DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING OF FUTURE ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract: This article is based on improving teachers' critical thinking. In recent years, English language teaching and research in Uzbekistan has witnessed a significant increase in the emphasis upon critical thinking skills development alongside language proficiency. Fostering a perspective of commitment to teaching critical thinking skills in line with the English language courses, this paper reports on a study conducted in English sphere. In particular, it explores English language teachers' conceptual definitions of critical thinking, their beliefs about the significance of critical thinking for language teaching and connections between critical thinking and language teaching methods.

Key words: critical thinking skills, context, identities, Bloom's taxonomy, components of critical thinking.

The significance and value of critical thinking skills are thought about at present as being ones of social empowerment, enhanced communication, employability and networking. The most decisive point at issue, on the one hand, is that of stimulating and enhancing student capacity for critical thinking, nurturing and promoting critical thinking skills across disciplines and diverse socio-cultural and educational contexts. On the other, it is that of teachers' ability to continually self-assess their own beliefs and methods in the classroom in order to enhance students' critical thinking skills. In these interrelated conditions, English speaking countries are cases conforming to this general course and prevailing tendency, being a country of distinctive identities, and education that emphasises critical thinking as an essential component of students' personal and social development (Al-Busaidi & Sultana, 2014) and their preparation for future work. The

issue of higher education graduates' preparedness for the modern job markets and the skills' shortages that these markets are facing are currently among the concerns observed by multiple publications noted in Shaw (2011). Most of this research drew attention to the fact that many higher education graduates lack capacity in specific areas wanted by employers (Candy & Crebert, 1991, cited in Robinson & Garton, 2008, p.96). It also raises questions about students being inadequately "equipped with general, transferable skills" (Robinson & Garton, 2008, p.96) that are necessary for successful professional careers in the new global economy and in fast-growing local job markets. Recent research indicates that team work, problem-solving and critical thinking are essential skills that top the list of the most desired attributes for the 21st century workplace (Billing, 2003; Robinson & Garton, 2008; Wagner, 2008; Wagner, 2012) and the "increasingly complex economy" (Salama, 2004). It also focusses the attention of educators on the importance of skills' development. According to Robinson's study (2000) that has strongly influenced later developments in educational research, "failure to equip young people with the job readiness skills critical to job success is equivalent to placing employability barriers in their path" (p. 2). The English language classroom has an important place in these training systems and plays a key role in developing skills, including critical thinking also referred to as the skill of 'responsible thinking' (Eder & Paul, 2009; Vaughn, 2005). As a consequence, critical thinking skills' development, alongside language proficiency, has become one of the key goals of Oman's tertiary education to more holistically prepare students for further academic studies and their future careers in the workplace. Actually, critical thinking is interpreted and defined in various ways. In a seminal study on critical thinking and education, Edward Glaser (1941) defined critical thinking as "the ability to think critically" (p.409). Reflecting upon the components of critical thinking, Glaser (1941) pointed out the importance of the range of one's experiences as well as an attitude of being disposed to consider problems and subjects in a thoughtful way and knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning. He also suggested taking into account some skill in applying these methods (p. 409-410). Several other leaders in the field

included in their understanding of critical thinking, skills, practice and the need for reflection both by the student and the teacher. Scriven and Richard (1987) in their address to The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking listed the following as attributes of critical thinking: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth and fairness. Fairness and empathy were also supported by Elder and Paul (2009) as traits and attributes of critical thinking. It should be noted that leading members of The Critical Thinking Community, Elder and Paul (2009), included in their definition of critical thinking, not only information, belief generating and processing skills, but also added the importance of developing a habit of using those skills to guide behaviour. In a similar way, Van Gelder (2005) concurred that learning the skills was not enough and that students must practise using them. According to him, to develop critical thinking, there must be full concentration on improvement, that is, exercises to improve performance that are graduated and including repetition and guidance with timely feedback (p.43). There is some debate on the transferability of critical thinking skills; however, Elder and Paul (2006) and Vaughn (2005) considered the skill of critical thinking as transferrable to any subject, content or problem, Willingham (2007) stated that critical thinking is intertwined with content knowledge and is highly discipline specific and, therefore, non-transferable. There are also differing opinions as to whether critical thinking is synonymous with higher order thinking skills. Mulnix (2012), Elder and Paul (2006) referred to higher order stages in Bloom's taxonomy when describing critical thinking, while Rudd (2007) stated that critical thinking and higher order thinking are not equivalent, "… [because critical thinking also includes] problem solving, creative thinking and decision making" (p.48). Interestingly, Halpern (2014) also noted the importance of these elements. Following this line of thought, he incorporated practical guidelines including acquisition, retention and retrieval of knowledge and moves onto the importance of problem solving, decision making and creative thinking. The issues of critical thinking skills' development and teaching practices have been addressed by many researchers. Ennis (2002), a leading contributor

to the field of critical thinking, designed the 'FRISCO approach' (focus, reasons, inference, situation, clarity and overview) with emphasis on understanding and evaluating an argument. He also produced a super-streamlined conception of critical thinking, which lists the attributes of a critical thinker. According to Ennis (2011), a critical thinker is open-minded and mindful of alternatives; tries to be well-informed; judges well the credibility of sources; identifies conclusions, reasons and assumptions; judges well the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions and evidence; can well develop and defend a reasonable position; asks appropriate clarifying questions; formulates plausible hypotheses; plans experiments well; defines terms in a way appropriate for the context; draws conclusions when warranted, but with caution; and integrates all items in this list when deciding what to believe or do. Other writers in the field have produced similar lists or frameworks including Duron, Limbach and Waugh (2006), who shared their five-step framework, and James Cooper (2013), whose work focusses on the importance of questioning. Another advocate of the importance of questioning techniques to aid engaging in critical thinking is Yilin Sun, of the TESOL International Association in 1997, whose blog explains her use of the acronym FIRE to stand for four areas of critical thinking: factual, insightful, rational and evaluative. Critical thinking has also been linked to autonomous learning (Little, 2004; Pemberton & Nix, 2012), and in particular in relation to writing where the student is engaged in reflective thinking (Nunn, 2015). As well as that, a substantial body of present-day research on critical thinking development emphasises its continued nature and the importance of considering the types of teaching and learning activities from the point of view of their contribution to such development (Vdovina & Gaibisso, 2013). In conclusion, there is a lot of interest and valuable implementation of critical thinking already taking place in Education system of Uzbekistan, and the majority of participants in this study recognised the central role played by critical thinking in effective language teaching and pedagogy. According to the teachers, fostering a perspective of renewed commitment to teaching critical thinking skills in line with a functional and communicative language-learning

environment enhances students' chances of success and achievement in both their studies and potentially the job market. However, in spite of the identified connection between critical thinking and other elements of language teaching and a variety of activities directly relating to language teaching, there is no consensus among teachers regarding the understanding and interpretation of thinking that "defines the content" (Paul, 2004) of what is taught in the English language classroom. Therefore, there is a need for targeted professional development for teachers in the area of critical thinking that will include a theoretical rationale, reinforcement of the basic principles of critical thinking and practical examples that teachers can utilize and better understand the idea of critical thinking in general and critical thinking approaches in teaching specifically. As Paul (2004) stated, "If we understand critical thinking substantively, we not only explain the idea explicitly to our students, but we use it to give order and meaning to virtually everything we do as teachers and learners".

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