Culture and Critical Thinking Skills for Language Learners

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Abstract

Language Learning is a an indispensable part of human culture. A major purpose of language is to express thoughts, knowledge, and beliefs through the processes of teaching and learning. As a result of learning and functioning in a language, culture is sustained through generations (Salili & Hossain,2007). At the same time, culture also influences how knowledge, teaching and learning are construed as well as how teaching and learning are practiced. The knowledge is acquired in a particular cultural context transforms into schemata (mental representation of knowledge based on personal experience) that may not be universally acceptable. A better understanding of the interdependency of language and culture is paramount to the development of appropriate learning strategies to meet the needs of an increasingly changing world. This paper examines the influence of culture on language learning in relation to the teaching and learning of critical thinking in the context of professional education. The increasing emphasis on critical thinking in education at all levels is applicable to any culture that is currently influenced by changes in the global environment, but how culture influences the increasing emphasis on critical thinking is not certain. Just as culture affects how people construe and practice teaching and learning (Merriam, 2007), culture can also have an important influence on how critical thinking is perceived and exercised. The ability to think well does not guarantee one's ability to communicate effectively. Students are trained with critical thinking skills in order to solve problems or make decisions; if they do not know how to present their ideas appropriately, the efforts spent in critical thinking would be futile. While it is important to consider the language ability of students, the manners and methods involved in the expression of their critical thoughts should also be made explicit to others, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, Foreign/second language Learning, culture, culture-biased interference*

1. Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking has been commonly used to describe a desirable intellectual or cognitive outcome of students of professional courses, but the exact meaning of the term in this context varies. A precise understanding of the concept and its nature provides the basis for meaningful discussion on how it may be influenced by culture. As Friere (1973) says, language is a thinking process that allows students to learn and grow. The processes of thinking, learning and growing with language demand the learners' involvement.

Critical thinking is also a normal activity which all of us do but when left untrained, it is unstructured , biased and self-centred. This affects the process of learning. The quality and quantity of learning is minimal and time taking because there is no systematic approach to learning as well as cognitive involvement. A well directed thought which is very systematic and organized should be cultivated for better learning output.

Critical thinking skills are viewed to be a crucial part of education to make education relevant to the rapidly changing world. Many educators believe that specific knowledge will not be as important to today's workers and citizens as the ability to learn and make sense of new information (Gough, 1991). Multiple skills and basic knowledge in many areas of study is the need of the day. For this the learners/ individual has to be a lifelong learner. Learning has to be independent as looking for someone to support or teach throughout one's life is next to impossible. Hence, the learners have to be independent thinkers as well as learners to be successful in their careers.

The model suggested by Lakshmi(2007) present.s all the chief characteristics of critical thinking. The outcome of being a critical thinker is the ability to make a good judgment which is truthful/ universally accepted to be true (Bowell & kemp,2002) . Advocates of critical thinking skills programmes argue that the skills stated as part of characteristics of critical thinking can be promoted to help pupils to achieve their full potential as thinkers which in turn results in their improved performance. All the higher order thinking skills,

considered critical thinking skills are intuitive abilities of every indi-vidual.

The presentation of various definitions of critical thinking shows that there are many sub-skills for critical thinking and a person can be called a critical thinker only when some of these major sub-skills are acquired. They are: creative thinking, logical reasoning and problem solving. All these skills are interdependent and can also be treated as independent skills. There are researchers who suggest that creative thinking and critical thinking are two separate skills in-dependent of each other (Eg, Hinkel, 1999). Lipman (2003) suggests that caring thinking (emotional intelligence) is another thinking skill as important as critical thinking.

However, for this study there are three sub-skills considered are creative thinking, logical reasoning and problem solving. The out-come of acquiring these skills is application of knowledge/skills in new contexts along with unbiased evaluation. As critical thinking emphasizes the importance of giving equal importance to all cul-tures, this study trained the students in accepting other cultures and being objective in evaluation when it comes to their own cul-ture.

2. Influence of Culture on Critical Thinking and Second/Foreign Language Learning

Abilities

The ability to think critically has become a critical attribute expected of young adults . however, the endorsement of critical thinking in higher education has been challenged by the growing cultural diversity in language classroom.

Traditionally, culture is related to civilization. Cultural knowledge generally emphasizes history, literature, art, music and way of life along with beliefs and perceptions expressed through language, behavior, food, dress, customs, habits, leisure, time activities and so on (Luk and Lin, 2007). Hence, it can be understood that culture primarily influence the language learnt or used by an individual as language is a product of all the above said aspects of a social life.

However, it is not the same when it comes to second/foreign language. Learning second language does not mean learning the culture of that language. The dichotomy of learning the culture of the target language or learning the second language through the culture with which the learner is familiar, still exists. The communicative competence of an EFL learner is considered to be of high proficiency levels only when he/she is on par with a native speaker's competencies. This includes understanding popular idiomatic expressions , accent and intonation, pace of speech and respond to them with equal ease. However, training our students in critical thinking skills with developing their critical learning abilities in general and language competence ,in particular, may not need the native like competence.

3. The Study

The aim of this study is to make EFL critical thinking skills learners culture sensitive along with making objective judgments.

The objectives of this study are

- To make the learners culture sensitive

- To develop critical thinking skills

- To enhance language proficiency of the learners

The present discussion is part of a major study on developing critical thinking skills in EFL learners. There are various strategies that the learners are trained into become critical thinking. In the process, it is observed that the learners' initial response towards culture based texts was biased. As stated above, culture influencing the thinking of an individual is a non-controversial fact. Hence, it is realized that the learners need to be trained to make unbiased judgements to help them become better critical thinkers and professionals by making them sensitive to various cultures.

The study involved a group of first year students in English Department (young Adults) who are first generation learners. As the family background does not support diverse thinking. It can be said that their concepts are schema based. Their world of knowledge and understanding is based on the culture and society they live in. However, the course, being a professional one, demands students to be critical thinkers resulting in application of knowledge in new contexts with logical reasoning and decision-making abilities. Their critical thinking skills should be devoid of any cultural influences on their decisions or judgments. That is, the learners need to critique their own thinking, metacognate (thinking about one's thinking) and be objective.

The learners are young adults and therefore the complexity in their cognition is very high. Hence, the factors that influence the leaners in the process of responding to a task are restricted to analysis of their responses devoid of the influences of the context or background. Nevertheless, the environment in which the learners were trained through the tasks is common along with their socio-

economic and academic background.

In three phases, the learners are trained to become culture sensitive and make unbiased judgements. In the process the learners are trained to use critical thinking strategies suggested by Paul et al (1995). The strategies the learners are to adopt to complete a task, are given to them as part of instructions.

The four levels of responding to tasks in each phase are: creative thinking, logical reasoning, problem solving and application or evaluation. The learners are expected to respond to the task with creative interpretations at the first level, then think of the logic behind the response, later decide on the acceptability of the response and finally give different contexts where this knowledge or strategy can be adapted. The strategies learnt in one phase are automatically implemented in the next phase. That is, along with the strategies adopted in the first phase, they learn to adopt/adapt the strategies of the second phase and whatever strategies are suitable that are to be used in the third phase.

Implicitly, the language skills that the learners would be able to develop are:

1. Reading the text and understanding at three levels: factual, inferential and interpretative.

2. Written responses to the tasks are to develop their writing skills.

3. Discussion with peers are to develop their listening and speaking skills and communicative competence.

Role of the teacher: The teacher's role is confined to guiding the learners towards the intended change in the learners' thinking patterns. Unless the learners are diverting from the actual task, the teacher does not interfere with the process of completing the task.

Phase I: Learning to understand a wide range of interpretations

In this phase, the learners are given simple texts (one or two sentence) and are asked to make a list of facts, inferences and interpretations. The strategies that the learners are to exercise in this phase are:

1. Making facts, inferences and interpretations.

2. Exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts.

3. Developing intellectual humility and suspending judgment.

4. Developing intellectual courage to question.

5. After the learners respond to the task, they are asked to think of the reasons (logically) that led them to their interpretations. Questioning themselves is the strategy they need to adopt here. Then, they are asked to find out the possibilities of implementing the strategies in new contexts.

Phase II: Peer interpretations-group- discussion

All the responses to the tasks in this phase are peer reviewed. The texts given in this phase are stories or incidents that are based on the beliefs of different places. The learners complete the tasks as per the strategies they are to adopt. Later, they are asked to work in pairs, for the first task, groups of three for the second task, groups of four for the third task and groups of five for the fourth task. The objective of this phase was to expose the learners to other's interpretations and question their ideas.

1. Developing intellectual faith and integrity

2. Reasoning: comparing perspectives, interpretations, or theories

3. Recognizing contradictions

4. Examining or evaluating assumptions

During the discussions, the learners were instructed to listen to the partner or group member and then respond to their opinions or interpretations. For every point, the learners are making in the discussion, they are supposed to give a reason which is to be logical and acceptable to all the other members of the group. This phase took a longer time than the previous phase because each of the learners was trying to convince the other members regarding his/her opinion or response.

Phase III: Reinterpreting the texts

In this phase, the learners were given non-fiction, long texts to understand and respond. Each text calls for better logical thinking and problem solving skills when compared to the tasks of the previous learners.

1. Exercising fair-mindedness

2. Comparing analogous situations: transferring insights to new contexts

3. Exploring implications and consequences

4. Generating various solutions and deciding on the right ones for culture based problems.

Each learner has to accept the response of the others. If there is any objection, it has to be logically pointed out. The complexity of the task has increased. That is, the learners have to respond to their own task, evaluate others' tasks (not less than three learners' responses for each task). As their evaluation is completely based on logic, their questioning abilities are to be pointing out the logically of the others responses.

The three phases and types of tasks given to the learners are presented in this table:

	Creative Thinking	Logical Reasoning	Problem-solving	Evaluation/ Application
Phase I	Generate possibilities	Questioning	Accept possibilities	When &where to be used
Phase II	Peer interpretations	Reasoning possibilities	Possible solutions	Judge peer interpretations
Phase III	Reinterpretation	Logic of interpretations	Deciding on the right solution	Apply in different contexts& acceptability

3. Discussion

There are a few issues that cropped up in the process of making our students culture sensitive and make them be open to other cultures. They seemed to be complex and contradictory to be solved within the limited time span of the study. They are:

Questioning or Acceptance?

When the students were insisted on being open to other cultures, the major challenge was whether to encourage them to question the cultural issues or to accept them. Acceptance of the given texts would mean that their critical thinking skills are not prominent and if questioned it means that they are not able to accept the others' opinions.

Hence, during the study, the students were encouraged to question every concept that seemed new to them. However, they also need to accept the text/concept if it presents the alien culture. This is how the critical thinking.

Identifying culture-biased inferences/ interpretations

The students were able to identify the cultural issues if it was new or different to them. But they failed to do the same if the text presented was of they own culture or familiar culture. Hence, this became one of the challenges in this study.

For every aspect of the text, the students were asked to answer a set of questions:

1. Is this acceptable to people to US and UK which generally contradict the Iraqi culture?

If yes, how similar?

If no, how different?

2. (If the text is unfamiliar) Can it happen in my place?

3. What is wrong in doing/ thinking/acting/ reacting in this manner?

Students are supposed to answer these questions before they work on the critical thinking tasks. This made them turn more open to the texts and avoid a lot of conflict is accepting other culture based issues.

Schema Vs Concept

Normally, the schema (based on personal experience) of a person/student is mistook to be the concept (universal). This made the students accept and understand issues which are familiar to them as it was supported by their schemata. They also assumed that it is a concept and everyone in the world understand it in a similar way. This brought in another face to critical thinking and made me help the students focus on their metacognition.

Metacognition

For every aspect that was common or acceptable to the students, they were asked to trace out the situation or experience or incident that they encountered to understand that particular aspect. They were also asked to write down their experiences to help them understand the difference between schema and concept.

Teacher Constraints

In spite of the teacher-researcher being aware of backgrounds of the students, there are limitations. The students come from different backgrounds and their schemata are varied. Hence, the major role of the teacher in critical thinking classes is to be open and accept the opinions as "different" and nothing can be wrong when it comes to the students' interpretations. However, the teacher has to be aware of the appropriate strategies that are to be adopted by the students to respond to various tasks.

4. Implications and Suggestions

Based on the responses of the learners and observations made during the study, the following are the suggestions made:

1. Enable the learners to critique their own thinking, metacognate, to avoid any culture bound assessment of the given text or information.

2. Sensitize them to culture based interpretations by exposing them various culture based texts.

3. Before examining the possibilities of enhancing critical thinking skills in EFL learners, there are other aspects of teaching that are to be taken care of. Firstly, steps are to be taken to enhance the cultural sensitivity of existing critical thinking instructions.

4. Secondly, the teacher has to be aware that behavioural expressions of critical thinking are very much related to one's abilities ineffective communication of ideas. Hence, it would be important to incorporate the training of interpersonal communication into critical thinking skills instruction.

5. In addition to offering training to students, it might also be important to help teachers involved in teaching critical thinking skills to be exposed to international education/culture to become more aware of cross-cultural differences in communication styles and preferences (Durkin,2008)

6. The teacher has to understand and implement the difference between teaching and guiding.

7. Teachers have to be trained to design tasks which specifically promote CT skills.

8. Teachers have to know to assess CT skills (responses of learners) and guide them in a proper direction.

9. The issue of the effectiveness of different instructional strategies is especially important to the design of appropriate critical

thinking instruction for an intercultural classroom.

10. Despite the possible influence of culture, critical thinking instruction can and should be applied in international education.

11. The cultural challenges involved in the notion of critical thinking are also relevant to the other skills and attributes.

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Appendix

Sample Texts

Phase I:

Write the facts, inferences and interpretations related to these texts

She locked the car door and straight away entered the conference hall.

Jeane is a fabric which has been widely accepted in Iraq for its functional and symbolic values. Initially, jeans caught on in the urban market and later the appeal of jeans spread to rural and semi urban markets.

Phase II :

There was once a boy who loved stories. His name was Dong Chin, and every night at bedtime he listened to stories from a favorite family servant, a man named Pak. Years later, on the night before the wedding, Dong Chin's father undid his son's long braid- the kind worn by all sons and daughters till they married. Then he fixed the hair in a tight topknot, just like his own. On his son's head, he placed a skullcap with a hole for the topknot to poke through. And over it all, he placed a feather-light, see-through hat of horsehair mesh. Dong Chin was so proud. For years he had waited for this moment. Now he was a man! Pak was busy like everyone else during the wedding. But as he rushed around, he happened to pass outside Dong Chin's room. To his surprise, he heard a murmur of many voices " That's strange", he said to himself. " The young master isn't in there now, and no one else.

He went up to the paper window, carefully poked a small hole, and peeked through. Then he grasped. The air was teeming with spirits- hundreds of them! Over, under and around each other they swarmed . There were so many, they barely had room to fly, and they didn't look one bit happy! "Silence" called one of the spirits. " Stop talking all at once, or we'll never get anywhere".

Complete this story……

Phase III:

To outsides, South Korea's traditional culture looks Chinese and its modern culture looks Japanese. However, South Koreans assertively argue that their culture, both traditional and modern, is unique. With regard to traditional culture, Koreans talk of " Korean Confucianism", " Korean Buddism" and " Korean martial arts". For Koreans, it is important to believe that their traditional culture either originated in Korea or was shaped in Korea.

In Australia, it is difficult to talk or cultural uniqueness and expect other Australians to share the sentiments. For many Australians, Australian culture does not exist, there is nothing unique about Australia and Australia has no need for a national identity. Ironically, such a view is a uniquely Australian thing to say. No other country in the world has a significant segment of the population openly expressing their hostility to the notion that their country might have a culture.

How different is Iraqi Culture when compared to these two cultures?