

Reading and Critical Thinking Skills in ELT Classes of Turkish Students

Hasan Bedir

ELT Department Cukurova University, Adana, Turkey

Abstract: Critical thinking provides correct thinking in order to make use of relevant and reliable knowledge about the world. We believe students should become aware of the importance of imagination, decision-making and other higher-order thinking skills which will help them become critical and creative employees. Thus, this study investigates whether or not ELT students could benefit from the critical reading course lasting one semester and improve some critical thinking skills. For this purpose, various lesson plans aiming to improve the critical reading strategies were prepared and implanted. During the implications of the lesson plans, using different data collection tools such as rubrics, interviews, observations, we obtained data taking one semester on a regular basis.

Key words: Critical Reading • Thinking Skill • Critical Thinking • ELT

INTRODUCTION

In preparing our students for life and for rapidly changing world, it is vital that we be aware of what society needs and what we are providing. It is clear that there is a shift from traditional schooling which aims to educate students for what society needs to a new system aiming to enable our students gain such thinking skills as interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating. In other words, we should help our students become critical thinkers who fulfill the societies' needs.

Thinking skills have become crucial for people from any level of society since they enable us to remain relevant and sophisticated in this fast-paced and competitive world. It has also increasingly been recognized that thinking skills be infused into education system everywhere in the world. Thus, schools have been reconstructing their existing curriculum and including new courses aiming to improve the higher order thinking skills of their students to meet the expectations of the society [1]. Educators have become aware that having students do whatever we want them seems to be unrealistic in having them gain thinking skills. Critical thinking (hence forth CT) provides correct thinking in order to make use of relevant and reliable knowledge about the world.

There has been an agreement among the educators that critical thinking skills (hence forth CTS) should not be separated from the courses but should be an indispensable part of education [2], [3]. However, the problem is how they can be infused into the educational curriculum. Yet, the matter of teaching critical thinking raises fundamental questions for educational design. Thus, it is vital that we, as educators not only be knowledgeable but also be trained about what CTS are and how they can be infused into the courses we are teaching. We should emphasize and teach critical thinking in order to prepare our students for any challenging situation. We should also develop and use performance based exams that test students' critical thinking skills. In addition, we should be patient since mastering any skill takes substantial time and effort.

As for the English Language Teaching students (ELT), the prospective language teachers who will be teaching English in different levels, they can sharpen their knowledge through good study habits which can guide them to practicing CTS, and which they will also transfer their experiences into their classrooms. ELT students should become aware of the importance of imagination, decision-making and other higher-order thinking skills which will help them become critical and creative employees who fulfill what our society needs.

It is superficial to assume that our students would be able to end up with better critical thinkers by teaching them the theory of critical thinking, hence we should offer courses in which students can actively do the thinking themselves [3]. CTS, however, cannot be reliably taught to students as they are ordinary skills. Students can be equipped with the information which might be sufficient, but it can be limited for most of the time in the real life situation if it is not modified with correct and appropriate knowledge [4].

It is suggested that thinking skills be presented in a six step systematic framework; (1) identify the content area in which the lesson will be taught; (2). identify the complex-level thinking strategies you wish to emphasize; (3) identify the teacher strategies you wish to emphasize; (4) identify the student behavior you wish to encourage in your students; (5) make commitment to an overreaching concept or idea for the lesson; (6) outline the progression of the lesson in detail [5].

Thus, keeping in mind the role of CTs in education and life, we aimed to infuse critical thinking skills into a course named “Advanced Reading and Writing” in English Language Teaching (ELT) Curriculum. Upon deciding the syllabus, we concerned two common facts; (1) before university they are not offered any course aiming to improve reading skills/strategies, (2) the education system depends on examinations which impair students’ thinking skills. This study, therefore, presents the results of whether or not ELT students could improve some CT skills through a critical reading course lasting one semester.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants of the Study: Twenty two freshmen university students attending the English Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Çukurova University participated in the study during 2010-11 Academic year. All of the participants, most of whom were female and whose ages ranged between 19-21 years of age had intensively studied English Language involving core language and four skills. They were used to be studying in traditional classroom setting in which the teacher acts as an authority figure; hence they did not appear to have acquired any thinking skill which could match CTS.

Design of the Study: Qualitative research methods and data collection techniques were used in the study since the aim was not to demonstrate the superiority of the students in the class where the above mentioned skills were the focus; rather it aimed to discover the behavioral changes of the students participated. Qualitative researchers “are likely to observe how people interact with each other; how certain kinds of questions are answered; the meanings that people give to certain words and actions; how people’s attitudes are translated into actions; how students seem to be affected by a teachers manner gestures, or comments and the like” [6].

Data Collection: Data were collected through the implementation of various critical reading lesson plans based on the idea that critical thinking skills can be improved in the courses where problem solving, deductive reasoning or showing evidence supporting conclusions activities are conducted. During the implications of the lesson plans, using different data collection tools such as rubrics, interviews, minute papers. We examined the extent to which students improved critical thinking skills such as “*exercising fairmindedness, exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts, developing confidence in reason, clarifying issues, conclusions, or beliefs, analyzing or evaluating arguments, clarifying and questioning beliefs, theories or perspectives, noting significant similarities and differences, examining and evaluating assumptions, distinguishing relevant from irrelevant facts and etc.*” [7].

RESULTS

Throughout one semester lasting for ten weeks, the students were provided totally about forty hours of critical reading activities through the similar lesson plans. During this period they were observed to be showing some CT dispositions such as *truth seeking, open-mindedness, systematicity, inquisitiveness, self-confidence and maturity* [8], [9]. Thus, the obtained data were analyzed in order to find out whether the behavioral changes of the students were matching any of the CT skills suggested by Foundation for Critical Thinking. The content analysis method was administered in order to analyze the data obtained through observation, rubrics, interview and assignments (task based, presentations and problem solving).

CT skills Observed

Thinking Independently: During the group and pair works, students were observed not to be accepting, what the writer of the text argued about. The semi formal interviews and group work rubrics revealed that the majority of the students were tending to make an association between all known relevant knowledge and their thought and behavior. They articulated that they became aware of that their own ideas on what they were reading.

Developing Intellectual Courage: The rubric used to assess their performance in group work and interview results indicated that the more knowledgeable they became the more self confidently they faced and dealt with beliefs or ideas. The majority of the students concerned about “When I was in high schools I was frightened to question some ideas since my teachers and parents were telling that they were dangerous.” But, now I know I have the courage to look into any ideas to admit the truth”

Clarifying and Analyzing the Meaning of Words or Phrases: When they were assigned to work in groups to compare and contrast arguments in the texts, the majority of the students were observed to be looking into clear, obvious examples of the terms and concepts. In addition, during interview, they commonly uttered; “I used to be referring dictionary when I had difficulty understanding words or concepts. It was often useless. Now, I am using the context and trying to exemplify the concept and making it clear”

Evaluating the Credibility of the Sources of Information: The students were observed to be questioning the evidence by looking for unbiased, reliable and accurate information. In interview sessions, the common idea was “When I was studying ‘finding and using necessary information,’ I realized that there were a lot of sources” Thus, I tried to improve my skills to decide on the reliability of the sources of information.”

Listening Critically: the Art of Silent Dialogue: The students practiced this CT skill when they were studying note taking while listening. They were observed to be attending the classroom with advanced reading and asking questions to orient themselves to the teacher. They were using such questions as “Could you please

make it clear or give an example.” They commonly said “I was used to sitting and listening to the teacher no matter what the subject was.” I was afraid of asking questions, I was not aware what question to ask”

Noting Significant Similarities and Differences, Distinguishing Relevant from Irrelevant Facts: When the students worked in groups on reading skills, including identifying the writer's argumentation(s) and responding to the evidence provided, they were observed to be aware of the what was more important and what was less important and similarities and differences between the texts they studied. They also seemed to be aware of how deeply they wanted to study the texts. “Previously, I was not able to distinguish facts and opinions and what is relevant and irrelevant in what I was reading, but I now become aware of what is more and less important.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was conducted whether ELT students could improve CT through a critical reading course. The results indicated that the course aiming to improve critical reading skills of the students so as to be better at professional and personal life did give some valuable information about the development of CT skills.

The majority of the students during the interviews articulated that they previously were not aware of critical thinking skills and were considering critical reading as “tearing down or finding fault” of what they read. They also articulated that they were previously simply reading and accepting the ideas without caring for the argument, evidence given and kind of evidence; yet they insisted that after the course they were looking into the argument from different perspective and analyzing the evidence.

Thus, the students were observed to be showing noteworthy CT dispositions such as *truth seeking, open-mindedness, systematicity, inquisitiveness, self-confidence and maturity*. The CT dispositions were then developed into CTS though students were still unaware of what CTS they were using. The usage of CTS such as *exercising fairmindedness, exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts, developing confidence in reason, clarifying issues, conclusions, or beliefs* were assumed to have been resulted from the implication of the lesson plans the objectives of which were based upon the development and practice of some certain CTS. The students reflected

in the post-lesson interview that they improved their confidence in articulating their personal views in English and they were able to apply relevant critical thinking skills to analyze what they were reading.

It is essential that we, as teachers, must recognize and believe the role of thinking skills in education and integrate them into our courses. In order to introduce, them no matter what course we are teaching, it is substantially important to implement appropriate teaching strategies to foster CTS. There does not seem to be certain methods or techniques which have been proved to be successful in teaching CTS. There have been a great number of materials on CT, which indicates that no one else has solved the problem either [10].

Recent studies have revealed that pure lecturing fail to teach how to gather, analyze, synthesize or assess information. "Students do not learn how to analyze the logic of questions and problems they face and hence, they cannot adjust their thinking to them" [10]. Instructional strategies such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning and other forms of active learning are substantially important to developing CTS [11].

Critical thinking requires hard work; many students would prefer that teachers just give them answer to complex questions [12]. Thus, we should persistently and patiently teach them CTS through which they can process the acquired information. To illustrate, teaching students just how to fish does not necessarily enable them to catch fish since if they do not become aware of "whether they are using the right type of bait, right rod and the appropriate strategies for the fish they want to catch, they may have to buy fish on their way home [13].

REFERENCES

1. Costa, A., 2001. *Developing minds* (3rd ed). U.S.A.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
2. Perkins, D.N., 1992. *Smart Schools: from training memories to educating minds*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
3. Paul, R. and L. Elder, 2001. *Critical Thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life*. Upper Saddle River: NJ: Prentice Hall.
4. Bearman, S., 2001. *Thinking in context: Teaching for Open-Mindedness and Critical Understanding*. In *Developing Minds*. Costa A. L. (3rd Edition). Virginia USA: SCD.
5. Udall, A.J. and J.E. Daniels, 1991. *Creating active thinkers: 9 strategies for a thoughtful classroom*. U.S.A.: Zephyr Press.
6. Fraenkel, J.R. and N.E. Wallen, 0000. *How to design and evaluate research in education* (6th Ed.). U.S.A.: McGraw-Hill.
7. Strategy List: 35 Dimensions of Critical Thought. The Critical Thinking Community: Foundation for Critical Thinking Retrieved April 10, 2006 from <http://www.criticalthinking.org/resources/k12/TRK12-strategy-list.cfm>.
8. Ellis, D., 2002. *Becoming a master student*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
9. Facione, P.A., 2000. The disposition toward critical thinking: Its character, measurement and relation to critical thinking skill. *Informal Logic*, 20(1): 61-84.
10. Walton, D., 2000. Problems and useful techniques in teaching argumentation, informal logic and critical thinking. *Informal Logic* 20, Teaching Supplement, 35-9.
11. Garside, C., 1996. Look Who's Talking: A comparison of lecture and group discussion teaching strategies in developing critical thinking skills. *Communication Education*, 45: 213-227.
12. Paul, R., 1995. *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*. Santa Rosa, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.
13. Nicolic, V. and H. Cabaj, 2000. *Am I teaching well? Self evaluation strategies for effective teachers*. Canada: Pippin Publishing.