ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: *This article presents an overview about critical thinking providing definition from reliable sources. It also talks about the characteristics of an ideal critical thinker and the importance of critical thinking in language teaching. In addition, the issues are highlighted as why to teach critical thinking in the language classroom and how to enhance critical thinking through assessment.*

Key words: critical thinking, feedback, one-shot exam, washback effect, linguistic competence.

Critical thinking is not a new concept or practice. Most teachers might be impressed to learn that critical thinking can be traced back many centuries ago. In fact, it has been practiced from times immemorial , notably, by Socrates and Plato.

Defining critical thinking might seem difficult, especially because the term tends to be used repeatedly without actually reflecting on its true meaning. To begin with, we can state that critical thinking is a quality able to be developed throughout life. But critical thinking is not a dimension just applicable to education (in the formal sense of the term). So what it is? How can it be defined? "Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically. They are keenly aware of the inherently flawed nature of human thinking when left unchecked."

It is crucial to be aware of the fact that critical thinking is not "survival thinking"; it requires careful and intentional development of specific skills in processing information, considering beliefs, opinions, solving problems. Schafersman states that "critical thinking means correct thinking in the pursuit of relevant and reliable knowledge about the world. Another way to describe it is reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skillful thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions,

gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable one to live and act successfully in it".

There is no doubt that the way of assessment in foreign language classrooms highly influences what and how the learners learn. This influence of testing on teaching and learning is referred to as washback effect. Alderson and Wall state that —tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom .‖ In his trichotomy of backwash model, Hughes's describes test effects in terms of —participants‖ such as teachers, students, administrators, materials writers, and publishers, —process‖ referring to those actions taken by participants to complete teaching and learning tasks and —product‖ referring to learning outcomes and the quality of learning. Hughes' model implies that the quality of a test determines to a high degree the level and amount of washback.

Assessment practices mainly influence learning through affecting the objectives the learners set for themselves in learning the foreign language. In fact, in many cases the way of assessment is determinant of the objectives of the language learning program. If in a language teaching context, assessment focuses on linguistic competence of the learners, mastery of linguistic competence becomes the learners' objective, while in a context emphasizing communicative competence, learners do their best to become communicatively competent in the foreign language. In the same way, if the focus of assessment is on integrating language and thinking skills, the learners do their best to achieve this objective. In fact, when the purpose of teaching is understanding the process of assessment, in addition to evaluation, is a substantive contribution to learning. Assessment that fosters understanding needs to inform students and teachers about both what students currently understand and how to proceed with subsequent teaching and learning.

Here are presented a number of suggestions for enhancing critical thinking among language learners through assessment practices:

1. Use ongoing assessment rather than one-shot exams at the end of the semester. While one-shot exams require the test taker to have a limited amount of knowledge, mostly linguistic, ongoing assessment carried out during the course gives the teacher the opportunity to test a larger range of knowledge and skills, including critical thinking skills.

2. Include activities in your assessment which encourage the learner to think about the major objectives of the course, including developing critical thinking skills. The type of activities used in assessing language learners determines the goals of learning. Those activities which can be carried out through simpler processes such as memorizing, substituting, etc. are not appropriate activities for enhancing critical thinking in language learners. Better activities for the purpose of promoting critical thinking skills are those which require the learners to think, cooperate, ask questions from themselves and others, etc. These activities also require the learners to the activities with the purposes of such activities.

3. Provide learners with feedback which gives learners understanding that thinking is an integral part of their learning experience. This integration of performance and feedback is exactly what students need as they work to develop their understanding of a particular topic or concept. Feedback needs to occur frequently, from the beginning of the unit to its conclusion, in conjunction with performances of understanding. Some occasions for feedback may be formal and planned; some may be more informal. Feedback also needs to provide students with information not only about how well they have carried out the activities but also how they might improve them. Furthermore, it needs to inform learners of the teachers' planning of subsequent classes and activities. Another requirement of feedback is that it must come from a variety of perspectives: from students' reflection on their own work, from classmates reflecting on one another's work, and from the teacher. Model for students how to provide feedback that both tells them how well they are doing and gives them information about how they might do better.

The points suggested here are just a few among many points which if taken into account can help language learners think critically. In fact, what is highly

important is the teachers' understanding and having in mind that assessment is a key determinant of what is learnt in the language class and how it is learnt. In that case, the teachers can choose the most appropriate ways of language assessment with regard to the specific context of their own classroom.

Critical thinking needs to be enhanced among language learners due to its significance in developing effective language learning. So promoting critical thinking skills is considered one of the tasks' of language teachers. They can do this task through various ways, including using appropriate ways of assessment as assessment practices usually determine the learning objectives of the language learners.

To sum up, thinking activities develop learner's motivation. There are many other activities that generate critical thinking on the part of the learners. If the teachers are well-known and prepared, they may design their own activities that help the learners develop lower level to higher level thinking skills. The three techniques mentioned above develop integrated learning of language skills of aspects. All of these activities enhance learners' readiness, feeling of responsibility and sharing. Finally they will be the critical thinkers.

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