FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN STUDENTS IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Educators and employers are stressing on the fact that the gulf between the critical thinking skills of our students and the demands of life in the 21st century is only widening. We need to make a paradigm shift in the way we teach students in the language classroom so that critical thinking skills are fostered in them. This paper aims to bring into focus, through a review of principles laid down by theorists of Critical Thinking, the strategies and instructional processes that language teachers can adopt in order to foster critical thinking skills in students.
Key Words: Critical Thinking; High Order Thinking Classroom (HOTC); cognitive strategies; Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

INTRODUCTION

We live in an age in which people are expected to communicate, collaborate and think critically in their work place. To prepare students for the world of rapid change, it is absolutely imperative that teachers groom their students to think critically and think on their own. Consequently, the role of high order thinking, which has been recommended by educators in the world since 1980s, has become more important than ever in institutions of learning. Although teachers agree that critical thinking should be integral to the learning outcome, they do not adopt any teaching practices that trigger, develop and hone these skills among students.

This research paper, drawing on the principles laid down by critical theorists, aims to define and explain strategies that all educators need to adopt in their classrooms in order to facilitate their undergraduate students' critical thinking. The following research question serves as a guide for the following paper: What are the instructional methods and strategies that can be used in language classrooms to further critical thinking among students?

What is Critical Thinking?

The definition of what constitutes critical thinking has evolved over the years. Critical thinking has "shifted from the ability to recognize certain patterns of thought in the work of others to the more active demonstration of critical thinking of one's own" (Cromwell, 1992, p. 38)

Paul & Scriven (1992) explain that a vast amount of information is collated from observation, experience, reflection, reasoning and communication. They define critical thinking as the intellectually disciplined process of actively sifting through and assimilating, interpreting, applying, conceptualizing, synthesizing and evaluating this information so that it serves as a guide to action and belief. It is not enough to just think critically; one must aspire to improve it and make it better. The best way to assess one's quality of reasoning is to apply it to the following "universal intellectual standards"- clarity; accuracy; precision; relevance; depth; breadth; significance; fairness. Paul (1995) goes on to suggest that a purely " associational and undisciplined thought" can move on to become " conceptual and inferential" if it uses the following dimensions of reasoning called "elements of thought"- purpose or end in view; problem to be solved; point of view; information/data; concepts/ideas; assumptions; implications and consequences; inferences.

Paul and Elder (2008) suggest that Critical Thinking is "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism**."** (p. 4)

Classroom environment to foster critical thinking:

A High Order Thinking Classroom (HOTC) is quite different from a traditional classroom in the way it functions. Traditional classroom mistakes information for deep learning, promotes memorization, tests recall, advances competition rather than collaboration, believes in convergent thinking with one right answer, overlooks affective factors, disregards discovery learning and offers a threatening environment that believes in didactic instruction where students are mere passive receivers. HOTC, on the other hand, offers an enriched and

supportive environment that stimulates active deep learning and spirit of inquiry where divergent views are encouraged, promotes problem solving, believes in co-operative and collaborative learning, increases the learner's self-confidence and self-esteem, offers learners opportunities to be engaged with their own learning and progress and tests their depth of thinking rather than short term memory.

Scaffolding of Instruction:

In a HOTC, teachers make sure that learners are provided with familiar yet stimulating learning experiences. These learning experiences provide enough room for learners to explore and grow but at the same time do not toss the students into unfamiliar zones which render them lost. If the learning task is too simple, the students would not be stimulated enough and would remain uninterested and bored. If the task is beyond the capacity of the learners, they would feel overwhelmed and would give up before trying. The skill of the teacher lies in making sure that challenge and support are in right balance so that the learners are able to achieve the desired outcomes and achieve mastery. This is in keeping with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which was defined as "The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (p.86). Clark & Graves (2005) define ZPD as "the area between what children can do independently and what they can do with assistance."(p.571). These definitions imply that students learn through social interaction when their teachers or capable peers assist them during the learning process.

Pearson and Gallagher (1983) suggest a model of instruction where students are gradually guided towards autonomy as in the course of time the scaffolding is reduced and they gain more confidence in the use of the cognitive strategies. They suggested four stages of instruction: 1) Teacher modeling 2) Guided practice where teacher acts as a facilitator for the completion of task 3) Independent practice with detailed feedback given by the teacher 4) Application of the cognitive strategy in real life situation.

i) Modeling:

In keeping with this concept, in a HOTC, learners aren't asked to take a plunge into using the cognitive strategy without some hand holding by the teacher. It begins with the teacher isolating the strategy and modeling it to the students using a think-aloud. A "think aloud' shows explicitly how the thinking process runs during the task. For instance, if the students have to be taught to look for the main idea and to summarize, the think-aloud would be something like this:

"Summarizing is the skill of getting the essence of something we have read or heard or seen or experienced and reducing it into a few sentences. If you read the newspaper, you'll see that the headlines are nothing but a one line summary of the report you are about to read. Summarizing just sticks to the main idea and is precise and to the point. Summarizing is of great relevance in life as it helps us understand or remember what has been read. We can say that it is the key take-away of what has been read or experienced.

The title of the text we are about to read is "Headache" and it has been written by R K Narayan. Well let me use the title and predict what the text is going to be all about. Could it be about health? Since R K Narayan uses a lot of humour in his prose, it might be a humorous take on how headache is used as an excuse to wriggle out of unwanted situations. Let me read the first paragraph and see…"

ii) Scaffolding:

After introducing the concept of summarizing, the teacher can give a framework to the students and ask them to work in groups. For instance, the teacher would give the following steps to the students- a) Read the headings and sub-headings to make a prediction about what the first half of the chapter is about. b) Read the first half of the chapter and tell whether the prediction has been confirmed. c) Identify who or what the paragraph is about. d) What is the main thing being said about *who* or *what* d) Identify the most important words that state the main thing. e) Use as few words as possible, preferably less than 10 words, to write the summary.

iii) Fading:

The teacher can gradually remove the scaffolding and ask them to do the summarizing independently. To reinforce the feeling of self-efficacy, the students can be asked to assess the summaries of their peers by using certain criteria such as a) Has the main idea been stated clearly? b) Would you know what the text is about if you just read the summary? c) Have all unimportant details been kept out of the summary?

iv) Coaching:

It would involve giving the students detailed feedback on their performance and giving cues to them as to how they can apply this strategy in their lives too.

Seeking connections with real life:

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Alston (2001, p.34) makes a very pertinent point when she said that if arguments and texts are read without any connections to feelings, emotions, desire or action, then the cognitive activity lacks "an ethical depth" to be labeled as critical thinking. Unlike a traditional class which reinforces the idea that authority is to be obeyed without questioning, a HOTC stimulates students to make critical enquiry, interpret evidence in an unbiased manner, think about connections between what they have read and their own lives, understand and listen to a diversity of perspectives and myriad stories. It encourages both dialogue with self as well as dialogue with others.

Bell hooks also advocates that a classroom should provide room for an exchange of opposing viewpoints and multiple stories and standpoints. hooks believes that an ideal classroom is that

"space where we are all in power in different ways…we professors should be empowered by our interactions with our students." (p.152) If the experiences and stories of students are to be elicited from them, the teacher has to step down from the pedestal and start by sharing his/her experiences. For instance, a poem like Wole Soyinka's *"Telephone Conversation"*, in a traditional classroom, would only discuss the autobiographical element or the social injustice projected in the poem but a HOTC would also discuss the relevance of these issues in their own lives and have them explore the issues of stereotyping and prejudices in the light of their own sociocentricity. Students would be asked to speak about their own personal accounts of stereotyping, prejudices or discrimination that they faced in their lives as others listen. This confirms the diversity of experiences, view points and perspectives in a group. They can even be prodded to introspect and reflect with questions such as,

> "*Have you caught yourself stereotyping people?"; "Are we victims as well as perpetrators of stereotyping*?" Questions such as "*What does the writer have to say that touches your values?" help the students look within and go to the depth of the text.*

If the text advocates a particular argument, the students can be asked what a counterview to this could be. They can be asked to give arguments supporting the view as well as the counterview. This can make them think from multiple perspectives. For instance, if the text advocates a minimalist lifestyle, the counterview to this would be a consumerist lifestyle. Having the students think of a counterview and give arguments in its support is of utmost importance in fostering a bias free attitude. As Nickerson (1998) points out, people subconsciously seek or interpret evidence to suit their purpose or existing beliefs, without being aware of their confirmation bias. According to Kenyon & Beaulac (2014), sometimes people, albeit subconsciously, choose to be unaware of their biases because it would be

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counterproductive for them to thwart their biases and racial prejudices by being aware of them. Paul (1995) and hooks (1994) both advocate dialectical exchanges across opposing ideologies, stand points or points of view so that they transcend their sociocentric and egocentric biases. Students can be given an argument analysis worksheet with the following subheadings: a) argument premise or claim made b) reasons given to support the claim c) evidence given to support the reasons d) assumptions made e) conclusions drawn f) consideration of counterviews and claims.

Paul (1995) exhorts teachers to know the distinction between reasoning and subjective reaction. A teacher can easily mistake a student's assertion in an emotive language or an assertion that has been made in a glib or witty or fluent manner for good reasoning and thinking. Students learn good reasoning only if teachers insist on their providing reasons and evidence for supporting their judgment or claims. Otherwise, the students would harbor the false belief that they can get away with half baked arguments on the basis of the felicity of their language.

Questioning to trigger high order thinking skills:

In keeping with Vygotsky's ZPD, teachers should not push the students into questions that require deep level thinking. They should be eased into it by first setting the ground with knowledge based questions to check for understanding. However if the teacher stops there, it would give a false sense of security to the student and he/she would not reflect on it further. Students need to be pushed out their complacency with questions that make them introspect, apply, evaluate and synthesize in keeping with the taxonomy provided by Bloom (1956).
For instance, if the poem *"Introduction"* by Kamala Das is being taught in the class, the teacher can pattern the questions in this manner:

In the Pre-reading, the curiosity of the students can be whetted with questions such as *Can you guess from the title what the poem is all about?*

During the first reading, as the students get acquainted with the information/concepts, questions are asked to check their level of understanding/comprehension and to clarify their concepts. For ex.*, Can you tell me what this means? Can you again describe...*etc. (Paraphrasing and inferential questions)

In the second processing of the text, questions are asked to help them move towards a deeper understanding of the text so that students learn to build on each other's ideas. For ex *What makes you say that there was a rebel hidden in the poetess? Do you agree with what she says...* etc. (Inferential, analytical questions)

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In the post reading task, high order questions can be asked that make them apply, evaluate, imagine and create. *Why do you think the issue of gender equality is relevant to your generation?* (application based) ; *How might the perspective of some other women be different from that of this poet?* (Evaluation) ; *If given a chance to work for a women's organization, what are the many ways in which you can contribute to solve this problem of gender discrimination?* (Synthesis)

It is deep questions that force students to deal with complexity and expose them to a certain degree of uncertainty. It is such tasks that put the students out there and hone their critical thinking skills.

Teachers can also use Socratic questioning in order to have students define their purpose, analyse their arguments, delineate issues and uncover their biases. For instance, *what is the purpose of this text?* (Question of purpose); *How do you know?* (Questions seeking evidence); *Could you give me an example?* (Question of clarification); *How would someone in another situation and circumstances respond to this?* (Question of point of view); *What would the consequences of this action be?* (Questions of implication); *What is it that you are assuming here?* (Questions of assumption); *In what way is it relevant to the issue at hand?* (Questions of relevance). Students need to be shown that it is questions and not answers that drive thinking.

Application of critical thinking skills beyond the classroom :

Knowledge of critical thinking skills would be of little use unless used in real life. Hence it is crucial to encourage students to apply the principles in the many activities and events that they plan in the college outside the classroom. For instance, when the students are encouraged to collaborate to produce a worthwhile end product such as a stage performance, a street play, a college magazine or a cultural event, it gives them an opportunity to make decisions , solve problems , be receptive to each other's ideas, express and execute their own ideas and persist despite the odds. These beyond-the- classroom experiences give them an opportunity to cultivate intellectual traits such as intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual integrity, intellectual perseverance, problem solving skills etc. However, as Paul (1995) cautions teachers, not all collaborative work is critical thinking. As he points out, gossip is also collaborative but not critical thinking. So teachers have to make sure that the students apply the concepts of critical thinking to their daily life and critically examine and assess the choices they make and actions that they execute. For instance, students can be asked to apply Paul's elements not just when they are reading a text but also when they are planning an extracurricular event or solving their own personal problems. Here's an example of Paul's elements being applied when taking a decision to plan a trip for faculty as well as students:

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Purpose: To decide on a place for outing so that the staff and the students have a good time.

Questions: What is our budget like? What place would be exciting for adults as well as youngsters?

Information: Seek information from the tourist office in our city as well as advice from friends who would give reliable information.

Concept: The main concept is that the place should live up to the expectations of people of two different generations.

Inferences: Finally a forest reserve which would give the adults the peace and quiet they were looking for and the youngsters, the excitement of spotting some wild animals.

Assumptions: Nobody would mind paying for the Safari they would be taking in the forest.

Implications: The consequence of this choice would be that all going in this trip would be happy.

CONCLUSION:

The world is changing and our students need to change too. This can only happen if the educators take a paradigm shift in the way they facilitate their students' thinking so that the students become more cognizant and discerning of their thinking processes. This can happen only if the language classrooms are used to gear students to move from mere grasping and retaining of information to that of critical questioning and high order thinking.

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