

# Instructional Strategies for Developing Critical Thinking in EFL Classrooms

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## Abstract

In English as first language contexts, clear requirement for critical thinking (CT) has been listed in teaching guidelines and assessment criteria in higher education. At present, fostering language learners to be critical thinkers is valued in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching as well; yet how to achieve the objective remains a challenge. Efforts have been made to seek appropriate ways to develop CT in various courses; although no single method has emerged as the best, some do seem to be effective when properly implemented. This paper focuses on three sets of research-supported teaching strategies which are useful in promoting CT and applicable to EFL classrooms; that is, explicit instruction, teacher questioning, as well as active and cooperative learning strategies. Meanwhile, common features of effective CT instruction are discussed, which aims to illuminate instructional strategies for CT at a macro level.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, teaching strategies, English language teaching, direct instruction, interaction

## 1. Introduction

Recent trends in English as a foreign language (EFL) have highlighted the significance and necessity of developing critical thinking (CT) as an integral part of English language curriculum (Davidson & Dunham, 1997; Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Sun, 2015; Tang, 2016). In English language learning, students need CT skills to read beyond the literal, to write convincing essays, to express their ideas with adequate supporting evidence, and to challenge the others' position. As Kabilan (2000) argues, merely using the target language and knowing the meaning are not enough; proficient learners must be able to display CT through the language. Furthermore, CT tends to expand students' learning experience and makes language learning deeper and more meaningful.

Despite wide acknowledgement of the significance of fostering students to be critical thinkers, there has been debate concerning the teachability of CT in the EFL context. Atkinson (1997) especially expresses doubt about the feasibility of teaching CT to EFL learners; in his view, CT is a "social practice" (p. 72) inherent in Western culture and can only be acquired through an unconscious process of socialization during childhood. In a refutation of Atkinson's position, Davidson (1998) reasonably contends that even though CT is less practised in some cultures, it does not make a good reason for precluding CT to EFL learners; instead, "such cultural differences are a strong argument for its explicit introduction" (p. 122). Indeed, empirical studies (e.g. Davidson & Dunham, 1997; Liu & Guo, 2006) have indicated that with proper training and guidance, EFL learners can gain advancement in their ability to think critically. Rather than being a strong argument for rejecting CT instruction, Atkinson's (1997) skepticism about the teachability of CT may be seen as a caution about the difficulties of developing CT in EFL contexts or as a call for exploring more effective CT pedagogies. Prior to the discussion of the instructional strategies, a brief review of the prominent definitions of CT helps us gain insights into the important features of the key term.

## 2. Defining Critical Thinking

Although widely used, CT has been regarded as a concept difficult to define and specify with precision. From a cognitive psychological perspective, Sternberg (1986) explicates CT as "the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (p. 3). This psychological view of CT as a set of discrete skills is valuable in showing how critical thinkers can do or behave with personal

and situational constraints. However, it tends to oversimplify the complex concept of CT into a mere collection of cognitive skills or mental procedures.

Among the most prominent philosophical theorists in the field of CT, Robert Ennis has contributed mightily to the conceptualization of CT. To Ennis (1993), CT is “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 180). To elaborate what CT entails, he further proposes a comprehensive list of thirteen CT dispositions and a set of CT abilities (skills). Ennis (2011) especially asserts that it is not enough to just have the requisite CT skills to clarify, to judge well, and to infer wisely, an ideal critical thinker must also have the tendency to employ these skills willingly. The tradition of defining CT from the aspects of cognitive skills and affective dispositions can also be found in Mcpeck’s (1981) definition, which is “the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism” (p. 8). Distinct from other theorists’ stress on the aspects of logic or reasoning, Mcpeck puts emphasis on “reflective skepticism”, which means the judicious use of skepticism based on standards or norms. According to Paul (1989), any definition of a multifaceted concept like CT may have its limitations, and different definitions can be usefully applied in different situations. He thus chooses to retain a host of definitions rather than trying to obtain one particular definition of CT. Paul has expressed the meaning of CT in multiple ways, one of which is “critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it” (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 2). The comprehensiveness of Paul’s definition is viewed as a weakness by Thayer-Bacon (2000), who posits that “in trying to include so much in his definition of critical thinking, he [Paul] loses exactness and exclusivity” (p. 61).

The probably most-cited study by Facione (1990) presents a consensus definition of CT derived from a panel of 46 CT experts. The final consensus views CT as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based” (Facione, 1990, p. 2). Additionally, the consensus adds personal traits to its conceptualisation of CT by describing an ideal critical thinker; some of these dispositions are inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, flexibility, trust in reason, prudence in making judgment, honesty in facing personal bias, and clarity about issues. This definition reflects a comprehensive understanding of CT by bringing together both the cognitive and dispositional dimensions. For educational purposes, this broader view of CT is deemed to be appropriate, as it indicates that developing students’ CT means not only improving their cognitive CT skills, but also nurturing the dispositions to think critically. Likewise, effective CT instruction should attend to the dual aspects.

### **3. Instructional Strategies for CT**

#### *3.1 Explicit Instruction*

In the integration of CT into subject courses, two general pedagogical approaches are frequently discussed: explicit and implicit instruction. The explicit instruction, also named as the “infusion approach” by Ennis (1989), calls for direct teaching of CT principles, especially those related to the subject area. The implicit teaching, called by Ennis as the “immersion approach”, does not make CT instruction distinct. In other words, the explicit instruction aims to advance CT competence by making the expected CT skills and dispositions clear to students. In implicit CT instruction, however, although students might well be engaged in deep subject content learning, basic CT concepts are not introduced; it is expected that their CT can be developed as a natural consequence of the content learning.

To effectively incorporate CT in the rich context of specific courses, researchers (Halpern, 2007; Swartz, 2004) have strongly argued for the explicit teaching, as learning how to think critically “is not an automatic by-product of studying certain subjects” (Beyer, 1991, p. 274). Van Gelder (2005), for instance, shows resistance to the indirect approach; he argues that subject course instruction, even with implicit emphasis on critical thought or critical analysis, will not effectively prepare students to become excellent critical thinkers. Hence, he suggests that CT be practised deliberately and taught explicitly as an indispensable part of the curriculum.

Effectiveness of explicit CT instruction has also received empirical support. Based on a meta-analysis of over a hundred of empirical studies, Abrami et al. (2008) concluded that although the results were mixed, explicit teaching generally had larger effects on CT development, whereas the implicit instruction was least effective. Additional support for explicit instruction comes from a recent study by Bensley and Spero (2014), which revealed that in regular course instruction, direct teaching of specific CT skills (e.g., argument analysis and critical reading skills) significantly improved college students’ CT performance and metacognition.

Teaching CT overtly and explicitly is particularly necessary to students from non-western cultural background as they are found lack of experience and practice in CT (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). Explicit instruction in EFL classrooms requires that teachers must not only understand how CT relates to language learning, but also be able

to explain, model, and infuse the concept of CT into their lesson designs and classroom activities. In English reading instruction, for example, teachers can explicitly teach the following key CT skills related to reading through explaining, modeling, as well as student practicing. These skills involve (a) analytical skills (analysis): identifying main claims and supported reasons, identifying the writing techniques, and summarising the main idea; (b) inferential skills (inference and interpretation): making predictions, detecting the authors' purpose and tone, drawing logic conclusions, and interpreting figurative language; and (c) evaluative skills (evaluation and explanation), such as evaluating the accuracy and credibility of the claims, evidence, and sources, evaluating the logic strength of arguments, distinguishing facts from opinions, questioning the text, commenting on the author's use of language. Specific procedures for explicit teaching of these skills can follow the guidelines suggested by Beyer (2008), which consist of (a) detailed explanations and modeling of thinking skill procedures and rules; (b) explicit instruction on how and when to apply a thinking skill; (c) systematic skill practice for autonomous use; and (d) supportive feedback and continuing coaching. Meanwhile, explicit instruction should simultaneously attend to CT dispositions. With regard to English reading, for example, the desired CT dispositions may include such traits as being flexible in considering alternative views and explanations other than those given by the author, being open-minded and not allowing personal expectations or biases to interfere with text understanding, and habitually questioning and challenging the author/text. In explicit instruction, teachers can explain these dispositions or model how an ideal critical reader with these attributes may behave and think. It is essential that teachers explicitly communicate to students that these dispositions are highly valued and expected in English language learning.

### 3.2 Teacher Questioning

Questioning is an important way to stimulate students to think critically. Teachers' questions can be classified into two general categories: lower-level questions and higher-level questions. Lower-level questions, also known as factual or literal questions, call for recognition or recall of factual information previously presented by the teacher. Questions at the higher level, on the other hand, require students to manipulate previously learned information to create a response; these questions go beyond memory and factual information and require students' greater effort to infer, analyse, and evaluate. The level of student thinking generally relates to the level of questions that the teachers pose; if teachers systematically raise the level of their questions, students tend to raise the level of their responses correspondingly (Orlich et al., 2013).

In English language teaching, much-discussed are closed/open questions and display/referential questions. Closed questions often elicit one or a small number of possible responses, while open questions can have various responses as acceptable answers. For display questions, the teacher already knows the answers; on the contrary, referential questions seek new information from students and the teacher does not have the answers in mind (Wu, 1993). Studies (Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Wu, 1993) have indicated that language teachers in general tend to ask more lower-level closed/display questions which elicit restricted and less linguistically complex responses; on the other hand, the higher-level open/referential questions are less commonly used. While acknowledging the pedagogical values of lower-level questions, Tan (2007) posits that predominance of lower cognitive questions "places the students in a passive position by depriving them of opportunities to think independently and critically" (p. 100).

Another strategy to engage students in CT is asking follow-up probing questions, sometimes known as "Socratic questioning". In an ESL classroom, Wu (1993) found that probing was an effective questioning technique which elicited longer and more complex responses. The detailed list of probing questions presented by Paul and Elder (2006) can be applied to English language classrooms: questions for clarification (e.g., "Could you please explain further?"); questions about different viewpoints or perspectives (e.g., "What would someone who disagrees say?"); and questions to challenge or probe students' assumptions, reasons, evidence, implications, and purposes.

In addition to asking higher-level and probing questions, other questioning techniques are also considered effective in prompting students' CT. For instance, teachers should allow adequate wait-time for students to reflect and formulate reasoned responses (Orlich et al., 2013); this is particularly necessary when the questions posed are at a higher level and demanding for English language learners. In classroom practices, however, teachers tend to dominate the teacher-student interactions by rapid exchanges of questions and responses; this drill-like interaction is more likely to place students in passive roles and dampen their initiative and CT (Fisher, 2011). Moreover, language teachers should avoid answering their own questions after a short silence time, a common harmful teaching habit that shifts the work of thinking and learning away from learners.

In brief, posing higher-level questions and employing probing questioning techniques facilitate students to infer,

judge, evaluate, expand their ideas, and thus have great potential to stimulate CT. At the same time, to engage students in CT, teachers must have genuine interaction with students and provide them adequate time for reflection.

### 3.3 Active and Cooperative Learning Strategies

To help students develop in CT, researchers have suggested adopting active and cooperative learning which focuses on student participation, cooperation, and interaction. Active group interaction provides students chances to exchange ideas, take responsibilities, and become critical thinkers (Slavin, 2011). Some of the proposed strategies include role play/simulation, a group teaching technique in which students act out a real-life situation (Dennicka & Exley, 1998); group research projects, a method which involves investigation or surveys about a certain topic and the reporting of the findings in various ways (presentations, newspapers, plays, skits, debates) (Campbell, 2015; Slavin, 2011); and peer-critiquing/peer-evaluation (Fung, 2014). In particular, group discussion, debate, and peer-questioning are recommended as three basic yet potentially effective strategies that can be adopted in EFL classrooms.

#### 3.3.1 Group Discussion

As an alternative to traditional lecture method, *discussion* is “a teaching technique that involves an exchange of ideas, with active learning and participation by all concerned” (Orlich et al., 2013, p. 244). Group discussion has been regarded as an effective way to facilitate deep learning and CT development, because discussions require students to think through and clarify their ideas, and they also provide students with the perspectives and insights of others through exchanging ideas (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008). The experimental study of Garside (1996), however, did not reveal the advantage of the group discussion method over the lecture method on the development of CT skills among undergraduate students. Garside attributed this to students’ lack of prior training experience with group discussion techniques. This seems to indicate that merely placing students in groups and encouraging them to talk and discuss does not guarantee higher achievement in CT.

Effective group discussions depend on the provision of group goals to learn something, individual accountability, and student engagement. In order to promote CT and student involvement in EFL classrooms, it is crucial to instruct students the ground rules and skills for group discussion, such as listening attentively, responding appropriately, building on others’ ideas, inviting others to respond, asking clarifying questions, expressing agreement/disagreement with a position supported by adequate evidence, providing and requesting justification for assertions, challenging ideas but not people (Gunning, 2008). Meanwhile, to stimulate CT among English learners, the choice of appropriate discussion topics also counts. Teachers need to choose thought-provoking topics that are pertinent to students’ life experience and can hold their interests; cultural differences, controversial issues, current events, and moral dilemma may serve the purpose well.

#### 3.3.2 Debate

*Debate*, a formal discussion method, is espoused as another ideal teaching tool for developing CT. As a form of active learning, debate induces students to research a topic deeply, ask cogent questions, identify contradictions and errors, and formulate evidence-based arguments. The experimental study of Omelicheva and Avdeyeva (2008) demonstrated that the debate format, compared with lecture, better facilitated students’ higher-order cognitive skills of application and critical evaluation. In the same vein, Goodwin (2003) introduced debate in his communication class and students reported gains in developing divergent perspectives on course topics. Halvorsen (2005) recommends using debate activities in ESL/EFL courses; in his view, choosing controversial issues for students to debate can not only increase student participation and language use, but also facilitate CT development. The study by Rybold (2011), using a debate pedagogy in an EFL class in a Chinese university, further documented students’ progress both in oral English skills and in CT skills of analysis and evaluation.

Although widely recognised as a potentially valuable tool to stimulate CT, debate has its critics. Tumposky (2004), for instance, contends that debate may lead to dualism or merely reinforce preexisting opinions rather than promoting an objective analysis of all sides of an issue. To overcome the potential drawbacks, students can be assigned to defend a stance which is contrary to their existing views; or alternatively, students are required to defend a position in the in-class debate but defend an opposing position in a written assignment. In this way, students are encouraged to research and consider both sides of an issue. Another way to avoid dualism and broaden students’ perspectives is conducting a whole-class discussion after each debate. In the post-debate discussion, students are allowed to comment on each team’s arguments and share their divergent views on an issue. As a typical debate presents only two views (“for” or “against”), other forms of debate can be employed as well. For instance, *four-corner debate* where students may choose one of the four positions (“strong agree”, “agree”, “disagree”, or “strong disagree”) on a topic to argue; and *role-play debate*, a format in which students

are assigned to take on different roles and argue on behalf of several perspectives of an issue (Kennedy, 2007).

### 3.3.3 Reciprocal Peer Questioning

*Reciprocal peer questioning* is recommended as a useful strategy for promoting CT and critical reading skills. In reciprocal peer questioning, students work in pairs or small groups, taking turns to pose their prepared questions and answer each other's questions. Questioning and sharing responses in small groups could help students improve critical analysis and understanding of texts (Simpson, 1996). The experimental study by King (1992) found that students in peer questioning groups asked more CT (vs. recall) questions, produced higher-level elaborated explanations and greater learning achievement than students using questions individually or engaging in group discussions without such question prompts.

As asking and answering questions is a demanding task for many English language learners, teachers have to explicitly instruct students to do so at the initial stage of reciprocal peer questioning (Berkeley & Barber, 2015). To help students generate higher-level questions, teachers can explain typical question types and model the self-questioning process in English reading by thinking-aloud. Another helpful way is providing students with generic question stems as prompts. For example, a question stem such as "How does...affect...?" calls for the skill of analysis of relationship among ideas (cause-and-effect); the question "What would happen if..." requires making predictions; "Do you agree or disagree with this statement: ...? Support your answer." prompts responders to evaluate and provide evidence (King, 1995). It is expected that as they regularly and frequently pose and answer questions of others and their own, students develop their skills and habit of questioning and begin to become critical thinkers.

Overall, the aforementioned strategies (i.e., group discussion, debate, and reciprocal questioning) can be used as effective ways to enhance students' CT in EFL classes. The point is that teachers provide appropriate guidance and adequate chances for students to interact with each other and share different ideas.

## 4. Common Features of Effective CT Instruction

Without focusing on any specific teaching strategies, some researchers seek to explore the common features of teaching strategies or classroom practices that are found to be effective in prompting CT. The study by Smith (1977) reveals three instructor-influenced factors which correlate positively to college students' improved CT score: (a) instructors' praise, encouragement or use of student ideas; (b) the amount of interaction among students; and (c) the amount and cognitive level of student participation. In explaining what is involved in effective CT instruction, Bailin et al. (1999) present three elements: (a) engaging students in tasks or activities that require the skills of judgment or assessment; (b) helping students develop intellectual resources (e.g., knowledge of CT principles, dispositions or habits of minds to use CT skills) for dealing with these tasks; and (c) providing a favorable environment where critical enquiry is valued and students are encouraged to think critically. A more recent study by Mathews and Lowe (2011) further summarise the characteristics of effective CT instruction, which includes introducing CT skills related to content domain, providing ample opportunities to practise the skills, inclusion of students in classroom decision-making, and creating an emotionally safe learning environment.

As most CT instruction gives more priority to the "cognitive skill" perspective of CT, it is worth noting that the above studies also accentuate the importance of establishing an encouraging learning environment where CT is encouraged, expected, and valued. The affective or dispositional dimension of CT is hence highlighted. Tishman et al. (1993) particularly advocate for creating a culture of CT in the classroom. They argue that explicit instruction may be helpful in teaching cognitive CT skills, but not well-equipped to teach for inclination or commitment to CT; to develop CT dispositions, "teachers must not only transmit, but inspire, move, convince, engage, enthrall" (Tishman et al., 1993, p. 149). Therefore, it is vital that teachers create a classroom environment where students are encouraged to probe assumptions, ask important questions, and evaluate reasons through teacher-student and student-student interactions. To construct a classroom culture for CT, teachers themselves can act as role-models or create conditions in which different perspectives are expressed and confronted with each other. Teachers' feedback and their attitude toward the critical features of students' work impact students' development in CT attitudes and CT skills. Bailin et al. (1999) posit that teachers who provide criticism rather than praise and corrective advice, who shake students' confidence in the value of new ideas, inhabit CT.

To sum up, common features of effective CT instruction generally involve direct instruction, frequent practice, intense student interaction, and a supportive CT classroom climate. In essence, these characteristics are broadly in line with the specific teaching strategies discussed in the above section. They may serve as general guidelines for employing various strategies to develop CT in EFL classrooms.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the proposed instructional strategies for CT are theoretically sound and research-based, no specific method seems to be the best. In designing CT activities in the classroom, teachers need flexibility and creativity; they may use and combine various strategies in a new way or develop alternative methods appropriate to their own classes. Effective CT instruction in EFL classrooms depends on teachers' deliberate and persistent efforts.

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