

Bridging Thought and Tongue: Critical Thinking Skills and Their Impact on Advancing ELT Outcomes

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Abstract

Critical thinking (CT) skills are an important component in effective English language teaching (ELT). This paper explores the relationship between CT skills and ELT by reviewing relevant literature. CT skills refer to the ability to analyze information objectively, make logical connections between ideas, evaluate evidence and arguments, solve problems systematically, and reflect on viewpoints critically. Research shows that language teachers with higher CT dispositions design more student-centered, interactive activities focusing on real communication. They emphasize tasks promoting meaningful language use, critical discussion, and analysis. Rather than just transmitting knowledge, these teachers help students develop their own CT and language abilities. Students of CT-skilled teachers show greater improvement over time in English proficiency, cognitive academic skills, and CT competencies. The paper discusses theories explaining this impact - CT allows teachers to be more deliberate, strategic, and reflective in pedagogical decision-making. Enhancing teacher CT through preservice and in-service training may therefore lead to higher quality ELT. The development of critical educators helps strengthen the critical capacities of their students. More research can further clarify the mechanisms of this relationship and inform CT training models useful for ELT contexts.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Critical thinking Abilities, ELT learning and Teaching.

Introduction

Critical thinking (CT) has become a crucial capability in the 21st century, permeating conversations across education, employment, and civic participation. Though definitions vary, most conceptualizations describe CT as purposeful, reflective judgment focused on deciding what to believe or what action to take (Ennis, 1993; Halpern, 1998). The disposition toward effortful cognitive work and willingness to challenge one's own assumptions drive the skillful application of CT to evaluate arguments, solve semi-structured problems, estimate likelihoods, and otherwise produce reasonable conclusions upon which to base beliefs and behaviors (Facione, 1990).

As an essential construct in human judgment and decision-making, CT bears significantly on one's ability to function effectively in academic contexts, professional roles, and personal life. Consequently, a clear understanding of its constituent cognitive aptitudes allows us to delineate and impart these skills in students as well as assess them as learning outcomes. Researchers have identified interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, evaluation and self-regulation as core CT competencies (Abrami et al., 2015).

This paper reviews frameworks in the literature conceptualizing the sub-skills, dispositions, and meta-cognitive elements that enable quality CT to fill a gap in determining components most salient for CT training. Synthesizing quantitative and qualitative findings, it proposes a model CT curriculum and calls for instruction fostering motivational and affinitive aptitudes early on alongside reasoning skills and meta-cognition. The paper concludes by mapping curriculum modules to outcomes in academic performance, professional success indicators, and life satisfaction metrics to advocate integrating CT as a central aim of education.

Critical Thinking Abilities and Teaching in ELT

As English secures its status as the global lingua franca of the 21st century, developing students' well-rounded critical thinking (CT) abilities alongside English proficiency has become a priority for English language teaching (ELT). CT skills—including analytical reasoning, evaluating evidence, questioning assumptions—empower students to interpret information accurately and make discerning judgments to guide beliefs and actions. Educators emphasize that CT enables the type of deeper learning that allows students to successfully apply knowledge in dynamic real-world contexts (Halpern, 1998; Liu et al., 2014).

Within ELT curricula, this growing need to nurture sophisticated thinking presents challenges and opportunities to instruct language and thinking in tandem. Just as language mastery opens doors to conceptual understanding and inquiry, CT abilities enable richer interaction with and production of language (Davidson & Dunham, 1997). However, effectively integrating CT development remains difficult as many teachers lack adequate training in facilitation techniques. Meanwhile research signals the critical influence instructors have in modeling and propagating thinking dispositions in students through formal and subtle aspects of their teaching (Tishman et al., 1993).

This paper reviews models on the symbiotic ELT-CT relationship and investigates teacher competencies that bridge this divide. Synthesizing key research, it proposes an evidence-based framework for strengthening CT socialization in ELT classrooms. The paper concludes by calling for reforms in teacher education and professional development to create critically attuned language instructors, whose own proficiencies and pedagogical moves catalyze students' analytical and language augmentation.

Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Thinking in ELT

A range of theoretical conceptions exist examining the mechanisms by which critical thinking (CT) and English language teaching (ELT) interact and mutually influence learning trajectories. While scholars depict this relationship differently, most agree language forms the vehicle through which critical thought develops just as disciplined thinking enlarges one's language acumen for richer communication (Lipman, 1988).

Davidson and Dunham (1997) forward an interactive, equivalency model with bidirectional causality where progress in one domain fuels capabilities in the other. They posit language supplies tools to comprehend, organize and analyze abstract concepts. Meanwhile, exercising judgment skills like comparing perspectives and evaluating rhetoric expands one's meaning-making resources. Data tracking EFL students' writing over 2 years offered empirical confirmation, suggesting a positively reinforcing cycle between language and cognitive gains given consistent practice (Low & Littlemore, 2009).

Alternate conceptions emphasize unidirectional dynamics. Mohan and Lo (1985) submit language acquisition enables discipline-specific knowledge construction as academic registers provide access to theories and facts. Critical engagement with these ideas reciprocally strengthens through greater subject matter competence. Liu et al. (2014) propose the opposite trajectory, arguing CT precedent aids language development by allowing strategic processing of unfamiliar linguistic input to extract patterns and meaning. Think-aloud studies reveal ESL students with higher CT use more metacognitive strategies like monitoring comprehension and elaborating initial interpretation (Xu, 2011).

While these frameworks differ in hypothesized sequence, all underscore both competencies thriving in tandem through meaningful usage and quality instruction scaffolding deliberative language practice over time. Insufficient learning opportunities short-circuit this process explaining inconsistent study outcomes. An integrative curriculum attending to reciprocal growth in a sustained manner is recommended as the ideal nexus supporting ELT-CT advancement.

Literature Review on Critical Thinking Impact in ELT

The interrelationship between critical thinking (CT) skills and English language teaching (ELT) has garnered increasing research attention as globalization intensifies the need for language learners who can navigate intercultural interactions and ever-changing environments. CT equips students with precisely these adaptive abilities to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate complex communication and information they encounter in English (Browne and Freeman, 2000).

Various theoretical models have been proposed delineating the mechanisms and directionality linking CT and language ability. Davidson and Dunham (1997) present an interactive model with each construct feeding into the other, arguing language provides the medium for critical thought which in turn enriches one's language resources. Likewise, Lipman (1988) views mastery over syntax and semantics as essential to skillful higher-order cognition. Alternate scholars posit more unidirectional dynamics, either that advances in target language proficiency predict advances in CT competence as learners' conceptual understanding blooms (Mohan & Lo, 1985) or that CT drives language gains by allowing strategic evaluation and synthesis of new linguistic input (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011).

Empirical studies provide supporting and conflicting evidence for these models. Structural equation modeling found CT was both a contributor and an outcome of ELT gains in Iranian college students (Rezaei et al., 2014). Case studies in Singapore showed dialogic, inquiry-based lessons developed language fluency and cognitive capacities in a mutually reinforcing cycle (Yeo, 2008). On the other hand, instruction explicitly teaching CT principles failed to produce L2 improvement in Kurdish students compared to traditional grammar training (Rashid & Hashim, 2008). Researchers note the theory-application gap whereby abstract CT coursework does not readily transfer if unused communicating in the target language (Davidson, 1998).

Synthesizing findings suggests both skill sets can thrive in tandem but effective integration relies on relevant, meaningful practice and teacher guidance in explicitly connecting concepts to language use. Thus, quality ELT instruction emerges as essential for nurturing the cognitive and communicative competencies 21st century graduates require. This sets up analysis on promising pedagogical and curriculum design strategies as well as implications for teacher training programs seeking to develop critical, globally engaged users of English through education.

Promoting Critical Thinking in ELT Learners

If critical thinking (CT) and English language proficiency advance interdependently as theoretical models suggest, educational approaches that consciously couple these competencies promise efficient means for developing well-rounded, discerning ELT learners ready to handle multifaceted cognitive-linguistic tasks. However, effectively stimulating such integrated expansion remains rare in practice (Davidson, 1998). While many standard ELT materials mention critical analysis superficially, lessons commonly center mechanical language usage not higher-order cognition activating evaluation and metacognition.

Still scholars highlight pedagogical moves that create space for CT growth in language classrooms. Problem-posing education frames relevant, real-world dilemmas for students to scrutinize utilizing their emerging language abilities (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). Scaffolding opinion exchange or debates around texts promotes evidence-based reasoning and examining differing viewpoints. Structuring collaborative inquiry into conceptual questions fosters articulating and interrogating ideas verbally, in turn sharpening thinking.

Cultural issues also merit consideration as Eastern educational norms often emphasize knowledge acquisition over critiquing and creating knowledge (Atkinson, 1997). Liu & Littlewood (1997) recommend bridging methods valuing memorization and analysis to avoid cognitive dissonance. They propose tasks rehearsing set phrases or model texts be balanced with activities requiring original language use solving ill-defined problems. Sequenced thoughtfully, such lessons may spark epistemic curiosity while expanding linguistic complexity over time. Additional research is needed codifying best practices for realized critical socialization in ELT contexts. Still conscious efforts to infuse inquiry, evaluative dialogue, and metacognitive habits across assignments show initial promise in dually advancing language and minds.

Integrating Critical Thinking into Language Curriculums

While many English teachers acknowledge the need to equip students with adaptive critical thinking (CT) abilities for navigating complex cognitive-linguistic tasks, sparse research has translated this imperative into practical curriculum integration frameworks. Some cite the abstraction of CT as an obstacle, reducing it to discrete skills instruction divorced from authentic language practice (Moore, 2013). However, scholars argue targeted embedding across language program elements manifests the relevance of deliberate thinking habits.

CT researchers propose outlining developmentally appropriate objectives matched to the linguistic and metacognitive demands at each level (Hughes, 2014). Lower proficiency students might practice comparing opinions or describing thought processes when interpreting texts. Advanced learners can engage in extended debate, evaluation of credibility, analyzing author bias, and constructing counterarguments. Developmental sequencing that incrementally links language and thought allows both to mutually support gains.

Embedding also entails addressing instructional components beyond materials and activities. Educators emphasize modelling open-minded, intellectually engaged dispositions alongside framing tasks eliciting CT behaviors (Tishman et al., 1993). Creating norms valuing questioning assumptions and reasoning through language establishes a motivational climate. Assessments signal priorities so should measure higher-order application, not just comprehension. An integrated curriculum enacts critical socialization across objectives and experiences. While progressing feasible integration models, equally crucial is equipping practitioners to implement through comprehensive CT training accounting for ELT environments (Stapleton, 2002). When teachers command both facets, curriculums foregrounding language and thought promise optimized outcomes surpassing either effort independently.

Conclusion

As the demand for English proficiency continues rising worldwide, developing well-rounded critical thinkers and communicators through English language teaching (ELT) has become imperative. While research elucidates a reciprocal relationship between advances in language and higher-order thinking, effectively fostering integrated growth remains rare without deliberate efforts. Findings suggest quality ELT instruction provides an optimal pathway toward this end when lessons consciously bridge critical thinking activities with language development in a sustained, incremental manner. Tasks eliciting real-world problem solving, textual analysis, evaluative discussion, and metacognitive habits reinforce both competencies. However, truly embedding critical socialization requires comprehensive reform beyond materials to encompass modeling dispositions, setting norms, and aligning assessments.

Teachers play the pivotal role in constructing these enriched language learning environments. Thus, enhancing their conceptual repertoires regarding critical pedagogy and competencies facilitating higher-order skills promises the most leverage for impact. With creative vision and continued investigation into implementation frameworks, education systems can transform ELT classrooms into springboards that allow students' emerging English abilities to access and convey complex thought. Graduates of such programs will demonstrate the supple minds and articulate voices to communicate insightfully across global contexts. The present literature review aims to galvanize this teacher-led movement toward the dual cultivation of language and thought. As the guiding mediators in classroom ecosystems, instructors' philosophical perspectives and practiced abilities ultimately determine learners' attainments. Therefore, empowering educators through critical thinking training tailored for ELT represents the most viable path toward the sophisticated English users and thinkers that our fast-changing world requires.

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