CRITICAL THINKING IN THE CONTEXT OF ELT CLASSROOM: DEFINING THE NOTION AND DEVELOPING THE SKILL

K. Tkachenok, S. Tumskiy
MGIMO University (RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

Abstract

While approaching things critically appears to be an innate ability, the skill of critical thinking is the one to be developed and honed in current educational settings. ELT classroom is not an exception as in a globalized world the fact becomes obvious that proficiency in a foreign language does not particularly pave the way for the unqualified success in business or academic background. A great number of skills are needed in order to employ one’s linguistic competence in the way which will yield long-term benefits for a future professional. Involving multiple intelligences, critical thinking is indicative of successful intellectuals and particularly sought after in the workplace.

The paper addresses some ways to seamlessly incorporate teaching critical thinking into the process of foreign language instruction. The case of teaching the English language to the students of MGIMO University considered, the authors seek to provide an answer to the question of how to engage learners in critical thinking activities and hone the skill to facilitate its further use in practice.

Regarding some obstacles to acquisition of critical thinking skills, the paper concludes by providing a number of practical recommendations on teaching and learning them in universities.

Keywords: English language teaching, critical thinking, critical thinking skills, ELT classroom, linguistic competence.

1 INTRODUCTION

Matthew Lipman saw the main aim of education as the transmission of knowledge and the cultivation of wisdom. Lipman’s idea of wisdom includes judgment as “a determination of thinking, of speech, of action, or of creation” [1]. With a view to identifying essential characteristics of CT (critical thinking), Lipman relates it to judgment in the following way: “…Critical thinking is skillful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it relies upon criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context”. Characterizing the process of education as one of inquiry, Lipman stresses the importance of the students’ ability to exercise good judgment, stating that good judgment “cannot be operative unless it rests upon proficient reasoning skills that can assure competency in inference, as well as upon proficient inquiry, concept-formation, and translation skills” [1].

As seen by Robert Ennis, critical thinking is “reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” [2].

As Richard Paul puts it, while trying to foster quality thinking, an educator does not want his students to simply assert things, he wants them to try to reason things out on the basis of evidence and good reason [3].

According to Tara DeLecce, critical thinking means making reasoned judgments that are logical and well-thought out. It is a way of thinking in which you don’t simply accept all arguments and conclusions that you are exposed to but rather have an attitude of questioning such arguments and conclusions. It requires wanting to see what evidence supports a particular argument or conclusion [4].

American Philosophical Association sees CT as the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. In this process we give reasoned consideration to the evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria by which those judgments are made [5].

As it can be inferred from numerous definitions given to critical thinking at different stages of the notion’s development, critical thinking is inseparable from reason and judgment and closely connected to the process of decision-making. When set a task to teach critical thinking, an educator should ensure learners’ correct view of the notion preventing them from thinking that the aspect of criticizing is incorporated into the term.
The peculiarities of the information society of today precondition several personal and professional characteristics one should possess in order to be on par with modern developments. Critical thinking appears to be one of the basic assets a modern professional can possess to make his/her contribution to teamwork or perform complex tasks individually.

Scientific and technical progress seem to be ensured by the ability to think critically, while education that is designed to hone the skill should definitely play the role of facilitator in the process. The mental faculties of individuals rather than natural resources, funding, and technological advances have become central in drawing the line between success and failure, between leaders and those following the lead.

As foreseen by Richard Paul, the principal role does not appear to be played by information per se. Being able to effectively produce information makes someone the most precious asset in the modern world. In this connection, the skill of processing data will increase its price, making the CT skill a prerequisite for success in this information society. With regard to highly demanding working and studying conditions, it is possible to assume that thinking skills are to be improved continuously. That is one of the primary reasons to teach students how to approach things critically.

According to V. Borisenkov, a paradigm in education is needed which will ensure the autonomy of students’ thinking. The latter does not seem possible without students’ critical thinking. Hence, it is imperative that schools teach how to think and how to study in the framework of current paradigm [6].

The tools of critical thinking are still being widely discussed, which only adds to the overall confusion over the subject of CT, its functioning and methods of teaching CT to students. It is noteworthy that in order to be able to implement CT strategies and tactics in their teaching, educators are supposed to be cognizant of the notion itself as well as the elements forming it and the steps crucial to achieving the planned results.

2 METHODOLOGY

With regard to the utmost importance attached to teaching and learning critical thinking today, the English teaching staff of the Faculty of International Journalism outline the options and difficulties while developing CT skills in a language classroom.

Various CT strategies and techniques considered and applied, the tutors provide the descriptions and comment on their applicability during language classes designed for high level learners.

The techniques and strategies described in the paper are:

- True/false statements, “Do you believe that” question
- Memorizing, sequencing facts
- Project-based learning
- A platform for opinion exchange
- A flipped classroom
- Peer reviews
- An article/a text with factual mistakes
- Scaffolding
- Asking “why”

One specific consideration which should also be put forward by the authors is connected to the notion of “fake news” and the importance of identifying it in current conditions. Now that cases abound when we are easily deceived by numerous news items, the ability to think critically acquires crucial importance and developing the skill in future journalists becomes educators’ top priority.

3 RESULTS

At the beginning of a class, it is suggested that the students be engaged in discussing true/false statements or answering the question “Do you believe that?” before being exposed to the academic or practical topic of the lesson and the text of the unit in their main course book [7]. Towards the end of the same lesson students tend to eagerly go back to their initial thoughts on the topic and comment on the changes (if any) which can now be observed in their attitudes to the problems posed.
Turning to journalistic practice, it is possible to suggest that extra time should be allocated for the verification of facts that the students want to employ in their argumentation. Additionally, it is also important that the participants in the discussion should not only be given a chance to change the opinion towards the end of the lesson but also account for such a change by providing the appropriate arguments and examples. It is noteworthy that the more vocal students are about their viewpoint towards the end of the lesson, the more practice they gain in applying their critical thinking and argumentation skills to practice.

Memorizing and sequencing facts from academic texts and articles is one more activity that contributes greatly both to language learning and the development of critical thinking. With thinking skills activated, students eagerly embark on a quest for “true” data and forget that they currently are in a classroom with an academic task set before them. The practice shows that having students share their findings with peers builds up learners’ enthusiasm and stimulates critical thinking further.

Collaboration, creative and critical thinking, and problem-solving skills are all developed when a task is given in a project to develop unique material which is to be further presented to the whole class. Being engaged in this type of activity, students tend to demonstrate their most creative selves while trying to impress their group members and the audience. A task of evaluating the presented projects critically or even preparing a peer review in writing can definitely be considered by teachers whose aim is to develop critical thinking skills that their students will be able to use in their future. When given a task of writing a peer review covering both the positive and negative aspects of their classmates’ projects, students activate their critical thinking while trying to give a detailed review to make a useful contribution to the work of their classmates.

Having an inquisitive mind and innumerable opportunities for personal and professional development, modern students embark on a great number of projects voluntarily. The immediate task before the teaching staff is to provide them with considerable food for thought presented through topics for discussion, thesis statements for essays, books and articles for critical analysis and to build a suitable platform for presenting the results of their research and discussing the same. In this case, an important consideration should be the format of such a platform for opinion exchange. The teaching staff should be prepared to create such a platform and then modify it according to their students’ needs and preferences. The format of opinion exchange here precondition the success of the discussion. Hence, tailoring it to suit the interests of a group will be a rewarding experience for tutors. Students become active participants in the discussion, eager to voice their opinions and comment on the ones of their peers.

An example of such a platform that allows every student to voice his mind about a subject of interest while also commenting on the performances of other speakers is a project developed at MGIMO and partially based on the format of TED Talks. Held in MGIMO University on a monthly basis, the conference called Let’s Talk gives all the guests an opportunity to take a critical stance on a topic and discuss it later with the speaker. The fact is noteworthy that many guests reported a changed viewpoint on a number of topics presented at Let’s Talk MGIMO after listening to the speeches. Not only can members of the audience question any point addressed by the speakers after the end of the conference, but also contact them via social networks (among which the official Instagram account of the project) with a view to further discussing what they disagree with. The topics vary from the traditional ones such as music, sports, art and science to more specific ones such as the nature of dreams or sign language. It is worth mentioning that the topics of speakers’ talks are announced beforehand so that everyone planning to attend could research any topic and form his own opinion in order to take part in an informed discussion or gain the necessary English vocabulary to be able to clearly understand the talks. In this connection, one more important result to consider is the notable improvement in the level of English mentioned by the members of the audience and proved by academic ratings of those attending the talks regularly.

Both the conference organizers and its guests view the event as a perfect opportunity to stimulate their critical thinking as well as to keep their mind open on a wide range of modern issues.

The notion of a flipped classroom presents a workable solution for university teachers as well. Students often show their willingness to use multiple sources of information in a number of different ways. Allocating tasks and responsibilities connected to extra research of a proposed topic seems an attractive alternative to traditional classroom activity. Sometimes having students participate in choosing a topic/topics and asking them to justify their choice is a good way to trigger the mechanism of critical thinking. A tutor can also have them discuss the topics in small groups and present the results in front
of the class; this way chosen, a tutor becomes a facilitator of the process, just asking questions and shaping the flow of the discussion.

One more opportunity for fostering critical thinking used by MGIMO tutors is connected to the major of the students which is the field of journalism. In the framework of their journalistic practice students are often asked to present their own articles in English, which differ in genre and length. A task of writing peer reviews within a group is a good way to motivate students to exercise their critical thinking faculties. It is important that tutors should provide their students with clear instructions including a task to address both positive and negative aspects of the presented articles. By giving such instructions, teachers can help students improve their critical thinking skills and familiarize them with the journalistic skills and enhance their level of English. The role of an educator here is to provide future professionals with the freedom to judge and assess and to choose a role as an observer and advisor rather than a mentor.

Another activity used both to stimulate critical thinking and enhance students’ linguistic competence is presenting an article with a factual mistake and having students identify and correct what they find wrong. The task may presuppose extra work on the part of a teacher who will have to carefully choose the text and incorporate a false fact or facts into it trying not to ruin the logic and maintaining its plausibility as effectively as possible. Having composed a text containing false information or just inserted a phrase which contradicts the real state of things, a tutor will be able to follow a vivid discussion in which students try to reason with one another in small groups or in open class and prove that the stance they took is correct and can be justified. Wishing to save time teaching staff can allocate responsibilities among students who can take turns researching a topic and developing a text for every lesson. Having to make a choice concerning what factual mistakes to include students take great interest in the activity and are eager to have their classmates discuss the plausibility of this or that passage.

This type of assignment can prove useful not only in ELT classroom for journalists, but also be tailored to academic needs of students whose major is politics, history, economics, law, etc. The mistakes can include dates, terms, succession of events as well as national realities and historical figures.

One feature of a wise and attentive participant to a discussion is asking questions. By encouraging students to ask various questions, addressing them either to a teacher or their fellow students who are making a report an educator provides for the development of critical thinking and succeeds in creating a supportive learning environment. In this connection scaffolding strategies should be mentioned. Scaffolding proves to be a good educational strategy while incorporating critical thinking into ELT classroom at MGIMO. Regardless of the level of English and students’ age, some scaffolding techniques always work to provide the best results. One scaffolding technique which Rebecca Alber calls “tapping into prior knowledge” means having students relate their personal experiences and associations with the content or concept of study. Tutors sometimes may provide their students with some tips or hints in order to facilitate such learning. Once the connection is made, students tend to remember the study material longer and make use of it later on.

Giving students time to talk through new learning material seems perfect for learners in any classroom. In this connection such activities as think-pair-share or turn-and-talk can perfectly contribute to effective learning. Students will benefit greatly if they are allowed to “verbally make sense of and articulate their learning”. While it proves to be a workable solution for future journalists, it can also have great effect when used during language classes for other future professionals.

One more important thing to consider is how often the question “why” is asked at the lesson. As Laura Sigsworth puts it, “At its most simple, critical thinking is about asking why. Why does this person believe that? What is the evidence? What is their reason for writing?” It is important that friendly atmosphere be created and maintained in a language classroom where students can ask this simple question as many times as they want to. By asking this simple question when addressing their teacher or their fellow students learners both demonstrate their genuine interest, provide for building new knowledge and foster critical thinking of the whole class.

4 CONCLUSIONS

When taught in a structured way, critical thinking can make students intellectual empaths, provide for their awareness of their own knowledge as well of various conditions their fellow “thinkers” can find themselves in. By having students realize how powerful individuals can be when they exercise relevant
research and reasoning skills, educators can contribute greatly to learners’ future success in any sphere of their professional interest.

The question remains which set of procedures would be adequate for bringing CT into a language classroom. One more thing to consider is the place of the tasks designed to stimulate CT in school curricula, e.g. how many of them should and can be incorporated into classroom activity.

REFERENCES


