

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

***What Critical Thinking for What Purpose?
Some Reflections on Criticality in Academic
English Contexts***

BENSEMMANE Faiza
University d'Alger 2

Abstract

This article is an attempt to explore the question of what type of criticality is needed in academic English contexts at university. We shall first examine a number of definitions and approaches to critical thinking, and discuss how this concept is framed into the curriculum. Then we shall look at how critical thinking is taught in English language classrooms at university and lastly, how Critical Pedagogy can address issues of critical thinking and respond to current educational challenges.

Definitions and approaches to critical thinking

Critical thinking is a key component in academic English curricula in the world, and Algeria is no exception. This concept is not easy to define or to present to students with a certain degree of certitude and predictability because it is rather elusive and may be understood in different ways from a high degree of precision to a high degree of confusion. As a result, every teacher's conceptualisations of critical thinking might translate differently in English teaching practices.

Initially concerned with first language education, the concept of critical thinking was soon embraced by

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

second /foreign language educators in the 1990's and criticality is now being taught and researched at all levels of education as a "valued educational goal" (Burbules & Burk 1999). In higher education, critical thinking is a major "graduate attribute" (Barrie & Poster 2004), and is included in all graduate programmes and beyond (Dooley 2010). The literature on critical thinking identifies three main approaches (Moore 2017): the "skills approach", the "ethics approach" and the "language of evaluation approach".

1. The "skills approach"

This approach is related to analytical philosophy and logic. Ennis (1987:10) provided an influential definition of critical thinking and viewed it as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do". This includes the ability to judge ambiguity in reasoning, contradiction between two statements, specificity in a statement, a conclusion following necessarily, etc. These are the basic acts of judgments that teachers generally use to assess the quality of evidence adduced by the student (writer) to support a claim. These skills are often described as general, universal and applicable to all disciplines (Norris 1992). More recently, Moore (2017:21) regarded the attributes of critical thinking as "a finite set of cognitive operations (...) that can be taught as an object of study in their own right".

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

As far back as 1909, John Dewey, the American educational reformer, was already concerned with CT that he termed “reflective thinking” and defined as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends”(p.9). This definition contains all the ingredients of critical thinking described above, in that judgments should be made carefully, after a deep consideration of all the issues involved. Thus, critical thinking is an attitude towards one’s thinking. But it is also an evaluation of the claims and beliefs through an examination of the grounds on which these claims and beliefs are based. All types of knowledge claims should not be accepted blindly and a critical thinker should be able to and willing to challenge those claims not properly supported by verifiable evidence.

According to McPeck (1981:7), critical thinking is the” appropriate use of reflective scepticism within the problem under consideration”. Critical thinkers need to defend themselves and question themselves, their peers, teachers, experts and authoritative scholars (Gieve 1998).

2. The ethics approach

This approach is also based on a critical paradigm but that of Critical Theory (Habermas 1984) and Critical Pedagogy (Freire 1970, Giroux 1988). In an ethics-based approach, students are involved in a critical analysis of

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

society, its structure and practices, and particularly those features that reflect or enact social injustice and oppression. The aim is not only to understand and interpret the world, but to promote a fairer, more rational and more civilized society to change the world and to transform learning and society (Barnett 1997, Benesch 1993). Then developing critical thinking skills implies developing cognitive skills for “vocational” or “technical” purposes (Paul 1984), and skills that have an “emancipatory” or liberatory function so that people can “free themselves from the self-serving manipulations of their own leaders” (Paul 1984:5).

The ethics approach to critical thinking came to criticize and scrutinize the so-called “pragmatic” approach characterized by a rigid application of the “standards, conventions and discourse practices” of the academia (Pennycook 1997). This approach encourages the move from a “needs analysis approach” to a “rights analysis approach” (Benesch 2001) in which students and teachers consider “options” rather than “prescriptions”. Students and teachers may challenge the prescriptions by developing a critical voice towards curriculum contents and themes/topics and urge for curricula that draw on their own experiences and connect more to their own lives. Through this approach, it is a “critical consciousness” in the Marxist sense that is being developed. This approach is often regarded as radical or “activist critical action”

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

3. The language of evaluation approach

This is a linguistic approach which focuses on the linguistic means by which judgments are enacted in texts. For example, the authorial voice or stance of the writer as expressed through some verbs, more neutral or more evaluative than others (like “to state” which is more neutral than “to claim”). Academic discourse is thus explored in this approach to raise students’ awareness and enable them to become critical participants in their studies. By “making the implicit in discourse explicit”, one can “enable critical awareness and critical participation” (Hood 2004:244). Thus, students can “position themselves evaluatively” in their texts (ibid.).

4. How is critical thinking framed into a language curriculum?

These three approaches to critical thinking can provide a challenge to teachers about how to integrate it into a curriculum. As Moore (2017:25) underscores, there is “uncertainty about what it means, and what and how it should be taught”. If critical thinking is learned intuitively and is easy for academics to recognize, it is not easily defined and not simple to explain to students (Fox 1994). Fairclough (1989) suggests that a three-level cycle should be followed to develop critical thinking in second/foreign language learners:

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

- i- Reflecting on experience: students reflect on their own experience using language skills in a second/foreign language
- ii- Systematizing experience: teachers help students to express these reflections in a systematic way
- iii-Explanation: students' expressions lead to further reflections and analysis by the whole class, seeking social explanation

This cycle of three levels is meant to enhance students' critical awareness in a second/foreign language. But it is also important that teachers understand the curriculum discourse and move from a micro-technical level of understanding curriculum to a macro socio-political level that closely links the content taught to students with their realities (Giroux 1988). At this point, McLaren (2003) distinction between productive knowledge and directive knowledge is worth examining. According to him, productive knowledge is knowledge that is necessary to meet micro-objectives and students' mastery of uncontextualized information, while directive knowledge is needed to meet macro-objectives that interrogate political and economic contexts, and examine them critically. For this purpose, Critical Discourse Analysis is a helpful tool which can be used to uncover and avoid "the epistemological trap set by the positivists" (Harb 2017:59).

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

Back in the 1980's, Giroux (1988) called for a criticality that emphasizes a “language of possibility” which requires someone to do something, seeking reasons or seeking social justice. The critical educator should not only use a “language of critique”, but also a “ language of possibility” in order to “raise ambitions, desires and real hope for those who wish to take seriously the issue of educational struggle and social justice”(p.177).

5. How is critical thinking implemented at university?

Critical thinking is an interesting concept for university foreign language instruction. Teachers of diverse disciplines can give it form and meaning, depending on the subject matter they teach. From informal discussions with twelve teachers in the English department on what approach to critical thinking they prefer to teach, it appeared that the skills- approach is preferred because of its strong rational basis, and its “neutral” nature. It is true that this approach to critical thinking teaches students to think rationally, to be discerning and to formulate substantive judgements in their area of study. Being critical is having a good deal of background knowledge relevant to the task that students are to produce, like essay writing, and obviously, doing adequate reading, (not just a single chapter or one article) to do the task. Students can then demonstrate their criticality when they are in a position to evaluate their own answer after having read alternatives. The teachers insisted that being aware and critical of previous readings will allow

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

students to bring in theoretical sources from outside the text to bear. The role of background knowledge in critical practice has been well supported by studies on Schema Theory in the 1980's (eg: Glaser 1984) as familiarity and engagement with content are likely to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills. All the teachers agreed that critical thinking skills cannot be developed independently of the content to which they are applied because thinking critically is always "thinking about something", i.e. some specific disciplinary content. For instance, the teachers of literature and civilisation courses remarked that critical thinking should relate to the content of the programmes (topics, issues, components, etc) and were quite sceptical or critical about the student's learning of critical thinking in the methodology/study skills courses of the English degree curriculum, arguing that critical thinking can only develop successfully when students are reflecting actively and engaged with the relevant material of content courses (eg.,: literature, linguistics, civilization, media studies, etc) and not reflecting in some experiential way on other types of materials and situations with which they are generally presented in methodology/study skills courses.

It is true that if students are taught general critical skills as part of a methodology/study skills course (eg.,: critical reading, critical academic writing), how far can we expect that these critical skills will be applied or

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

transferred to specific situations in discipline-based courses? This question was raised by some scholars (eg: McPeck 1992, Davies 2006, Wingate 2006, Moore 2017) who questioned this approach founded on a “putative efficiency principle” (Moore 2017:31): students can be taught general critical skills within standardized courses and be expected to apply them readily to specific situations (Davies 2006). Such study skills courses are said to have limited value. These scholars advocated discipline-based critical thinking skills embedded and task-focused in a clearly delineated disciplinary content (Wingate 2006). As the proponents of Content-Based Instruction (Beretter& Scardamalia 1993, Grabe &Stoller 1997, Brinton et al 2003) rightly argued, the development of complex skills requires an initial foundation of knowledge.

For few teachers of the department, their understanding of this concept seems to embrace the ethics approach. They generally opt for a less evaluative and more interpretive form of criticality, and their aim is to produce a socially aware critical student through dialogue in which thinking from the perspective of others is dominant. These teachers are usually interested in minority languages and cultures, minority writers whose voices are often silenced and cannot speak for themselves. Such social and cultural factors which intervene in critical thinking are emphasized in Critical Pedagogy. From this perspective, to think critically is to

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

react not only against false beliefs but also against those implicated in the preservation of an unjust status quo. The critical person (student or teacher) must feel empowered to seek justice and emancipation and change the status quo in a collective action (see Freire's "critical consciousness").

But is this type of criticality embraced and/or encouraged by teachers? Do they all wish to make their students critical persons and empower them in this way? For the critical pedagogues, criticality requires reflection and action, what Freire (1970a) calls "praxis", through both interpretation and change. He wrote that "critical consciousness is brought about not only through intellectual effort alone, but through *praxis*-through the authentic union of action and reflection" (p. 48; italics in original). The transformation of the individual (student) is viewed as an inseparable part of the pedagogical act, not as an additional act. Some teachers are reluctant to teach critical thinking within the framework of politics and ideology, even if, as Kaplan (1994:217) claims, critical thinking should include "the ability to decode the political nature of events and institutions" or "the ability to envision alternative events and institutions" (op.cit:217).

As for the third type of approach to critical thinking, the "language of evaluation approach", a small number of teachers only seem to be keen on using discourse analysis, and to focus on how lexical and grammatical

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

resources are used for specific evaluative purposes within social interactions.

6. How can Critical Pedagogy respond to the current educational challenges?

Critical thinking that aims at questioning the authority of teachers and experts does not seem to appeal much to either teachers or students, as the “critical spirit” is being largely developed through the teaching of epistemological rigour. But is this sufficient to develop critical thinking? For the critical pedagogues, individual criticality is intimately linked to social criticality. Teaching critical thinking is teaching “the conditions for social, and hence, self-emancipation “, as Giroux (1988:110) put it. Some teachers consider critical thinking that focuses on ideological discourse as a form of “indoctrination” and would prefer using more “neutral” critical positions in order to avoid being “politically incorrect” or being bounded by particular political positions. But this does not imply that they are encouraging passivity, stagnation or conservatism. Burbules & Burk(1999:21) remarked that “criticality as a practice (...) is a way of being as well as a way of thinking, a relation to others as well as an intellectual capacity”. It is accepting that one is fallible and can be wrong, and also that one can move “against the grain of convention” and think differently. But, as these scholars rightly noted, “some people possess this virtue and others

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

do not”, and “some circumstances and relations encourage the exercise of such virtues and others do not”. Then , how to “unravel these mysteries”?

A Critical Pedagogy approach to critical thinking will involve the student into looking into the social context, what inhibits or suppresses critical thought and how to learn to think critically individually and collectively. For instance, classroom activities such as the debate involving controversy and conflict on agreeing or disagreeing, or seeking to reach an argument, can be an opportunity to think in new ways, and get new insights from the interaction with challenging alternative views(Burbules 1993, cited in Burbules & Burk 1999). Johnson et al (1986:199) write that “controversy among students is a moment of truth, a test of the health of the relationships among group members”. This expression of adverse opinion that collides among students is inevitable in the classroom and has a constructive impact in learning situations. Academic conflicts can generate new ideas as well as deeply challenging alternatives, and neither teachers nor students would benefit from its absence.

Thus, critical thinking that is embedded in Critical Pedagogy can help students to identify the obstacles that inhibit critical thought, and such obstacles are often not visible. Collective questioning may be beneficial to uncover them as the relations to others can influence the individual and produce new insights and new

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

understandings. Teachers should then be supportive of the possibility of thinking together and thinking otherwise, and should provide the “educational conditions” for the development of criticality in the classroom. Critical thinking is thus essential to “read the world” and “read the word”(Freire 1998, Freire & Macedo 1987), to decode the “texts” which are the images of their own concrete, situated experiences with the world. In “reading the world”, both teachers and students engage in reflection and action (or “praxis”) in order to understand, and where necessary, to change the world (Freire 1970 b). In the classroom, both teachers and students can see how individual stories are connected to larger patterns of domination and resistance in globalized societies, how they are reproducing the western consumer culture of individualistic consumption which leads to social injustice, the hegemonic power of money, the promotion of an expanding consumer economy, the degradation of the environment, the depletion and waste of natural resources, pollution, overpopulation, migration, and all that relates to social injustice (Bowers 2001).

Gruenewald (2003:3) proposes a “Critical Pedagogy of place” which lays emphasis on “the relationship between the kind of education we pursue and the kind of places [we] inhabit and leave behind for future generations”. In our educational institutions, including universities, conventional education does not seem to integrate “place-

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

based pedagogies” which privilege an education which can have some bearing on the well-being of the individuals in the social and ecological places they actually live in. The current educational reforms are still putting an increased emphasis on standards and examinations or tests, and classroom pedagogies that “teach to the test”, providing few or no opportunities for students and teachers to experience critical education or “place-based education”. Hence, “place” becomes a critical construct that focuses attention on the analysis of how economic and political decisions impact particular places (Berry 1992, Orr 1992, Haas & Nachtigal 1998, Theobald 1997), and how this is connected to global development that impacts local places. Gruenewald (2003:3) suggests that “Articulating a critical pedagogy of place is thus a response against educational reform policies and practices that disregard place and that leave assumptions about the relationship between education and the politics of economic development unexamined”. He proposes that people be “challenged to reflect on their own concrete situationality in a way that explores the complex interrelationships between cultural and ecological environments” (op.cit.p.6), in order to preserve nature, and conserve and restore our shared environments for future generations.

Therefore, thinking critically will imply reflecting on a variety of reasons (spiritual, political, economic, ecological, and pedagogical) in order to “evaluate the

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

appropriateness of our relationships to each other, and to our *socio-ecological* places” (op.cit.p.7, italics in original). This may reduce or avoid the phenomenon of standardization of the learning experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places who are prepared to compete in the global market economy. Critical thinking is crucially needed to answer these questions: (1) How to produce socially and ecologically critical students/citizens? (2) How to help them to engage with complex ecological themes? (3) How to transform oppressive conditions? (4) How to “decolonize” the mind, i.e., recognizes and dislodges ideas, assumptions and ideologies that are externally imposed? (Smith and Katz 1993), and finally, (5) how to recover and renew traditional non-commodified cultural patterns such as mentoring and intergenerational relationships, and encourage cultural transmission?

Criticality can indeed reveal itself through both transformation and conservation (Bowers 2001), and not conservatism as the latter hardly fosters reflection and action. As a matter-of-fact, teachers can reflect on the “cultural politics” that their practices support, and encourage students to actually experience and interrogate the places outside the educational institutions (school, university, etc) that are the local contexts of shared cultural politics (Orr 1992). How do people from diverse cultures attempt to live (well) in the age of globalization is a valuable critical thinking question worth addressing

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

in our EFL classrooms, whatever the students' levels of English proficiency.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted a few reflections on critical thinking in relation to the academic context of EFL learning and teaching. These reflections emerged from informal discussions with teachers on critical thinking approaches and the issue of criticality. Although difficult to define, critical thinking can be viewed as the ability to understand a concept fully, taking into consideration the different sides of an idea or an issue, and avoiding being influenced by propaganda or other method to promote this concept. What seems important when fostering critical thinking is to have an open mind, listen carefully to the views of others, and be aware of one's world views? Because we live in an age of information and hyper connectedness, where facts are increasingly invading us, these facts are open to interpretation which requires critical, discerning and discriminating thought. It is also crucial to have self-defence in critical thinking to sift out information that does not match our beliefs. But we also agree that "criticality is a practice, a mark of what we do, of who we are, and not only how we think" (Burbules & Burk, 1999:22). Critical thinking necessarily creates tensions between different insights and a dialogue which reveals that multiple interpretations of the world are possible and might bring variety and fecundity. As such, critical thinking becomes a valuable

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

tool and a way of life. So, developing criticality in students means challenging others by reading the texts of our own lives and constantly asking what needs to be conserved, renewed, imbued with new life and vitality. This seems essential for the purpose of developing in students “an ethics of eco-justice” and teach them “how to learn” and not just “how to earn”(Bowers 2001).

References

- BARNETT, R. (1997). *Higher education: A critical business*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- BARRIE, S. & PROSSER, M.(2004). Generic graduate attributes: Citizens for an uncertain future. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(4), 243-246
- BENESCH, S. (2001). *Critical English for academic purposes: Theory, politics and practice*. Mahmah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- BENESCH, S. (1993). Critical Thinking, a learning process for democracy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(3),545-547
- BEREITER, C. & SCARDAMALIA, M.(1993). *Surpassing ourselves: An inquiry into the nature and implications of expertise*. Chicago: Open Court
- BERRY, JW (1992). Acculturation and adaptation in a new society. *International Migration* ,30(1), 69-85
- BOWERS, C.A. (2001). Challenges in educating for ecologically sustainable communities. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 33(2), 257-265

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

BRINTON, D., SNOW, M.A. & WESCHE, M.B. (2003), *Content-based second language instruction*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

BURBULES, N.C. & BURK, R. (1999). Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: relations, differences and limits. In T.S.Popkewitz & L.Fendler, eds, *Critical Theories in Education*, New York: Routledge

DAVIES, W.M. (2006). An 'infusion' approach to critical thinking: Moore on the critical thinking debate. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25(2), 179-193

DEWEY, J. (1909/ 1998). *How we think*. Mineola: Dover Publications

DOOEY, P. (2010). Students' perspectives of an EAP pathway program. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9(3), 184-197

FAIRCLOUGH, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. New York: Longman

FOX, H. (1994). *Listening to the world: Cultural issues in academic writing*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English

FREIRE, P. (1970a). *Cultural action for freedom*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review

FREIRE, P. (1970b). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, New York: Seabury Press

FREIRE, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom. Ethics, democracy and civic courage*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

FREIRE , P.& MACEDO , D.(1987).*Literacy: Reading the world and the word*, South Hadley, MA: Bergin Garvey

GIEVE, S. (1998).Comments on Dwight Atkinson's 'A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL', *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1): 123-129

GIROUX, H.A. (1988).*Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*, South Haley, MA: Bergin Garvey

GRABE, W & STOLLER, F.L. (1997). Content-based instruction: research foundations. In M.A.Snow & D.Brinton (eds), *The content-based classroom: Perspectives on integrating language and content* (pp.5-21). White plain: Addison Wesley Longman

GRUENEWALD, D.A. (2003).*The best of both worlds: a critical pedagogy of place*, Educational Researcher 32 (4), 3-12

HAAS, K.T. & NACHTIGAL, P. (1998).*Place value: An educators' guide to good literature on rural life ways, environments and purpose of education*. London: ERIC Clearing House

HARB, M.(2017). Curriculum as a discourse: using critical discourse analysis to revive curriculum reconceptualists' thought, *Journal Of Curriculum And Teaching*,6(1), 58-64

HABERMAS, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action. Volume 1: Reason and the rationalisation of society* (T.McCarthy Transl.). Boston: Beacon Press

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

- HOOD, S. (2004). *Appraising research: Taking a stance in academic writing*. Sydney: University of technology
- KAPLAN, R.D.(1994).*The coming anarchy: Shattering the dreams of the post-cold war*, New York: Paperback
- MCLAREN, P. (2003). Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts. In Darder, A., Baltodano, M., and Torres, R., (Eds.) *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. London: Routledge.
- MCPECK, J. (1992). Thoughts on subject specificity. In S. Norris (ed), *The generalizability of critical thinking* (pp.198-205). New York: Teachers College Press
- MCPECK, J.(1981). *Critical thinking and education*. New York: St Martin's Press
- MOORE, T. J. (2007). The critical thinking debate: How general are general thinking skills? , *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(1): 3-18
- MOORE, T.J. (2011). *Critical thinking and language: the challenge of generic skills and disciplinary discourse*, New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation
- NORRIS, S. (1992). Introduction: the Generalizability question. In S.Norris (ed). *The generalizability of critical thinking: multiple perspectives on an educational ideal*(pp.21-37). New York: Teachers College Press
- ORR, D. (1992). *Ecological literacy*. Albany: State University Of New York Press
- PAUL, R. (1984). Critical thinking: Fundamental to education for a free society. *Educational Leadership*, 42(1): 4-14

What Critical Thinking for What Purpose? Some Reflections on Criticality
in Academic English Contexts

PENNYCOOK, A. (1997). Vulgar pragmatism, critical pragmatism and EAP, *English For Specific Purposes*, 16(4):253-269

SMITH, N. and KATZ, C. (1993). Towards a specialised politics, *Place and the Politics of Identity*, 66:76-83

THEOBALD, P. (1997). *Teaching the commons: Place, pride and the renewal of community*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press

WINGATE, U. (2006). Doing away with 'Study Skills'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(4): 457-467