadmissible (to Western sensibilities) argument that information with the capacity to disrupt social harmony is best suppressed is sufficiently persuasive in Japan to compromise democratic notions of journalistic integrity. As Gerald L. Curtis (2015) has pointed out, and with a metaphor evocative of the Japanese media's dereliction of its duty as a watchdog, "the government doesn't have to muzzle the press if the press takes it upon itself to do the muzzling" (para. 5). In mitigation, however, it must be conceded that Japan's journalists would have been no more at liberty to question, challenge, or do anything other than accept the views expressed by their teachers and other authority figures during their formative years than anyone else passing through the national education system. It would hardly have been the most conducive environment in which to hone one's critical faculties (Barnawi, 2011, p. 195; Chavez, 2014; Davidson, 2001, p.7; Morikawa, Harrington, & Shiina, p. 118; Oda, 2008, p.148; Rear, 2017a; Timsit, 2018).

An interesting, if indeterminable, point of emphasis is the extent to which Japanese students are merely CT averse (due to societal pressures) as opposed to CT deficient. What is more demonstrably the

case is that a Western conception of CT has little or no bearing upon the retention and regurgitation of unembellished facts and logographs (Oda, 2008, pp.156-157). These latter skills, synonymous with rote learning and largely redundant in today's information society, are nevertheless legitimized in Japan by its archaic national testing criteria and writing system (Dunn, 2015, p.33; Timsit, 2018). Against this backdrop, the higher order skills analogous to CT are, at best, an irrelevance and, at worst, a distraction. Even basic literacy in the L1 in Japan is contingent upon a gargantuan and protracted feat of memorization spanning thousands of hours. The debilitating effect that this might have upon the production of written proof of CT is thrown into starker contrast if one imagines assigning two schoolchildren, one a native English speaker and the other Japanese, a simple L1 writing task involving even *none* of the skills alluded to by Barnawi (2011). For the native English speaker, the formulation of thoughts to express through the code would presumably constitute the greater intellectual challenge. For the Japanese speaker, however, it would not be inconceivable if the greater intellectual challenge were the code itself.

Unsurprisingly, the claim that East Asians are uniformly deficient in a cognitive process that many would regard as contributive to if not indicative of an

individual's level of intelligence has not gone unchallenged. In 2001, Stapleton referred to a lack of empirical evidence disproving the ability of non-Western students to think critically (as cited in Oda, 2008, p.151). Subsequent investigation has made only marginal gains in terms of redressing this deficit and further exposed the dubious nature of the claim itself. It overlooks the fact that critical processes are, for most human beings irrespective of sociocultural background, largely intuitive and necessarily performed numerous times a day. If an East-West disparity exists, it is therefore presumably only a matter of form. When filtered through the prism of Western individualism, "the very notion of *critical* presupposes that individual conflict and dissensus are a social reality, if not a tool for achieving socially desirable ends, while *thinking*... assumes the locus of thought to be within the individual" (Atkinson, as cited in Stapleton, 2002, p.251). Eastern collectivism is indisputably antithetical to this conception of CT and inhibitive of its expression. It does not, however, preclude critical consciousness or ability. As Nancy Sato has pointed out, "individual self-development consists of internal and social processes" that are complementary, inseparable and equally important (as cited in Oda, 2008, p.165). Indeed, a number of studies have suggested that, even by Western standards, East Asian students are innately critically aware, capable, and

inclined (Oda, 2008, pp.151-152, 158). Instead of casting the stigma of a deficiency, blanket like, over a vast geographical area as if it were somehow monolithic and unchanging, commentators might do better to concede that any East Asian student demonstrating an ability to think critically in English and according to the Western paradigm is simultaneously negotiating not one but two radically alien constructs—a cognitive accomplishment of some magnitude and one worthy of respect (Rear, 2017a).

Nevertheless, and despite the existence of extenuating contextual factors, the fact remains that East Asian students are relatively untutored and unpracticed in an interpretation of CT that has become the universal and definitive standard (Dunn, 2015, p. 29; Okada, 2017, pp.92-94). The paucity of deficiency-substantiating evidence referred to above is explicable in terms of it being consistent with academia's penchant for overturning stereotypes rather than confirming them and with Eastern CT's emphasis on process rather than product (Lewis, as cited in Oda, 2008, p.167). Argumentative essays, for example, are rarely solicited in East Asian contexts and tend to be sympathetically evaluated by examiners from the same sociocultural background when they are (Rear, 2017a, p.27; Rear, 2017b, p.4). This inclination towards leniency is conceivably even more pronounced among Westerners for whom applying their own contextually-remote

ethnocentric criteria is too close to cultural imperialism for comfort. The tendency is therefore for culturally-*oversensitive* native-speaking EFL instructors to rationalize and then validate the disparity as a precursor to disengaging from CT as they know it (DeWaelche, 2015, p.132; Zamel, as cited in Oda, 2008, p.154). This state of disengagement is indicative of the current status quo in schools and colleges throughout East Asia and entirely at odds with the emergence of a demonstrably CT-proficient graduate body.

## 2. The response from within (and without) Japanese society

Regardless of its veracity, the notion that the CT deficit is real and in need of redress has gained considerable traction among East Asian democracies eager to facilitate their economic ascendancies or forestall their economic declines. To these respective ends, the governments of South Korea and Japan have each declared a commitment to nurturing an overtly individualistic (read *Westernized*) conception of CT. This reflects a growing appreciation of this particular strain of CT as a “kind of common currency of communication” (Davidson, 2001, p.13) or, to put it another way, as a cognitive lingua franca complementing its linguistic equivalent. This partially explains why the EFL classroom has been acknowledged by commentators in the private sector as an

appropriate context for the teaching of CT (Yang & Gamble, 2013, p.409; Goharimehr & Bysouth, 2017, p.228; Okada, 2017, p.96). It is, after all, an educational contrivance to some degree insulated from the cultural constraints operating beyond its walls. This renders the EFL classroom uniquely liberating in terms of approximating behaviors or expressing opinions that might otherwise be construed as antisocial or, at the very least, inappropriate. This characteristic is all the more apparent in the EFL writing classroom where the emphasis is on the production of a more permanent (and therefore more potentially incriminating) type of product (Barnawi, 2011, p. 193). It should be noted, however, that engaging with critical thinking through the medium of writing is a practical necessity in view of the Japanese education system’s refusal to recognize oral output as a basis for assessment.

The issues of appropriacy impinging upon the where, how, and whether CT should be taught in Japan have engendered some commendably sensitive, if somewhat impractical, schemes and recommendations. Unfortunately, and while acknowledging the necessity of certain methodological compromises and concessions, much of the advice issued thus far has been so vague and reliant upon the discretion of the EFL teacher as to be practically worthless. Indeed, those time-pressed professionals inclined to pursue a “delicate balance

between individual and group needs” (Sato, as cited in Oda, 2008, p.168) or deduce whatever it is that a student *might* be doing internally but is incapable of expressing (Oda, 2008, p.167) might be better off reexamining their own critical faculties. The abiding impression is that the EFL profession throughout East Asia has yet to incorporate CT instruction as a secondary pedagogic objective in any consistent, systematic or meaningful way. This is not to suggest that no legitimate advances have been made in terms of instilling a degree of cultural sensitivity and moving towards a practical methodology—that a student’s CT faculties will improve the closer a topic is to the realm of his or her own experience has, for example, been established in EFL writing classes (Stapleton, 2001). Nevertheless, revelations such as these merely tend to reinforce the assumption that the teaching of an undiluted form of CT to students in East Asia is feasible. All that is required is for the pedagogists to provide the appropriate metaknowledge (about critical writing in English) and methodology, and for the policy makers to dispense with the stultifying inhibitions and inconsistencies.

This latter obstacle—attributable to a mixture of intransigence and fear—will likely prove the more difficult to overcome. It alludes to misgivings, by no means confined to the political elites in China and North Korea, about the implications of inculcating a populace with the ability

to critically evaluate information and autonomously determine a response. If the democratically-elected Japanese government appears less than fully committed to this mode of thinking, it is because it is caught between kick-starting a stalled economy (for which the dissemination of CT is deemed necessary) and preserving social harmony against the disruptive effects of individualism (of which CT is an obvious component). Nowhere is this dilemma played out more clearly than on the English language version of the official website for the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*). The website consists of government-issued reports, statements, and directives and provides a broad overview of Japan’s education policy in terms of its rationale and objectives. Most of the documents make vague allusions to CT without going so far as to define or even mention it as a discrete term. Indeed, the only reference to “critical thinking” that isn’t compromised by the insertion of at least one other adjective or adverb comes, rather revealingly, on a page outlining a program entitled “Education for Sustainable Development” running under the auspices of UNESCO (MEXT, n.d.-b, “Principles,” para. b). This is indicative of the website’s surefooted (if somewhat dubious) internationalism and sharply contrastive with its ambivalent portrayal of the ideal Japanese graduate:

In order to continue to develop the



Japanese economy and industry despite the nation's declining birthrate in a more competitive international community, it is also essential to develop human resources who possess a national identity, create new values, and take an active role in making contributions to Japan and to the world. (MEXT, 2013b, "Demands and directions," para. 3)

The above quotation, from the second and most-current Plan for the Promotion of Education, is self-contradictory in that it prescribes a specified set of values (based on an interpretation of national identity) while simultaneously advocating the creation of other, potentially displacing, value systems. To what extent the two objectives, consistently misrepresented by the ministry as complementary (MEXT, 2013a), will be able to co-exist within the same classroom has yet to be determined (Goharimehr & Bysouth, 2017, p.226). What is already apparent, however, are the extraordinary means by which the Japanese government hopes to resolve the CT dilemma and impose its own happy medium between the critical and the compliant.

From the beginning of the 2019 academic year, moral education (*doutoku*) will be a part of the regular junior high school curriculum in Japan (it having already become a part of the elementary-school equivalent a year earlier). This will elevate moral education's status from that of non-

regulated classroom "activity" to formalized subject—a fact some journalists have reflected on with trepidation (Maruko, 2014; "Moral education's slippery slope," 2014). In practice, and for the first time, teachers using government-vetted textbooks will be obliged to evaluate students through the prism of moral education and according to a government-endorsed conception of morality (Maruko, 2014). This evaluation, though entirely subjective, will enter each student's permanent record and may be referred to in such a way as to affect his or her future prospects ("Moral education's slippery slope," 2014). It is not inconceivable that, in the estimation of a high school principal or prospective employer, the difference between a student having deviated from the proffered value system and him or her being morally deviant will be marginal to the point of irrelevance. And yet attempts by the liberal press to call attention to such issues have so far failed to resonate with the general public. This is readily explicable in terms of the Japanese obsession with social harmony, but it is also indicative of moral education being too ingrained upon the national consciousness as a result of its longstanding peripheral status. It is a non-issue, and any mere shift in emphasis, no matter how drastic and whatever the implications, is simply incapable of arousing much in the way of protest. Even the affected teachers have tended to shy away from engaging in acts of defiance that could

be misconstrued as subversive or egotistical. Curious, then, that the Abe administration should feel the need to forestall an as-yet-to-materialize liberal backlash by mounting an orchestrated PR campaign aimed at presenting moral education as the solution to a high profile social problem. Common sense dictates that school bullying is probably no more prevalent now than at any other time in Japanese history. A wealth of data to the contrary has, however, seduced the nation and provoked something akin to a moral panic. This is as attributable to the media, for whom school bullying is a critically unambiguous and reliably profitable topic, as it is to politicians and bureaucrats. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that the aforementioned data only really stands up if one ignores the increasingly touch-sensitive climate in which it is being collected, the government's assertion that more ought to be done to prevent school bullying is indisputably reasonable. Whether or not this should involve the upgrading of moral education and the nationwide dissemination of a uniform value system is, however, another matter entirely. Abe and his cohorts at least are in no doubt as to the appropriateness of their response:

We became aware of the importance of dealing with bullying, especially after a junior high school student in 2011 committed suicide after being bullied at his school in Otsu. This incident prompted us to review and expand

the scope of ethics teaching so that teachers and students will think more seriously in class about bullying and the importance of life. (Maruko, 2014, para. 11)

The suggestion that the expansion of moral education might never have happened were it not for a specific instance of school bullying is as audacious as it is ludicrous. In exposing the government's opportunistic exploitation of the Otsu incident and of the school bullying issue per se, liberal commentators have pointed out that even the most thorough admonition would hardly require a formalized course of study spanning eight or nine years (Hoffman, 2014). The implication is that school bullying is merely a front for a wider and more opaque agenda. This might conceivably involve the critical examination of other more contentious contemporary moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia. Nevertheless, the suspicion lingers that moral education will continue to concern itself with indoctrination rather than investigation. Such cynicism, coupled with resignation, has thus far defined the liberal response. There is, however, compelling evidence to suggest that the opportunity offered by moral education for the development of CT will indeed be passed up in favor of the dissemination of something more insidious; specifically a government prescribed moral code founded on patriotism.

Patriotism implies compliance with an ethnocentric and consensual interpretation of national identity. It is inherently dogmatic and may be substituted for a moral and critical consciousness. These connotations render it antithetical to unfettered critical thinking and explain why patriotism, like CT, is referred to only obliquely on the *Monbukagakusho* website. Overt jingoism is in evidence, but lacks specificity and, as a consequence, fails to convince as policy. The temptation is to dismiss it altogether, either as political posturing or as some kind of CT-mollifying caveat installed after a collective loss of nerve on the part of the Japanese government. This, however, would be to overlook the fact that Abe was prepared to face down considerable opposition during his first term in order to have “an attitude to respect our traditions and culture [and] love the country” inserted into the 2006 Basic Act of Education (MEXT, 2008, “For realizing ‘an education-based nation’”; Rear, 2008, “The government view,” para. 7). A decade on, and the lure of entrepreneurial individualism has done nothing to quell the impression that moral education is setting up critical thinking to be subordinate to patriotism rather than the other way around. On the contrary, the initiative now unmistakably lies with those who would arrest Japan’s damaging descent into “me-ism” by reaffirming its conformist impulse (MEXT, 2008, “Current Status of Education in Japan and the

Challenges of the Future,” paras. 4 & 5). It is a nationalistic agenda and, as the Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education adopted by cabinet decision in 2013 makes clear, its fulfillment rests upon engineering a “normative consciousness and a public spirit, avoiding misplaced individualism” (MEXT, 2013b, “Respect for diversity,” para. 1).

In terms of its commitment to critical thinking *and* patriotism, the Japanese government will probably seek to maintain a foothold in both camps until such a position becomes untenable. That point will likely coincide with the publication and imposition of the moral education syllabus for junior high schools and its accompanying textbooks prior to the start of the 2019 academic year (potentially the government’s “Emperor’s New Clothes” moment as far as its commitment to CT is concerned). Until then, the *Monbukagakusho* website will presumably continue to promote such concepts as “creativity” and “tradition” side by side within the same mission statement and sometimes even within the same sentence (MEXT, n.d.-c; MEXT, n.d.-a, “Preamble [2006]”). It would be wrong, however, to assume that the government is oblivious to its concurrent pursuit of conflicting objectives. If it wasn’t cognizant from the outset (a disheartening, if remote, possibility) then it certainly is now, courtesy of Japan’s more liberal-minded commentators, a fair few of whom

are foreigners. Writing in the Japan Times in November 2014, for example, Michael Hoffman took the opportunity to castigate the Abe administration for its nationalistic dogmatism and, from there, to speculate as to where its sympathies might lie in terms of brokering a compromise between CT and patriotism: “Abe, his ministers and his top aides are patriots. They consider patriotism moral—more moral than truth, if the two should chance to conflict” (para. 4). A similar sentiment was expressed in a Japan Times editorial on moral education in February 2015: “It does not appear designed to teach children to think critically about their own country. The aim of such education should not be to instill in children a blind love of their nation” (“Moral education raises risks,” para. 6). The possibility of a covert agenda was then made even more explicit in a follow-up piece by Jeff Kingston (2015b): “[T]he odds are that the education ministry will not nurture... critical thinking and will instead try to brainwash Japan’s youth with nationalist pabulum” (para. 6). If this type of dissent has tapered off in the Japanese English language press in the past 18 months (and it has), it is merely as a consequence of the Japan Times coming under new ownership. As the political scientist Arthur Stockwin (2017) has pointed out, the same publication has, since the changeover, demonstrated “clear support for the Abe government” (para. 5) and terminated its relationship with a

number of its regular columnists, including Jeff Kingston. In any case, the sentiments formerly expressed through the Japan Times had always been somewhat undermined by their speculative natures, a fact that might explain why the government didn’t deign to respond through the *Monbukagakusho* website. It is, however, revealing that when the International New York Times similarly speculated on the existence of a covert nationalistic agenda in October 2014, an expansive denial ostensibly penned by the then-Minister of Education Hakubun Shimomura was issued later the same month (Shimomura, 2014). This disparity stemmed from the Japanese government’s relative contempt for its own domestic media and its equally-transparent emphasis on “value identification with the West” (Clark, 2015, para. 16), the latter having informed not only the celerity but also the substance of Shimomura’s repudiation of the allegations brought by the International New York Times (2014): “A dramatic change in the direction of education is underway in Japan in order to respond to globalization—not to promote nationalism” (para. 2).

Contrary to Shimomura’s assertion, David Rear (2008), an associate professor at Chuo University in Japan, has identified patriotism as the state-sponsored antidote to “reasoned nonconformism” and the consequent proliferation of a younger generation imbued with “a general disposition to challenge the status quo” (“The

dilemma,” para. 6). This “me-ist” disposition, manifest in “a dramatic rise in the number of young people not taking up full-time work” (Rear, 2008, “Growing individualism,” para. 2), is indisputably an unsolicited by-product of that “ability to weigh up evidence and come to an independent conclusion” synonymous with critical thinking (Rear, 2008, “The dilemma,” para. 7). Rear speculates that patriotism’s role will not be to displace or nullify CT entirely, but rather to temper its attendant risks as a “harbinger of social change” while retaining its benefits as a “purely cognitive skill” (Rear, 2008, “Conclusion,” para. 4). The question as to whether such a delicate balancing act is feasible is secondary to Japan’s policymakers accepting its plausibility. That they have already done so is apparent in their invocation of a peculiarly Japanese conception of individuality in order to justify the concurrent promotion of two conflicting agendas (i.e., critical thinking and patriotism). A 2005 progress report formalized during Abe’s second term (MEXT, 2013a) drew a telling distinction between *kosei* (individual ability or talent) and *kojin* (the rights of the individual) with the implication that a responsible education system should nurture the creative impulses associated with the former while suppressing the nonconformist leeway offered by the latter. Those tasked with converting political theory to pedagogic practice must therefore determine “how to go about developing the

individuality of children while downplaying their rights as individuals” (Rear, 2008, “The government view,” paras. 6 & 7). This stark assessment of the conundrum facing the Japanese government renders its decision to reinstate an archaic form of patriotism as the guarantor of national solidarity in the face of a mass, CT-induced repudiation of established values almost defensible. It does, however, also make no bones about the extent to which the nation’s teachers are being set up to fail.

### **3. Forestalling patriotism through principles: towards a contextually-appropriate methodology**

The remainder of this paper will endeavor to establish a set of principles capable of informing the teaching of critical thinking as a precursor to the writing of argumentative paragraphs in the Japanese EFL classroom. These principles will be distilled from three sources—from contextually-relevant research; from a subjective (if reasoned) determination as to what CT is and how it might be integrated into the Japanese EFL classroom, and from the author’s own extensive teaching experience. The resultant principles will invoke a spirit of individuality synonymous with *kosei* but should not be misinterpreted as a response, much less a solution, to the conundrum referred to above. At some point, the individual teacher must plot his or her own

course between an educative program that demands compliance with a prescribed moral code and one that equips the student with the cognitive faculties and fortitude to construct and then adhere to a personalized value system. This paper will adopt the latter course as a matter of principle. That it does so in defiance of a hegemonic political class bent upon the preservation of its own privileges through the suppression of social mobility and self-determinism is relevant only in terms of highlighting just how much more difficult it would be for likeminded Japanese school teachers, given their more precarious professional circumstances, to do the same. Regrettably, this paper is merely concerned with the removal of some of the pedagogic obstacles to the teaching of that alien construct that is critical thinking's global standard.

According to the taxonomy devised by Bloom et al. (1956), the ability to think critically is reliant upon the application of knowledge via three "higher order" cognitive skills. These skills, each a discrete cognitive process in its own right, were labeled *analysis*, *synthesis* and *evaluation* in 1956 and re-jigged as *analyze*, *evaluate* and *create* in 2001 (Anderson & Krathwohl). The relabeling of one of the cognitive skills, like the shift from nouns to verbs, was largely an exercise in establishing a more transparent semantic link with the application of knowledge, while the significance of shuffling the order was tempered by the fact

that, at the level of cognition, the taxonomy had never (in any practical sense) been a sequential hierarchy to begin with. Attempts to define or redefine the cognitive skills as discrete theoretical constructs belie the fact that they operate in tandem with each other and are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to isolate in practice. The not-uncommon misapprehension that higher order thinking involves progressing through a succession of cognitive sub-processes is a fallacy based on an overly-literal interpretation of a theoretical contrivance. In any of its incarnations, Bloom's taxonomy constitutes an inventory of the component parts of higher order thinking; it is less persuasive and far more susceptible to interpretation when it comes to establishing how these parts interact. This is not to imply that Bloom et al. fell short of their objectives—they set out to enable, not resolve, the debate by providing it with its framework and terminology. It was in this spirit that William Huitt (2011) proposed the following alternative to the "three-level" hierarchical aspect (and in terms that resonate with this paper):

Both [*synthesis* (create) and *evaluation* (evaluate)] depend on analysis as a foundational process. However, synthesis or creating requires rearranging the parts in a new, original way whereas evaluation or evaluating requires a comparison to a standard with a judgment as to good, better or

best. This is similar to the distinction between creative thinking and critical thinking. Both are valuable while neither is superior. In fact, when either is omitted during the problem solving process, effectiveness declines. (para. 6)

Far less contentious than the manner in which they interact is the assumption that the Japanese education system does little to facilitate, and may actually inhibit, the development of higher order thinking skills. The overwhelming emphasis on multiple-choice and fact-based testing typically precludes any classroom practice that doesn't directly relate to the dissemination and recall of factual information. Discussion, debate, argumentative paragraph writing and other CT-conducive mediums are therefore conspicuous by their absence from the vast majority of textbooks, syllabuses and lesson plans (Rear, 2008, "The business community view," para. 3; Rear, 2017a, p.27). This is entirely appropriate—any concession to active learning or lapse into student centeredness would be wholly redundant and therefore frivolous in the context of the all-important entrance examinations. It would also be unprecedented and conceivably disorientating for everyone concerned. Nevertheless, it has not escaped the government's attention that the nature of the test must change if higher order skills are to be engaged and anything more than lip service paid to the nurturing of CT. Quite aside from the issue as to what

Japan's student body will be encouraged to think (or coerced into thinking) through their moral education classes is the fact that tangible proof of (ostensibly-independent) critical thinking prowess is now emerging as a desirable commodity. And in response to this demand, the development of a new testing format focusing on university entrance examinations is now in process.

In what will be the biggest shake-up of the system since the introduction of the Center Test in 1979, Japanese university applicants will, from 2020, be tested according to their "ability to think and express themselves... [using]... long written answers instead of the multiple-choice questions common in the current system" ("New university," 2015, para. 5). If successfully implemented, this "integrated reform" program will have a transformative effect not only upon the interlinking university selection process but also upon the fundamental nature of non-compulsory (i.e., high school and tertiary) education in Japan. In both sectors, *Monbukagakusho* intends to exert pressure in order to "shift the focus of their classes from imparting knowledge to active learning" (Isoda, 2015). This conceptual break with the past will inevitably incur some resistance. Shiga University professor Takamitsu Sawa has identified himself as an early frontrunner in this regard, his skepticism driven by a lack of confidence in both the method (2018, para. 4) and the objective. Regarding the

latter, and despite Sawa (2015) personally recognizing the need for reform, his contention that the faculties of thinking, judgment and expression “should by their very nature be acquired through learning at universities” (para. 18) reflects the system’s deeply ingrained philosophical allegiance to the status quo. *Monbukagakusho* will have to break this paradigm if Sawa’s (2018) final analysis is not to prove as prescient as it is pessimistic: “Requiring students to answer in a descriptive manner under the new university entrance test system will not in any way elevate their ability to think, judge and express themselves” (para. 17).

There is evidence to suggest that *Monbukagakusho* is already making preliminary arrangements to ease the transition by introducing traces of higher order thinking into the high school curriculum. A cursory examination of some of the government-vetted textbooks currently in circulation (and specifically those being applied to high school English courses) would seem to confirm a policy of non-engagement with active learning and the higher order thinking skills. A closer inspection, however, reveals this assessment to be representative of only the majority of the textbooks. One exception is the 2013-vetted *Perspective English Expression II* (Morita et al., 2014) which, despite initially conforming to type, substitutes a diluted version of active learning for the grammar translation method in its latter units. Its

incorporation of presentations, discussions and debates is inconsistent with the unadulterated acts of recall demanded by the Center Test and would be gratuitous under the present system were it not for the possibility of a university independently requiring proof of higher thinking for the purposes of selection<sup>1</sup>. There is, however, the suspicion that *Monbukagakusho* is not merely engaged in familiarizing its current body of students with the fundamentals of active learning, but also (and in anticipation of the new testing system) its teachers. Less open to speculation is that the steps being taken in this regard are tentative, regimented and constrained by sociocultural factors. As a precursor to its shift in emphasis, *Perspective English Expression II* provides some guidance on argumentative paragraph writing but in a manner that paradoxically inhibits self-expression and higher order thinking. Topics are uniformly imposed and benign; supporting arguments provided or prompted; student initiative (and involvement per se) minimized (Morita et al., pp.103, 107). This disinclination to relinquish control would be defensible if it were part of a greater strategy designed to concentrate resources on the primary (writing) task in hand. Here too, however, the textbook fails to convince in terms of its commitment to active learning, the student being reduced to the filling in of gaps rather than the construction of paragraphs. The overriding impression is that this relatively progressive



textbook is “CT-lite” (Mineshima, 2015) and still in thrall to a socially pervasive impulse towards conformity and the expunction of individualism.

Of course, certain concessions have to be made to any learning tool (or indeed instructor) attempting to introduce, facilitate and extract proof of a higher order thinking process through the medium of a foreign language (Rear, 2017a, pp.26-27). If spoon-feeding is contrary to the process itself, it is at least admissible in terms of ensuring and coordinating progress without undue interference from either the linguistic or cognitive component. Constructing sentences in English is, for the average Japanese high school or university student, a challenging task made all the more difficult by a disproportionate emphasis on grammatical accuracy (as dictated by the current nature of testing). To simultaneously demand a substantiated opinion in writing and from scratch would run the risk of overtaxing the student (Rear, 2017a, pp.26-27). It would also consume an inordinate amount of time; certainly more than is admissible in terms of the Center Test or comparable tests and conceivably more than is available to the course of study. Some degree of spoon-feeding or form of template-provision is therefore entirely appropriate. It is also worth reiterating the point, verified by the work of Yang and Gamble (2013) in relation to Chinese

native speakers, that “English language instruction is an appropriate forum for CT activities, as the collaborative/interactive features of CT-based activities can augment language learning and challenge learners to expand their thinking” (p.399). This is undoubtedly true, though the quotation does rather understate the mutually-facilitative aspect and, in particular, the significance of conducting those pivotal “CT-based activities” in the EFL classroom. As previously hypothesized, and by virtue of its quarantined nature, the EFL classroom may actually be the context *most* conducive to the teaching of critical thinking. After all, and from the perspective of the East Asian student, where better to adopt (and then not have to apologize for) such unapologetically foreign patterns of behavior, thinking and expression?

Successfully facilitating the development of critical thinking depends upon a working knowledge of, and the ability to divine method from, Bloom’s taxonomy in either its original or revised form. This knowledge must, at the very least, be a part of the repertoire of any CT-inclined course designer, and would hopefully extend to the classroom teacher making procedural decisions. What is to be avoided is the presentation of this type of theoretical model to students under the misapprehension that, by deconstructing the critical thinking process, we are also demystifying and therefore facilitating it. On the contrary,

this type of “over-teaching” risks inhibiting students by making them self-conscious in relation to things they would otherwise do intuitively. Though largely untutored and unsolicited, the higher order thinking skills are neither missing nor dormant in East Asian students. They are, as previously stated, activated and acted upon countless times a day. Our task as educators is therefore to facilitate CT’s expression, not its installation.

#### 4. The nine principles

The following list represents a by-no-means exhaustive set of guiding principles, drawn from the author’s own EFL teaching experience (amounting to 17 years in the Japanese university sector) and consistent with Bloom et al. (1956), which might inform the formulation and application of a CT-facilitative methodology. The principles are considered to be applicable to EFL courses at Japanese high schools and universities and are substantiated wherever possible by published research.

##### 1. Provide opportunities for student-centered discussion

Student-centered discussion in pairs or in small groups externalizes the critical thinking process through the pooling of knowledge and the brainstorming and negotiation of ideas and opinions. It vocalizes whatever the student would

otherwise be doing internally and, as a consequence, renders the process less opaque. The communal aspect alleviates pressure on the individual student and minimizes the risk of him or her losing face at the feedback stage. Logistical constraints notwithstanding, teachers are advised to facilitate student-centered discussion by adjusting the physical layout of their classrooms. The seating arrangement recommended by this paper involves pushing four single desks together to form an “island,” with each island seating four students (one pair across from another pair) and with no student having his or her back to the primary whiteboard or screen at the front of the classroom. Sufficient time (minutes rather than seconds) should also be allocated in order to facilitate meaningful discourse. The EFL teacher is furthermore advised to encourage (or at least permit) discussion in the L1 before eliciting feedback in the target language.

##### 2. Encourage the asking of questions

Eliciting questions “is one way to motivate students to engage with the topic” (Morikawa, Harrington, & Shiina, 2012, p. 120) and may even be “the key to powerful thinking” (Paul & Elder, as cited in Morikawa, Harrington, & Shiina, 2012, p. 120). This task would initially be performed in pairs or in small groups as a precursor to discussion. Teachers are advised to provide (or at least model) a selection of

suitable question frames, each requiring a substantiated opinion rather than a definitive yes–no response or statement of fact (see Appendix A for examples). They should, in other words, bear no resemblance to, and be the very antithesis of, the type of question most commonly posed by the Japanese education system.

### **3. Repudiate your omniscience**

Authority reverence implies deference and the suspension of one’s critical faculties. The Japanese classroom typically establishes the teacher-textbook axis as the font of all *valid* knowledge (the qualifying adjective referring to that which is both true and, more importantly, required for testing purposes). This knowledge is definitive and non-negotiable. Anything threatening to interfere with its efficient transmission is perceived as unwarranted and unwelcome, including engagement with the higher order thinking skills. To break this paradigm, teachers are advised to present (or preferably elicit) knowledge via the type of question referred to above. The distinction between facts and opinions should also be made explicit and any notion of the similarly definitive opinion disabused. Intrinsic to this latter adjustment is the teacher’s repudiation of his or her own omniscience. This involves making it clear that the teacher’s fallacy-free substantiated opinion is no more valid than anyone else’s, including the student’s.

### **4. Encourage skepticism**

The recasting of the teacher from font of all valid knowledge to CT-facilitator is contingent upon the recasting of “truth” as a slippery, negotiable concept susceptible to subjective interpretation and manipulation. This implies nurturing a degree of “healthy skepticism” and the ability to critically evaluate, as a matter of course, the relevance and veracity of factual information and, by extension, the validity of any opinion it supports. That objectivity is often compromised by vested interest or bias should be acknowledged, as should the existence of counterarguments relative to almost any proposition. As Paul and Elder have pointed out, “Openness to insights from multiple points of view and a willingness to question one’s own point of view are crucial” if any semblance of objectivity is to be achieved and maintained (as cited in Morikawa, Harrington, & Shiina, 2012, p.125).

### **5. Teach students how to think, not what to think**

The CT-facilitating teacher must exercise restraint in order to avoid imposing a value system upon his or her students. This implies self-awareness (regarding one’s own prejudices) and tolerance (towards those of others). Indoctrination is always anathema to critical thinking, and no less so when the dogma being disseminated is from a supposedly reputable source or is

state sponsored (a point that may resonate more with Japan-based CT-facilitators soon to be simultaneously contending with the stipulations of patriotic education). And while some teachers might be inclined to automatically assume a contrary position to a student's point of view, this tactic of "benevolent provocation" common in the West should only be exercised with extreme caution in contexts where the student is operating in a foreign language and is socioculturally programmed to defer to authority.

#### **6. Consider issues from a variety of perspectives and proximities**

Considering contentious issues from a variety of perspectives is of vital importance if the teacher is to attain that state of open-mindedness and tolerance alluded to above. This proclivity is a precursor to comparative evaluation and, as such, should also be encouraged in our students. It differs from considering contentious issues from a variety of proximities in that the latter implies a range of progressively more encompassing perspectives running from self to the global society. A student might, for example, be asked to consider how global warming affects them personally, how it affects their local community, how it affects their country, and so on. Generally speaking, the more encompassing the perspective (or, to put it another way, the more remote

the implications are from the individual), the greater the degree of support (e.g. prompting) required. Conversely, and especially when introducing the rudiments of CT, teachers are advised to take full advantage of the correlation between increased proximity and high engagement with the issue (Oda, 2008, p. 169; DeWaelche, 2015, pp.137-138). It is of course possible to increase if not the proximity then at least the degree of familiarity a student has with a particular issue simply by teaching it (Yang & Gamble, 2013, p.408). This type of sustained content-based instruction pays dividends in terms of increasing depth of knowledge and building vocabulary. It should, however, be noted that, while the opportunities for critical thinking on any single issue are theoretically infinite, in practice the CT-facilitating teacher might struggle to come up with a sufficient supply of legitimately contentious sub-issues.

#### **7. Be bold in your choice of issues**

Quite apart from a lack of criticality, Japanese nationals are sometimes derided for a lack of knowledge on issues seemingly more pertinent to them than they are to their non-Japanese interlocutors. The ramifications of Japanese imperialism in the first half of the twentieth century and Japan's still-buoyant whaling industry are prime examples in this regard. Teachers are in dereliction of their duty

as educators if they contribute to these blind spots by avoiding sensitive issues. This is by no means a minority opinion (Benesch, as cited in Yang & Gamble, 2013, p.400), though the constraints under which Japanese educators routinely operate are often ignored by commentators. According to Nobuaki Nishihara, head of the high school division of the Japan Teachers' Union, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party has made it clear that it disapproves of teachers broaching controversial topics or speaking out against government policy ("Late teens less prepared," 2016). That the issue of state censorship is so rarely discussed in Japan is of course symptomatic of the problem. The suggestion here is for CT-inclined school teachers to legitimize bolder choices by approximating, as far as possible, the entrance examination questions and course topics determined by the more radical of their counterparts in the relatively unfettered tertiary sector. This would involve a constant process of negotiation as the teacher gradually progresses through a range of relatively innocuous issues (e.g. school uniforms) towards those requiring greater sensitivity.

#### **8. Require students to clarify their thoughts and permit them to do so in the L1**

Clarification implies organizing and substantiating one's thoughts and opinions. It is therefore intrinsic to critical thinking and may be facilitated by allowing students

to "work through" issues in the L1 before switching them to the target language at the production stage. Sufficiently bilingual teachers should similarly be at liberty to exploit the L1 for the purposes of explanation and enforcement. This is especially important in contexts where the formal expression of CT is to some extent an alien construct. As to whether the use of the L1 is ever appropriate in the monolingual EFL classroom, disinclined teachers should reconcile themselves to the fact that critical thinking is a discrete and challenging cognitive process in its own right. Any classroom technique or learning tool capable of facilitating the production of proof of CT in the target language should therefore be regarded as being within the bounds of permissibility.

#### **9. Develop critical thinking through writing**

Barnawi's (2011) general observation that "little attention has been given, on the pedagogical level, to critical thinking and self-voice in college EFL writing instruction" (p. 190) is certainly pertinent to Japan where receptive skills and comprehension tend to be prioritized over productive skills and critical evaluation (Morikawa, Harrington, & Shiina, 2012, p. 119). This emphasis, though sensitive to linguistic limitations and contextual constraints, fails to take advantage of the universally-efficacious nature of writing

vis-à-vis CT:

(An) essential ingredient in critical thinking instruction is the use of writing. Writing converts students from passive to active learners and requires them to identify issues and formulate hypotheses and arguments. The act of writing requires students to focus and clarify their thoughts before putting them down on paper, hence taking them through the critical thinking process. (University of Waterloo, n.d., para. 3)

Further to the above pro-writing rationale is the fact that, in educational contexts, proof of learning tends to be product based with the emphasis on a type of product that is both tangible and readily assessable. Proof of critical thinking by students operating in a foreign language is no exception.

## 5. Conclusion

Subsequent to a discussion on the sociocultural issues that may well render the entire exercise redundant, this paper compiled a set of guiding principles capable of informing a contextually-appropriate methodology for the facilitation and expression of critical thinking in the Japanese EFL classroom. That the same principles could be transferred, with minimal modification, to a variety of settings is at once an

indication of the universality of CT as a cognitive skill and the extent to which a Westernized conception of CT has become universal. The non-writing specific principles identified above are furthermore transferable to methodologies eliciting ulterior modes of CT expression such as discussion and debate. This, however, would constitute a truncated and somewhat gratuitous exercise in the context of contemporary Japanese EFL due to the absence of any assessable product. The onus is therefore upon the production of written proof of CT and most pertinently upon that type of argumentative paragraph already required by an increasing number of Japanese universities, especially in the private sector, as a component of their entrance criteria. This alludes to the manner in which the Japanese government is struggling to keep up with demand for a graduate body equipped with critical thinking skills transferable to the global marketplace. Progress in this sphere will be contingent upon the Japanese government resolving its issues about a populace equipped with the capacity to evaluate and conceivably reject established social norms. The only other hope is that state-sanctioned patriotism, as transmitted through the guise of moral education, will fail in its bid to neuter or intimidate criticality. That each and every Japanese student at least has the capacity to determine his or her own critical orientation is incontestably

true. Future research will therefore focus upon devising, testing and refining the pedagogic methodologies through which to realize this potential.

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## Appendix A

Suggested question frames for the facilitation of critical thinking

What are the strengths and weaknesses of ...?

How are A and B similar/different?

What is another example of ...?

What are the implications of ...?

Why is (X) important?

How could A affect B?

What do you mean by ...?

What are the possible solutions to this problem?

Which is the best (solution) and why?

What is a counter-argument to ...?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement ...?

## Footnotes

1. In Japan, students who wish to enroll at either a national or public university must take the National Center Test for University Admissions (popularly referred to the "Center Test"). Those students who pass the Center Test are then invited to take a university-specific exam set and graded by the university. Those who pass are accepted as students. Students who wish to enroll at a private university do not need to take the Center Test and take only the exam administered by their chosen university.

