

Developing Critical Thinking Skills in EDC

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ABSTRACT

Living in rapidly changing societies, students have been encouraged to acquire various 21st century skills including English language and critical thinking skills (Suto, 2013). Although a lot of studies have shared activities that include an element of critical thinking development, there are few practical activities that I am aware of that could be utilized in English discussion classes. Therefore, this paper attempts to propose one way to equip students with English language competency and critical thinking skills. English discussion prompts and questions are developed so that students can discuss questions critically and be responsible for their opinions. Students are also asked to complete check-sheets to evaluate reasoning processes. Informal observations of students' discussions suggest that the materials and tasks are helpful to promote students' critical thinking skills. Details of materials, preparation, and procedure are provided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language practitioners often find prevailing SLA theories incompatible with their teaching contexts due to context-specific constraints. Theories generated by language experts are often difficult to implement when it comes to the actual teaching context (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). For example, although communicative language teaching (CLT) has been well researched and highly praised, there are numerous concerns reported, such as the cultural appropriateness for EFL contexts (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994), ideological imposition (e.g., Canagarajah, 2005), and differences in the socio-cultural context (Gorsuch, 2000).

Addressing these issues with SLA theories and practices, Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003) suggests a framework called a *postmethod pedagogy*. It does not provide any specific method, but offers principles that language teachers could follow. This enables language practitioners to create their own context specific pedagogy that is not bound by any specific language teaching methods. A postmethod pedagogy consists of three principles or pedagogies namely: particularity, practicality and possibility.

A pedagogy of particularity emphasizes the importance of giving full consideration to a particular group of learners, in a particular context, aiming for particular goals (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). It claims that a meaningful pedagogy has to be catered to specific learners' linguistic, social and cultural needs. Teachers can only gain particular pedagogical knowledge by continuously engaging in observation, reflection, and action. Practitioners have to be willing to constantly reflect on their teaching, and modify their teaching accordingly.

A pedagogy of practicality is closely related to a pedagogy of particularity. This principle aims at empowering a teacher-generated theory because according to Kumaravadivelu, "no theory of practice can be useful and usable, unless it is generated through practice" (2001, p. 541). Practitioners are encouraged to develop their own theory, that is, personal theories. They are encouraged to use personal theories, instead of accepting generalized theories and methods constructed by language experts, and professional theories, which are often inapplicable to real classrooms.

A pedagogy of possibility attempts to connect language education to "sociopolitical reality" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 543). A pedagogy of possibility states that particular language contexts are influenced not only by education stakeholders, but also by broader social, economic, and political realities. Through language learning, learners construct and alter their

identities and subjectivities (Weedon, 1987 as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Proponents of a postmethod pedagogy are required to acknowledge the complex realities of learners, both inside, and outside the classroom. This principle attempts to incorporate the larger societal needs, such as learning skills, collaboration skills, and critical thinking skills into language teaching contexts.

The main purpose of learning English amongst the majority of my students is not to master the language itself, but to develop practical language skills, and use English to attain their particular goals. Following a postmethod pedagogy, I would like to try to teach my students not only the English language, but also other skills that they will need in society. Although it would not be sensible to consider all the goals and needs of all learners, it is essential to equip students with the necessary skills that society requires. In order to explore the skills that students need to acquire to succeed in education and the workplace, several conceptualizations of the so called 21st century skills are reviewed.

While there is no consensus on what skill sets are needed in the 21st century, it is notable that the various skills that are proposed by professionals and organizations considerably overlap. One of the largest research institutions is the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S). They provided a model that categorized ten significant 21st Century Skills into four broad categories: (1) Ways of Thinking, (2) Ways of Working, (3) Tools for Working, and (4) Living in the World. Although the term “21st Century Skills” is not widespread in Japan, there is a Japanese version of 21st Century Skills called “*ikiru-chikara*” (Shiramizu, 2014). The Japanese version of the 21st century skills set, similarly, emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, problem solving, metacognition, collaboration and self-direction skills. Based on a postmethod pedagogy, especially a pedagogy of particularity and possibility, I would like to infuse my English discussion classes with some of these skill sets, so that students can learn not only English discussion skills, but also other skills that will help them succeed in life.

Although there are many studies that have reviewed conceptualizations, and categorization of the 21st Century Skills, there are few studies I am aware of that have studied *how* 21st Century Skills can be incorporated into EFL classes. Suto (2013) introduces several approaches that could be used to develop 21st Century Skills in different contexts. However, many of these approaches seem difficult to be carried out in my context, namely discussion classes, for example, “developing a curriculum covering 21st Century skills explicitly,” and “cultivating 21st Century skills through independent research projects” (p. 12). Among the different 21 Century skills, the most suitable skill for English discussion classes seem to be “critical thinking,” which is under the category of “ways of thinking.” English Discussion Classes (EDC) are designed to improve speaking fluency and teach a variety of discussion skills. I believe that critical thinking skills could be integrated into the class, so as to complement discussion skills.

Critical thinking is a well-established field, and the term is a buzz word in Japanese society (Iwasaki, 2002; Davidson, 2006). It has been suggested that owing to advancement in technologies and rapidly changing societies, 21st century citizens need to assess, analyze, and create information (Ledward & Hirata, 2011). They need to be able to articulate their ideas while paying attention to others’ ideas in a fundamentally different way than before (Suzuki, 2006). Another important reason to incorporate a critical thinking approach into English classes is that the Japanese society often discourages independent and logical thinking. This creates a cultural handicap for Japanese people when competing with English speakers who come from societies which tolerate or encourage controversy and free discussion (Takemae, 2006). It has been well recognized and problematized that Japanese people often lack not only English language

proficiency, but also the critical thinking ability to successfully collaborate and engage in constructive discussions with people from different cultural backgrounds (Suzuki, 2006). Warschauer (2001) states that English language educators in an information technology society have to develop activities that learners would encounter in the future. Considering Japanese culture, and the type of education imparted to students across Japan, it becomes evident that teaching critical thinking skills to Japanese students is necessary.

Numerous studies have explored how critical thinking skills can be integrated into EFL classes, providing a list of the various activities and techniques for fostering critical thinking skills (Davidson, 1996; Masduqui, 2012; Stroupe, 2006). Before creating any critical thinking task or activity, it is necessary to identify what critical thinking is. According to Scriven and Paul (2013), “critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated through, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (p. 1). A variety of definitions of critical thinking has been offered (Kubota, 2010; Stroupe, 2006), but many of them seem to overlap with each other (Davidson, 1996). Therefore, the tasks and materials are created to develop these skills.

A range of pedagogical ideas and activities in EFL contexts have been developed to foster the above mentioned skills (see Davidson, 1996; Stroupe, 2006; Suzuki, 2006), but many of them appear very familiar to current language educators, like debate, media analysis, problem solving activities, and group discussions. In English discussions classes, many of these activities are already included, so what should be done is to have a more explicit focus on developing critical thinking skills, ensuring that these activities will help in actually developing the necessary skills. I have often noticed that the majority of students tend to regurgitate ideas from a textbook or from classmates in discussion classes. They tend to accept their classmates’ ideas or information of the textbook too easily, and it makes it look like they did not fully engage with the reading or with their classmates. Following the postmethod pedagogy, if society is going to require critical thinking skills from my students, such skills should be implemented in my discussion classes. The task is developed emphasizing reality in order to make students feel discussion questions are relevant, and materials are created to help students to realize and reflect on how they form their ideas.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

As critical thinking requires students to elaborate, analyze, defend, and modify their thinking, tasks have to create conditions for active participation, meaningful interactions among students and with material (Garside, 1996). In order to encourage students to engage with tasks and to be responsible for developing their ideas, an imaginary but realistic situation was set up for discussion questions, and some questions were reworded without changing the main points of the questions (See Appendix A). A check-sheet was also designed to provide the opportunity to investigate their thinking paths after discussions (See Appendix B). The check-sheet poses six questions that should help students to realize and internalize five aspects of critical thinking skills: functions, purpose, clarity, breadth, information, and depth. The first item refers to the target function phrases that students learn in the lesson. Each week students learn one function, such as paraphrasing and reporting information [e.g. “How do you know about that?” “I heard...”] or one communication skill (such as agreeing and disagreeing). Because effective usage of the target function and communication skill would help students engage in discussion critically, questions about functions/communication skills were included in the check-sheet. The second item, purpose, is about whether a discussion maintains focus on the question. Clarity is

about taking the whole discussion process into account rather than thinking about their own opinions. Breadth is pertaining to identifying their viewpoints on a topic. The information is about determining the reliability of the sources and depth is about looking at a topic from different viewpoints and considering problems in the question.

PROCEDURE

In this discussion class, students have two opportunities to discuss a variety of issues in small groups (between three and four members) for 10 minutes (Discussion 1) and 16 minutes (Discussion 2). To maximize the chances to enhance the students' critical thinking skills, the following procedure was implemented in Discussion 2.

<Preparation>

1. Create a meaningful situation for which discussion questions can be treated as relevant and realistic.
2. Examine discussion questions to check if the questions seem stimulating, and rephrase them if necessary.
3. Print out one question sheet that describes the gist of the developed story and the discussion questions for each discussion group.
4. Print out two check-sheets for each discussion group.

< In Class>

5. Provide the question sheet to each group telling why the developed story is important to students.
6. Students participate in Discussion 2.
7. After Discussion 2, teacher gives two check-sheets to each group.
8. Students discuss the questions on the check-sheet in pairs.
9. Instructor takes notes on the students' discussions on the check-sheet.
10. Instructor provides feedback.

VARIATIONS

There are a variety of ways this activity can be altered for students with different levels and needs. Instructors could develop stories according to students' majors and interests. It has been found helpful to take notes on topics that often come up during discussions in each class. For example, it has been noticed that many of my students enjoyed talking about hypothetical questions, thus, for these students a story like "Imagine if you were..." worked very well getting them actively responding to the questions. Many times discussion questions did not have to be reworded as long as stories were inviting. The check-sheet can also easily be adapted based on the students' needs. Some questions could be eliminated or more questions could be introduced based on their performance during discussions and the teacher's goals for lessons. Higher level students were sometimes informally asked additional questions, such as "How could we find out if that is true?" Instructors could also ask some groups to share their answers on the check-sheet. For lower level students, instructors could specify which question they should discuss, such as "Please discuss the questions about clarity and depth." If students really struggle to just complete discussions, they could talk only about the question regarding functions, although almost all of my students could successfully talk about questions about "function" "purpose" and "clarity." For some students, questions about "Breadth," "Information" and "Depth" seemed challenging.

DISCUSSION

This task and material has been used in almost all of my classes over the course of semester two. Throughout the second semester, the students progressively became accustomed to the discussion setup and using the check-sheet. At first, not many students could make full use of discussion opportunities or the check-sheet. They simply skimmed the prompts and questions, and engaged in discussions without fully analyzing their and classmates' ideas. They tended to accept their peers' opinions and media information without evaluating them appropriately. They approached the check-sheet in a similar manner. It appeared challenging for them to analyze their thinking paths. As Knight (1992) suggests, it is obvious that critical thinking skills can only be fostered over a long period through a step-by-step process. Thus, it was sometimes inevitable for the instructor to intervene and introduce some example ideas about the topic and explain why the topic was relevant and significant to students. Though many students constantly were challenged by the instructor and by discussing the questions on the check-sheet, students seemed to gradually develop their critical thinking skills. The transcript below provides one instance of students' demonstration of critical thinking skills in a discussion.

Excerpt 1. Topic: Gender Equality (Lesson 12)

Question: Is gender equality important?

1 Takuro: Can I start?

2 Ryouta and Jyunichi: Go ahead.

3 Takuro: Okay. Why do you think some people say there is no gender equality?

4 My friends and teachers do not act differently.

5 Have you ever felt there is no gender equality?

6 Ryouta: No. I think we are equal, but this is maybe because we are all men. We don't know.

7 Jyunichi: Can I ask a question?

8 Ryouta: Yes.

9 Jyunichi: What kind of gender inequality do you think girls feel?

10 Ryouta: Ummm... Maybe not equal working chances.

11 Takuro: How do you know about that?

12 Ryouta: I heard on the news that some women said that it is more difficult for women to get
13 jobs.

In this excerpt, the students are demonstrating some key elements of critical thinking skills. In line 3, a student raises a question about the topic in order to identify the meaning of the question. After stating his opinion, the student seeks other points of view in line 5. As a response to this question, another student attempts to restrict their opinions and suggest that their ideas are the ideas from one of the many perspectives by saying "this is maybe because we are all men. We don't know." Following this, another student asks a question from a different point of view in line 9. Then, Ryouta shares his opinion without indicating his information source. Noticing Ryouta's information might not be reliable, Takuro asks a question "How do you know about that?" to evaluate the information. In the next line, Ryouta tells that his information is from a news program. This short excerpt suggests that the students try to share and challenge ideas meaningfully and somewhat critically. After introducing this discussion set-up and the check-sheet, students have started asking more questions to each other. Some students even ask questions from the check-sheet during discussions, such as "What are some of the complexities of this question?" This activity seemed an effective way to help students to have "real"

discussions in which students share their genuine opinions and consider different perspectives. Another interesting observation was that many groups used target function phrases frequently. This might be that students realized that the effective usage of function phrases, such as “Examples” “Possibilities” and “Different Viewpoints” [e.g. “How about from {X’s} perspective?”] is crucial to support their opinions, and to justify their ideas rationally.

CONCLUSION

Given the emphasis on critical thinking skills in professional and personal life, this paper suggests one way to incorporate critical thinking elements in English discussion lesson plans. This paper illustrates how discussion classes can attach more importance to evaluating thoughts in the language instead of their language skills. After having introduced this technique, many more students engaged in discussions critically and meaningfully. Although no formal assessment was conducted to gauge the utility of this task, multiple instances were recorded where students identify weaknesses of their peers’ ideas, raised questions about each others’ opinions, and identified one-sidedness of thought or discussion questions. As many students hinted at the utility of this activity, there were also many instances where discussion situation-set-up failed to interest students or was too difficult for students, consequently, students could not interact with others or materials critically. A trial and error approach was taken to find ways to incorporate critical thinking elements in lessons. There is not one exclusive or proper way to teach critical thinking skills in EFL contexts because students’ needs and levels differ in different classes. Thus, instructors themselves have to apply their critical thinking skills to discover and develop lessons plans to teach critical habit of thought.

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APPENDIX A - Lesson 12 Discussion Question Sheet

<p>Situation You are members of the student council at Rikkyo University, and you need to discuss some issues about gender equality because some students think there is no gender equality on the campus.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is gender equality important? 2. Should gender roles change <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A) On the campus? B) In the workplace? C) At home?
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APPENDIX B - Lesson 6 Check-Sheet

A Checklist for Good Discussion		Function: Reporting Information
How well did you use the function to have interesting discussion?	(Function: Paraphrasing)	
Did the question(s) get answered well?	(Purpose)	
What was your group's main idea?	(Clarity)	
From what point of view did you (and your group) discuss the issue?	(Breadth)	
What information and experience did you use to support your claim?	(Information)	
What are some of the complexities of this question?	(Depth)	