Critical thinking or critical expression? Meeting students’ critical needs

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Preview

1. What CT skills are needed?
2. What CT skills do students have already?
3. Does ‘Critical Expression’ more accurately describe what students need?
4. How can we deal with critical expression systematically?
5. What are some strategies to help our students’ critical expression?
Preview

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What’s in the literature?

- **ELT literature:**
  - not much!

- **EAP methodology books:**
  - recent ones only

- **Mainstream education literature:**
  - far more
Mainstream literature

- Australian Qualification Framework, outcome of bachelor degree

  “cognitive and creative skills to exercise critical thinking and judgement in identifying and solving problems with intellectual independence”

What is critical thinking?

“The unbearable vagueness of critical thinking”

Vandermensbrugghe (2004)

International Education Journal 5(3), 417-422
What is critical thinking?

Provisional definition:

“questioning information, not just accepting it; developing and justifying opinions”
What CT skills are needed?  
Prospectuses and brochures

- Only very vaguely defined

"Students are expected to assess and think critically about issues rather than simply repeat learned information. To do well, students will need to consult different sources of information and evaluate them from a critical perspective."

University of Adelaide 2012 Postgraduate Coursework International Prospectus

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Where are these from?

- “If one takes no thought about what is distant, one will find sorrow near at hand”

- “There may be men who act without understanding why. I do not. To listen much, pick out the good and follow it; to see much and ponder it: this comes next to understanding.”

- “If I am walking with two other men, each of them will serve as my teacher. I will pick out the good points of the one and imitate them, and the bad points of the other and correct them in myself”

- “Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous”

- “When anger rises, think of the consequences”
Asking the students …

- 10 students, Egypt, Thailand, China, Turkey, Lebanon
- Qualitative:
  - survey (mostly open questions)
  - discussions
  - essays
- Questions separated thoughts from talk

Asking the students …

- All said either that they sometimes disagreed – in their own minds – with their teacher, OR that it’s normal to sometimes disagree privately with a teacher
- Most indicated that disagreeing with teacher in own country was frowned upon
Asking the students …

- teacher might be wrong, but if he/she "is wrong, we can't speak, because this lead us to a hard punishment from the teacher"
- teachers are not always right – but stu "must agree with the ideas from their teachers sometimes, even though they know the ideas are wrong"

So it appears that …

- Many students do question academic authority and draw their own conclusions
- Some may expect negative consequences for doing this openly

- CT teaching thus could focus on:
  - When and where CT expression is valued
  - How to express CT in a way that is accepted
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Why is ‘Critical Expression” a useful concept?

- May already be some critical thinking going on
- Pragmatic: allows a focus on end result
- Fits in with a traditional ESP/EAP needs analysis approach
- Relatively easy to explain to learners
- More concrete: we can ‘see’ expression; can’t see thinking
- Ties in naturally with language education
- Doesn’t sound political/ideological
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Sub-skills of Critical Expression

- Compiled from multiple sources
- Many not even labelled as CT
- They will be familiar!
3 stages of CT

1. Gather info
2. Analyse info
3. Express critical thinking

Reality is: they interact

1 and 2 are meaningless without understanding 3
Stage 1: Gathering information

- Traditional comprehension

- Detecting / understanding / being sensitive to:
  - main ideas / supporting ideas
  - inference degree of certainty
  - attitude tone emotion
  - purpose fact or opinion
  - [relationships between ideas]
  - [digressions, anecdotes and asides]
  - [good/bad presentation of statistics]

Stage 2: Analysing information

3 aspects:
- Relating to the text
- Questioning the context
- Questioning the text
Stage 2: Analysing information

- Relating to the text
  - ‘reaction’ questions
  - evaluating the ideas
  - forming initial opinions
  - effect on own prior opinions

Stage 2, cont: Analysing information

- Questioning the context
  - author affiliation / potential bias / ulterior motives / reason to influence
  - comparing with other texts
  - any important/obvious points not addressed?
  - ideas from others accurately represented?
Stage 2, cont: Analysing information

- Questioning the text
  - quality of support
    - fact/opinion logical/valid reasoning
    - references? assumptions?
  - conclusions drawn
    - appropriate from the evidence?
    - over-generalised?
    - only partially supported?

Stage 3: Critical expression

- Expressing critical thinking
  - genre
    - example essays
    - discussion scripts
  - lexical and/or functional approaches
    - useful chunks / functional language
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4 strategies (for now!)

1. Start from where the students are
2. Show them where they’re going
3. Habituate the questioning
4. Get students to do things with texts
1. Start from where the students are

Bringing up previous thoughts about the topic.

Situation: Feeling pressure to conform (before reading psychology text about conformity).

2. Think of a similar situation you have experienced. Discuss the questions in small groups. Try to use the key words.
   1. Describe the situation. What happened?
   2. Describe the pressures you felt. What were they? How strong did they feel?
   3. Did you try to resist the pressure? If so, how?
   4. What did you do in the end?
   5. How did you feel afterward?

Topic progression that moves students from the familiar to the more academic
2. Show them where they’re going

- Marking guides

- Examples (model essays, functional language, scripts)
2. Show them where they’re going

Examples:
functional language

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3. Habituate the questioning

- ‘reaction questions’

6. Work with a new partner. Discuss your reactions to the reading.

1. What new information did you learn from this text?
2. Which piece of information was most interesting to you? Why?
3. Where else might you read or hear about hypotheses, outside of biology lessons?
4. Get students to do things with texts

- Go beyond comprehension and inference
- Compare texts treating things from different angles
- Ask them to take on different roles and react to the text / they take different angles on the same text

Summary

- CT happens in everyday life
- There may be cultural differences in how and when/whether it is expressed
- Understanding **when and how CT is expressed** in the target culture will help learners
- Allowing **critical expression** to drive CT teaching has advantages
Continue the discussion at …

Pearson Tertiary Place website:

www.pearsonlongman.com/tertiaryplace

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Bibliography


