Developing critical thinking skills in the ESL classroom

By Alanna Carter, Ryerson University, Canada

Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of the importance of developing the critical thinking skills of ESL students. Critical thinking skills are sometimes overlooked in the ESL classroom which is problematic given that ESL students need to be equipped with the skills and thinking strategies necessary to perform in academic and professional arenas. ESL teachers can foster critical thinking in supportive environments in their daily practice by including activities that require students to challenge the self and activities that require collaboration and creativity. Several classroom activities that encourage critical thinking are presented and discussed.

Defining 'critical thinking'

Critical thinking is an important area of interest in education and stems back to the Greek philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Perdue, 2014). All three philosophers embraced the values of questioning, examination, and reflection. Concepts of critical thinking today can be traced to the work of philosopher John Dewey who wrote on the centrality of critical thinking in the educational experience (Dewey, 1933). More recent concepts and practices of critical thinking emerged in the works of Lipman (1988) and Ennis (1989). Lipman (1988) argues that critical thinking is a complex form of thinking and involves "skilful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it relies upon criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context" (p. 39). Ennis (1989) developed 13 characteristics which identify critical thinkers; according to Ennis, critical thinkers are open-minded, adapt a holistic approach to

situations, and look for reasons, among other things. Although a great deal of research has been done on critical thinking and differences of opinion exist about how exactly to define it, most researchers agree that "an important aspect of critical thinking is the ability to collect, evaluate, and make use of information effectively and appropriately" (Beyer, 1985, as cited in Iakovos, 2011, p. 82). Importantly, education has gravitated toward the idea that students must learn the processes of inquiry, learning, and thinking rather than simply accumulate skills and information.

Students' development of critical thinking skills goes hand-in-hand with the types of activities and questions teachers provide and ask and, consequently, Bloom's taxonomy (1956). Bloom's taxonomy identifies lower- and higher-order thinking processes. Lower-order thinking skills involve knowledge, comprehension, and application. Higher-order thinking skills include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Effective educators provide students with opportunities to develop both lower- and higher-order thinking skills. Effective questioning and use of inquiry as a pedagogical practice supports development of students' critical thinking skills (Wang & Seepho, 2017).

Critical thinking in the context of the ESL classroom

While critical thinking is valued in all disciplines, it is especially important in subjects where there is an intimate connection with language. Simply put, as one uses language, they are demonstrating personal thinking. Listeners can often identify a speaker's linguistic and ethnic background based on pronunciation and speech patterns; using this information, listeners make judgments about the speaker (Ze et al., 2013). When one does not use language well, the speaker may feel that his or her thinking is being exposed and judged in a negative way. Although this may be true in some instances, when the involved speaker or writer is also a student of English as a second language, such interpretation is too simplistic.

As indicated above, all students need to develop critical thinking skills and be given opportunities to practice and develop higher-order thinking; however, the asking of and responding to higher-order tasks questions can be problematic for ESL students. Often teachers wrongly equate language proficiency with cognitive ability (McNeil, 2010). Some teachers assume that because ESL students have difficulty with language, they also have difficulty thinking critically. As a result, teachers may give lower-order tasks and ask closed-ended questions to ESL students which offer little opportunity to develop critical thinking skills, take chances with language, and, ultimately, develop linguistic competence and fluency. In fact, this approach is problematic on a number of levels: classes can be too elementary; students and teachers may become bored; and student progress can stall. Many ESL students, when given opportunities and appropriate supports to complete higher order tasks and answer complex questions in their own languages, flourish.

The need for ESL students to develop critical thinking skills

Upon examination of data related to the numbers of international students coming to Canada to pursue studies, the need for ESL students to develop critical thinking skills becomes clear. The number of international students choosing Canada as a study destination increases yearly: The number of international students who chose Canada as a place to study increased 68% from 2014 to 2018 (Government of Canada, 2020). In 2018, the number of international students in Canada reached 721,205. One of the top reasons that international students cite choosing Canada to study is the quality of education offered (Humphries & Knight-Grofe, 2014). Indeed, the high quality of education that international students seek in Canada is deeply rooted in academic programs that champion innovation, creativity, and pushing boundaries. Critical thinking underpins all of these concepts.

In order to achieve their personal, educational, and professional goals, ESL students require fluency with language as well as skills to think critically about issues that are present in their educational or working careers. Importantly then, students require support in developing language skills as well as other skills as they are required "to think, to reason, to communicate, and to continue their learning outside the classroom" (Shaila & Trudell, 2010, p. 2). Carefully honed critical thinking skills are necessary for students' personal success as well as the success of the institutions and companies at which ESL students will study and work. Many universities have expressed concern about ESL students meeting the academic demands of university courses and have developed skills-based courses to support these students (Baik & Greig, 2009). Thus, ESL teachers need to ensure that they are equipping students with the academic and critical thinking skills necessary to be successful at higher levels of education and in the workplace.

The role of the teacher in developing students' critical thinking skills: Providing support and challenging beliefs

Support

Fundamental to the development of critical thinking skills is the environment in which these skills are nurtured and encouraged. Given that critical thinking in the ESL classroom involves learners taking significant risks both with respect to language and the formation of ideas more generally, learners can be hesitant and shy to engage with these types of tasks. Thus, a learning space in which students feel comfortable, safe, and appreciated is essential. According to Iakovos (2011), an ESL classroom which fosters the development of critical thinking skills is a "friendly, supportive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere [that] can have a positive impact on students' motivation and language performance" (p. 84). Learners need to feel that their ideas will be accepted and considered fairly and respectfully. Instructors

need to work to ensure that students engage with all members of the class and materials in respectful and supportive ways. If students are made to feel that their ideas are not important or valued, they may lose motivation, and the development of critical thinking skills will stall.

Challenge and beliefs about students' abilities

In addition to feeling safe in the learning environment, students need to feel a sense of challenge. Research has shown that well-designed tasks and questioning advance the development of critical thinking skills and that presenting ESL students with higher-order tasks and questions results in more language production than lower-order tasks (Yang, 2010). At the same time, research has also shown that teachers ask ESL students lower-order questions much more frequently than higher-order questions; this practice is linked to teachers' perceptions of students' abilities (McNeil, 2009). Teachers can be hesitant to ask ESL students higher-order questions and thus cultivate students' critical thinking skills because they believe that tasks that require critical thinking are too challenging for these students. While this belief may be true in some instances, in the overall, it is an inappropriate springboard for learning and for preparing students for the academic and professional challenges that they will experience. Accordingly, teachers need to provide opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills in their daily lessons and to experience challenge.

A review of literature by McNeil (2010) found that teachers' perceptions of students affect their questioning patterns; likewise, students' perceptions of themselves affect their levels of confidence and belief in their abilities to answer difficult questions. McNeil states that teachers need to change more than just their questioning patterns; teachers need to be conscious of their beliefs about students' abilities and learning processes (p. 77). In other words, teachers need to regard their students as highly capable learners and present learners with tasks that are innovative, interesting, and ultimately, challenging.

A number of activities that promote and nurture the critical thinking skills of ESL students are offered below. The suggested activities are grounded in the author's 10 years of experience working with ESL students across a variety of learning situations including general language classes, English for Academic Purposes classes, and test preparation classes. In the author's experience, the activities described engage learners, encourage collaboration and communication, allow for diversity of ideas, and help students create connections between ideas and skills. The activities are sorted into two categories: activities that challenge the self and activities that encourage collaboration and communication with others.

Critical thinking activities that challenge the self

Growth and learning occur when one is encouraged to consider what they already know and connect this knowledge with new ideas and information. The ability to make connections between previously known and understood ideas and information and new ideas and information is an important skill for learners to negotiate the world in which they live.

Prediction activities

Prediction activities are a valuable way for students to consider the information that they already know about a topic and use it to inform what they believe a different topic will be about (Literacy Work). With respect to reading and listening skills, students can be encouraged to make predictions based on the title of a text/video, the images within a text/video, or a few select words or phrases taken from the text/video. Encouraging students to make guesses about texts based on limited amounts of information will encourage them to make links with topics that they are already familiar with and extrapolate or hypothesize. It likewise primes students for reading/listening materials and will help with comprehension and engagement. Confirming or refuting predictions after a reading or listening task will help learners see how old and new information fits, or does not fit, together.

KWL

KWL charts (*What I Know*, *What I Want to Know*, *What I Learned*) are not new to teaching and learning; this is perhaps because they are valuable tools to foster critical thinking among learners. KWL charts are useful in encouraging learners to think about new and unfamiliar topics. The *What I Know* column on the chart empowers students and reminds them that they are holders of knowledge about various topics. This perspective is particularly important in an ESL classroom where learners can sometimes feel powerless and vulnerable due to the inherent understanding in the classroom that English is dominant, and the teacher is the holder of knowledge. The *What I Want to Know* column sparks interest and engagement with topics and motivates students to want to learn and discover new information in the target language of English. Finally, the *What I Learned* column encourages reflection and appreciation for the learning process and the language that is involved in that process. Students often feel a sense of pride when considering the *What I Learned Column*, particularly when they are reminded that they learned it all in English. Although these charts are quite simple, they are powerful tools in a supportive classroom dedicated to fostering critical thinking.

Perspective taking

Putting yourself in someone else's shoes and understanding what and how another person may be thinking and feeling is an extremely difficult activity that requires an open mind, a deep understanding of a situation or issue, and a willingness to be vulnerable. Despite its challenges, it is an exceptionally effective classroom activity that can foster learners' critical thinking skills. Activities that encourage considering others' perspectives involve deep understanding of an issue or situation, sensitivity to the ways that one might interact and relate to others, and strong communication skills so that perspectives are presented

in authentic, sensitive, and culturally appropriate ways. Clearly, these types of exercises require extensive thinking and understanding.

One way to bring this concept to life in an ESL classroom is to take a reading text from a course book, for example, and to have students rewrite the information/narrative/story from the perspective of another person. Possible perspectives include those of a person from a different cultural group, age, or gender. Alternatively, students could take a story or fairy tale that is popular in their own language and rewrite it for an English audience. Students should be encouraged to consider the types of themes, characters, and symbolism in the story and how these elements might be understood and interpreted by the audience. Upon rewriting the text, students should share and explain their choices highlighting similarities or differences between the original text and their interpretation.

In a speaking lesson, role plays are excellent activities to encourage perspective taking. Role plays require students to consider how others might react in particular situations. In addition to role plays being ways for students to practice common scripts used in English, they involve understanding and thinking about the responses and reactions of others. Role plays can be helpful for teaching about aspects of culture that may be unfamiliar to students (Thornbury, 2005).

Again, students need to feel safe and comfortable in the learning environment for perspective taking activities to be successful. Importantly, the instructor needs to remind students about the dangers of slipping into stereotypes. Perspective taking activities allow for important discussions about culture.

Critical thinking activities that create opportunities for interaction and collaboration

Activities and tasks that facilitate interaction and collaboration among students foster critical thinking. While it can be challenging to work with others and to understand the approaches that different people take in order to solve problems, the benefits are substantive. Working together with others requires significant communication, creativity, and innovation. Therefore, teachers should work to design activities that require purposeful and meaningful interaction and collaboration between students in the ESL classroom.

Debates

Debates are extremely effective and engaging for students, and they require students to develop and use critical thinking skills (Iman, 2017). Debates require students to take, explore, explain, and defend a position. Students can be free to choose the position to defend or, to add a layer of challenge, teachers can assign students positions to defend. Assigning students positions to defend can increase the level of challenge involved in this task because students may be forced to consider and defend opinions that they do not necessarily agree with.

Debates are inherently interactive and require extensive listening and speaking on behalf of the participants. Essential to a good debate is preparation so that students can feel confident expressing their opinions and ideas. Further, it is helpful to encourage students to anticipate beforehand the arguments the opposing side might present; this requires significant forethought and an appreciation for the fact that multiple perspectives exist. Debates also require significant active listening and processing of information during the actual live debate situation. Active listening will ensure that students respond appropriately and logically to the arguments presented. Debate about topics that are directly relevant to learners' lives will generally result in the most engaging and successful lessons and thinking.

Seminars

Seminars in which students serve as experts on specific topics and lead discussion are valuable activities that encourage critical and creative thinking. One approach is for students to choose a topic related to the theme of the unit and to partake in independent research about the topic. Students should be given a degree of freedom in choosing their topics so that they are engaged in the research and have a genuine desire to learn more about their topics. Then, students need to run a seminar with a small group of students. During the seminar, the student shares some of the interesting research that he or she has found and leads a group discussion about the topic based on a series of discussion questions prepared in advance.

Running a successful seminar requires students to use critical thinking skills throughout the entire experience. First, students need to find research relevant to their topics and decide which information is necessary and interesting for their classmates. Then, students need to decide how to share their research in engaging ways. Finally, students need to draw their classmates into conversation about the topic in accessible and meaningful ways. Creating relevant and stimulating discussion questions can be extremely challenging. Likewise, managing group conversation so that it runs smoothly and naturally is an important skill for all learners, especially for learners who are working in a language that is not their first.

Problem solving tasks

Tasks that involve working with others to solve a problem always require students to think critically. According to Snyder and Snyder (2008), "students who are able to think critically are able to solve problems effectively" (p. 90). Problem solving tasks can be complex or relatively simple. An example of a task that requires students to problem solve involves asking students to create a product to solve a common, everyday problem such as the difficulties of waking up in the morning or stubbing one's toe on the side of the bed in the middle of the night. These problems are universal and students will certainly have had experience with them. Students work in groups to design a product that they think will solve the problem; then, they need

to *pitch* their idea to the class. Certainly, this type of task can be much more involved; for example, students could work together to create a poster or presentation focused on a real-world problem, or they could work together to build a product or item that fills a need that exists in the classroom or a designated community.

This type of activity is inherently creative and requires diverse skills. Working with others requires communication, listening, strategizing, and navigating problems with others. Working together to solve problems is representative of the work students will experience in academic studies and the workplace.

Conclusion

In all, educators need to equip students with the skills necessary to *survive* and *thrive* in increasingly competitive educational and professional settings. In particular, teachers need to ensure that ESL students are ready to meet challenges, embrace diversity, and be successful, creative, and aware. In order to achieve these goals, ESL students need to develop strong language and thinking skills. Given the unique challenges that exist in a language classroom, critical thinking skills can be overlooked as the teacher is sometimes more preoccupied with helping students to improve their accuracy and fluency. However, language development and critical thinking go hand-in-hand: Developing good critical thinking skills will support language acquisition and increase students' confidence and ease with communication.

Teachers need to design activities with care so that students develop and use critical thinking skills in purposeful ways. At times, teachers may need to sideline their own personal biases and impressions of students and their abilities as a student's fluency with a language is not always indicative of their cognitive capacity and ability to think critically. Teachers need to challenge students in supportive and meaningful ways. In this way, students are empowered, and their confidence levels increase. This, ultimately, leads to capable learners who are well-equipped and confident to work, study, and live in English-speaking environments.

References

Baik, C., & Greig, J. (2009). Improving the academic outcomes of undergraduate ESL students: The case for discipline-based academic skills programs. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28*(4), 401–416. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903067005

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, Handbook I: The cognitive domain.* New York: David McKay Co. Inc.

Dewey, J. (1933). *Why reflective thinking must be an educational aim. How we think*. Boston: D.C. Heath.

Ennis, R. H. (1989). Critical thinking and subject specificity. *Educational Researcher, 18*(3), 4–10. https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0013189X018003004

Government of Canada. (2020). *Building on Success: International Education Strategy (2019- 2014)*. https://www.international.gc.ca/education/strategy-2019-2024-strategie.aspx?lang=eng

Humphries, J., & Knight-Grofe, J. (2014). Canada first: The 2009 survey of international students. *Canadian Bureau for International Education*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED549797.pdf

Iakovos, T. (2011). Critical and creative thinking in the English language classroom. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 1*(8), 82–86. http://ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol._1_No._8;_July_2011/10.pdf

Iman, J. N. (2017). Debate instruction in EFL classroom: Impacts on the critical thinking and speaking skill. *International Journal of Instruction, 10*(4), 87–108. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1155603.pdf

Lipman, M. (1988). Critical thinking—What can it be? *Educational Leadership, 46*(1), 38–43.

Literacy Work. (n.d.) E*SL by design—Predicting*. http://www.literacywork.com/Literacywork.com/Predicting.html

McNeil, L. (2010). Beyond the products of higher-order questioning: How do teaching and English language learner perceptions influence practice? *TESOL Journal, 2*, 74–88. https://tesol-international-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/A6V2_TESOL.pdf

Perdue, S. M. (2014). *The big three of Greek philosophy: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle*. English Blog. https://bit.ly/2IyrOLH

Sahila, Y. M., & Trudell, B. (2010). From passive learners to critical thinkers: Preparing EFL students for university success. *English Teaching Forum, 48*(3), 2–9. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ914890.pdf

Snyder, L. G., & Snyder, M. J. (2008). Teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills. *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal, 50*(2), 90–99. https://knilt.arcc.albany.edu/images/a/a5/Teaching_critical_thinking.pdf

Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking*. (J. Harmer, Ed.). Longman.

Wang, S., & Seepho, S. (2017). Facilitating Chinese EFL learners' critical thinking skills: The contribution of teaching strategies. *Sage Open, 7*(3), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017734024

Yang, C. C. R. (2010). Teacher questions in second language classrooms: An investigation of three case studies. *The Asian EFL Journal, 12*(1), 181–201. https://www.asian-efl-journal.com/main-editions-new/teacher-questions-in-second-language-classrooms-an-investigation-of-three-case-studies/

Ze, W., Arndt, A. D., Singh, S. N., Biernet, M., & Liu, F. (2013). "You lost me at hello": How and when accent based biases are expressed and suppressed. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 30*(2), 185–196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2012.09.004

Author Bio

Alanna Carter is an English Language Instructor in the Real Institute at Ryerson University. She has taught at various institutions across Toronto. In addition to classroom teaching, Alanna has worked on curriculum development projects for various stakeholders and student populations. She has strong interests in supporting international students and fostering environments that encourage culture and diversity.