



Improving critical thinking skills of English language learners in middle schools

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with critical thinking and its usage in English lessons. The author analyses the advantages of using critical thinking activities in FLT and also gives the ways of improving the critical thinking skills of the school students.

Keywords:

critical thinking, analyzing, learning foreign languages, thinking, critical thinking activities in English lessons.

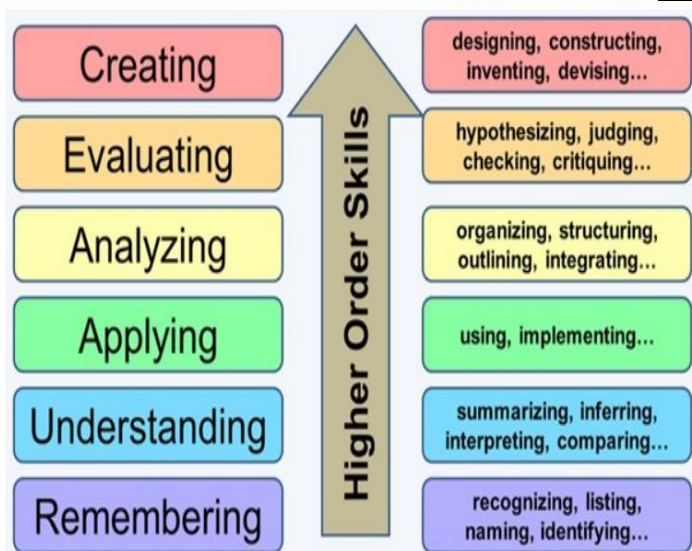
Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In the term *critical thinking*, the word *critical*, (Greek κριτικός = *kritikos* = "critic") derives from the word *critic* and implies a critique; it identifies the intellectual capacity and the means "of judging", "of judgment", "for judging", and of being "able to discern".¹The intellectual roots of critical thinking are as ancient as its etymology, traceable, ultimately, to the teaching practice and vision of Socrates^[15] 2,500 years ago who discovered by a method of probing questioning that people could not rationally justify their confident

claims to knowledge². Critical thinking skills are sometimes described as 'higher order' skills – that is, skills requiring ways of thinking that are deeper and more complex than the kind of 'everyday' thinking that we use to, say, cook a meal or learn our times tables. A framework that describes different levels of thinking can be helpful to start to understand the concept of critical thinking; one of the best-known of these is Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956) – an updated version of which is shown below³.

¹ Brown, Lesley. (ed.) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) p. 551.

² Moore, Brooke Noel and Parker, Richard. (2012) *Critical Thinking*. 10th ed. Published by McGraw-Hill. ISBN 0-07-803828-6.

³ <https://www.nuigalway.ie/academic-skills/criticalthinking/whatiscriticalthinking/>



There is no doubt that critical thinking is crucial in all fields. However, its role is significant in those disciplines where language is used to communicate ideas. When people are using language, they are not just putting together parts of speech but demonstrating their thinking. The potential foreign language learners exhibit to organize their ideas in a language that is not theirs implies using various critical thinking skills that teachers should benefit. Critical thinking skills can be influenced by a variety of variables. Among these are the types of assessments utilized in the classroom and at the end of the course. For various reasons, promoting critical thinking in FLT courses is extremely important. To begin with, language learners who can control their own thoughts can better monitor and evaluate their own learning methods. Second, critical thinking broadens learners' learning opportunities and makes language more meaningful to them. Learners can become proficient language users if they are motivated and taught how to demonstrate critical thinking in foreign language usage, which means that they must be motivated.

In order to improve critical thinking skills of the middle school students in English lesson we need a set of exercises and activities that designed for. English language instructors are educated to teach language skills, but they are not frequently taught how to teach the critical thinking abilities that help guide learning. Many curriculum requirements

include critical thinking abilities, yet some teachers may be confused how to teach them. "Learners will study a range of academic writing samples in order to understand the components, organization, and structure of academic writing texts," for example, may be the goal of an academic reading program. Although English language teachers may conceive of a variety of strategies to teach and promote reading as a skill, the first element of this objective—teaching learners to analyze—might be more challenging. Fortunately, critical thinking can be taught and learned. In our daily lives, we use many critical-thinking skills simultaneously—and not in any prescribed order.

Laurie Rozakis suggests the following ways you can use the lessons to help students become more effective thinkers⁴:

1. Read each activity aloud or have a child read it aloud to the rest of the group.
2. Allow children ample time to think and respond.
3. Ask students questions to assess their understanding of the problem.
4. Welcome different strategies for solving the problem. Encourage divergent thinking.
5. Observe children as they work in order monitor their problem-solving skills.
6. Give helpful hints to those children who are having difficulty finding ways to approach the problem.
7. Guide children to link the problem to others they have already solved.
8. Encourage children to check their work.
9. Help children explore their thinking and identify the strategies that worked—and those that didn't.
10. Invite students to share their results.

The reading part of the lesson is the best one that help the students not only reading skills but the critically thinking skills also improves. The reading process is interactive and inter textual, and it is a combination of traditional bottom-up and top-down strategies. We generally approach a text with a certain amount of background

⁴ Laurie Rozakis 81 Fresh & Fun Critical-Thinking Activities U.S.A. 1998 page 5.

knowledge, and our interest/motivation combined with reading strategies, help us with our comprehension. At the same time, vocabulary, grammar and syntax form an equally important part of our comprehension of a text, especially when we read in a foreign language. As our students improve their English and obtain more vocabulary, they will become better readers and will be able to combine different strategies. Here are some questions to help your students approach texts critically. You can select and adapt these questions for your students' language and reading levels. Remind your students that critical reading always has a purpose. They can start by asking why this author has written this text, did s/he simply want to entertain their readers? Does the author share their point of view from the perspective of a certain gender, social class or cultural group? Is the author trying to tell you something? Is the author trying to convince you of their values and opinions?

- Who wrote the text?
- When and where was it written?
- Why did the author write the text? If there is a narrator, what is his/her point of view?
- How do the time and place of the writing influence the views expressed in the texts? Are there any cultural, social or scientific assumptions in the texts?
- Can you evaluate the source? What points of view are presented in the text?
- Would the phenomena described in the text be approached in a similar or different way today?
- If it is a scientific text, is it well-researched? Are there reliable sources and references listed?
- If it is a news item (print or Internet), what is the source? How reliable is it? Is it a neutral website or group sharing the news?
- Is the information (historical, scientific, cultural) reliable? Even if it is a work of fiction, you can check if

the background information is well-researched.

- What is the author's / main character's / narrator's point of view? Is s/he critical of a phenomenon or event in the story? Here it is important to underline that in a scientific text or opinion essay you will read the author's perspectives, but in narrative fiction it might be a narrator's or character's experiences you are reading.

For example, when you are reading *Great Expectations* by Dickens, you are reading a love story, but you are also reading a social criticism of 19th century England. Similarly, when you are reading Jane Austen, you are learning about different social classes in a specific historical setting through a critical magnifying glass. Of course, you are also reading about the universal themes of love, family and friendship. Both authors represent a critical perspective on 19th century England. You can reflect on how these views have changed since the time of the novels. Remind your students that the author's voice is not the same as the narrative voice. There might be similarities between the opinions and values represented by an author and his/her narrator, but they need to be analyzed as different entities.

As a conclusion we can say that no of their level of language competence, English as a foreign language teachers are obligated to cultivate Critical Thinking abilities in their pupils, just as they are in any other sector. There are no obvious barriers for teachers in the English as a foreign language classroom to prevent their pupils from engaging in deep thought. In reality, studying a foreign language provides the ideal setting for the development of critical thinking abilities since it is at school that kids employ their full communication capacity to make sense of their thoughts. The importance of English as a foreign language teachers teaching Critical Thinking in their courses cannot be overstated. It is their obligation to provide their pupils with the skills they will need to face the challenges of the

employment market. Teachers must inspire pupils to maximize their potential and perform to their full ability. Teachers of English as a second language must seek out novel techniques to assist their students employ their Critical Thinking abilities as change agents. As a teacher and researcher, participating in this project was a lifetime learning experience that provided both personal and professional fulfillment.

References

1. Brown, Lesley. (ed.) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) p. 551.
2. Laurie Rozakis 81 Fresh & Fun Critical-Thinking Activities U.S.A. 1998 page 5.
3. Moore, Brooke Noel and Parker, Richard. (2012) *Critical Thinking*. 10th ed. Published by McGraw-Hill. ISBN 0-07-803828-6.
4. <https://www.nuigalway.ie/academicskills/criticalthinking/whatiscriticalthinking/>