

# Language Teaching through Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness

I N RECENT YEARS LANGUAGE TEACHERS HAVE FOCUSED ON THE ROLE OF THE learner as an active participant in the teaching-learning process. Focusing on the learner is a natural outgrowth of a change in orientation from behaviorist to cognitive theories of learning. That change has highlighted what the learner does and how the learner processes information during the lesson rather than focusing on what the teacher does.

The outgrowth of the cognitive approach has been perceived in language teaching together with reflections about the relationship between thinking and language. Teachers who want to promote thinking should try to observe how students produce knowledge rather than how they merely reproduce knowledge. Producing knowledge requires the use of a number of thinking skills such as analytical, lateral, problem solving, critical, creative, and reflective thinking (Rose and Nicholl 1997).

Although thinking skills can be learned by practicing, like playing tennis and swimming, they require more effort than many teachers realize. To emphasize thinking skills, a teacher must organize course objectives well and must be aware of his or her own values, perceptions, assumptions, and judgments as well as those of the learners as these are closely related to thinking (Heuer 1999).

Various definitions of critical thinking exist. All include many of the same concepts. Scriven and Paul (1996) define critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.”

This article covers the rationale for critical thinking followed by sample activities for developing thinking skills. Critical thinking is one of the thinking skills that should be highlighted in designing and improving language curriculum because the world we live in is getting more complicated to understand, and how we process information has become more important than specific facts. Taking this idea into consideration, we language teachers can encourage our students to go beyond surface meaning and to discover the deeper meaning instead of merely using basic literacy skills (Van Duzer and Florez 1999).

### How critical thinking can be improved in language classes

Critical thinking skills are not likely to develop spontaneously. On the contrary, teachers must take a directive role in initiating and guiding critical thinking. Language classes are particularly appropriate for teaching critical thinking owing to the richness of material and the interactive approaches used.

Of the many concepts related to acquisition and improvement of critical thinking, self-awareness is one of the most important. Through critical thinking and self-awareness, one can understand the relationship between thoughts and emotions. Although it is assumed that they are independent, the truth is that feelings are based on some level of thought, and thoughts generate from some level of feeling. Emotions play an important part in learning because learners may bring learned indiffer-

ence, irrational fears, acquired hostility, and inflexible ideas into the classroom so their learning is limited to the surface (Paul and Elder 2002; Kurland 2000).

Language teachers can activate critical thinking in the classroom by highlighting self-awareness; that is, they can help the learners have and show understanding of themselves and their surroundings. By means of interactive approaches and materials, teachers can help students be aware of their perceptions, assumptions, prejudices, and values and can help students break old habits to construct a new point of view. It will take effort, but students will enjoy discovering themselves as they learn a language.

### Perceptions

We hear, see, taste, or feel stimuli by means of our senses. This process occurs so spontaneously that we tend to think of perception as a passive process. However, perception is an active rather than a passive process. It enables us to construct, interpret, and make conclusions about information we receive, rather than simply to record “reality.” Perception is a process of making inferences. Through inferences we construct our own version of reality. However, our version of reality may be distorted by our past experiences, education, cultural values, and role requirements (Heuer 1999).

To help the learner become aware of his or her own perceptions and how they may differ from those of others, language teachers can use optical illusions in class. Activity 1 will teach students different ways of seeing and help them realize that people can perceive the same things in different ways.

### Activity 1

Begin by showing the pictures (*right*) one by one to your students and asking them what they see. Most of them will say that they see a picture of a woman (Picture A), some figures (Picture B), and an old man on a boat (Picture C). Be patient and wait for some students to perceive the pictures in a different way (vertically or upside down); give them time to discuss their perceptions with the other students. After a while, ask students what else they perceive. In all likelihood, some will say they see:

- The word Liar in Picture A (viewed diagonally).

### ACTIVITY 1 • ILLUSTRATIONS



PICTURE A



PICTURE B



PICTURE C

- The word LIFE in Picture B (seen by focusing on the white spaces between the black spaces).
- A large bird with a man in its mouth in Picture C (when looking at the picture upside down).

This activity will help students appreciate that images can be perceived differently, not only in language class but in real life as well. Students enjoy the lesson, and they get an opportunity to discuss what they have seen, to learn vocabulary, and to practice structures such as present continuous tense (e.g., “What is the man in the boat doing?”).

### Assumptions

Assumptions are ideas that a speaker or a writer takes for granted, like axioms in mathematics. Ideas that ought to be examined are assumed to be true, so it is possible to build an argument that seems completely logical. However, if an initial premise is false, the result will be wrong. By focusing on critical thinking skills, language teachers can help students identify their assumptions, consider whether those assumptions are justifiable, and understand how they shape students’ point of view. Since associating personal interest with collective interest (assuming that what is good for you is good for everyone) is a common trend, clarifying assumptions is one of the basic steps of critical thinking (Heuer 1999).

There are many techniques for revealing assumptions. One is to have students read a story and then explain their assumptions and give their rationale for those assumptions. The teacher must be careful not to label responses as right or wrong, or students will be reluctant to speak. The following joke can help make students aware of their assumptions.

#### ACTIVITY 2

One hot summer afternoon, a deliveryman drove up to a house, got out of his truck, and started up the walk when he noticed a little girl sitting on the steps. “Is your mother home?” he asked her. The little girl nodded and said, “Yes.” So the deliveryman went back to his truck, slid out a large carton containing a mattress and box spring, and carried the heavy carton up the steps to the front door. Red-faced and sweating, he pushed the doorbell and waited. No one came to the door. He

smiled at the little girl and rang the bell again. Still, no one answered. He waited and rang the bell a third time, and when there was still no sign of anyone in the house, he said to the girl, “I thought you said your mother was home.”

“She is,” the girl replied, “but I don’t live here.” (Boostrom 1994, 201)

After reading the joke, ask your students the following questions:

- What made the deliveryman assume that the house belonged to the little girl?
- Would you make the same assumption if you were that deliveryman?
- What would you do to ascertain that the house is the girl’s house or that anyone is at home?
- Have you made any wrong assumptions lately? What were they? What was wrong with your assumptions?

Discuss with your students how difficult it is to avoid making assumptions, and how important it is, when thinking critically, to consider the assumptions we make. Only by doing so can we determine if an idea makes sense. Teachers can use the “AFAN” formula (Rose and Nicholl 1997) to help students analyze their assumptions. AFAN stands for: A=assumptions, F=For, A=Against, N=Now what? Each of the letters raises certain questions:

- **A (Assumptions):** What have I assumed? What have I taken for granted? Do I need more information? What are the facts?
- **F (For):** What is the evidence for my opinion? Is it good evidence? Is it a fact or belief? What are the reasons for my belief?
- **A (Against):** What are the alternatives to my point of view? Can I see this another way? What if my starting assumption is wrong?
- **N (Now what?):** This is a question posed to lead to a better assessment of the argument, one that may produce a better final decision.

The AFAN formula can be easily applied to most assumptions. Try the AFAN questions with the deliveryman joke above.

## Prejudices

A major obstacle to critical thinking is prejudice. Everyone has some prejudices because we all have ideas about what is true, false, right, or wrong. Our prejudices related to patriotism, race, religion, class, ethnicity, or gender affect the way we think. To be a critical thinker does not mean that one has no opinions; rather, it means that one is alert to ideas that may change his or her opinions. We language teachers should be alert to data, information, and evidence used in our classes to question our prejudices (Boostrom 1994). Activity 3 provides a way to do this.

### ACTIVITY 3

This activity can be structured or less formal, depending on the level of the students. To make students aware of their prejudices, give them concepts or certain words to consider or open-ended sentences to complete. For example, ask your students what feelings, ideas, or opinions occur to them when they hear the following words or phrases:

- |           |    |                                  |
|-----------|----|----------------------------------|
| School    | or | School is a place where I _____. |
| Women     | or | Women should _____.              |
| Teachers  | or | Teachers are always _____.       |
| Marriage  | or | Marriage is never _____.         |
| Education | or | Education is _____.              |

Students can be made aware of their prejudices and those of their classmates by discussing their responses.

## Values

Critical thinkers are thinkers who are aware of the values on which they base their judgments. Learners should be shown ways to identify their values because how students judge what is said or written may depend on whether they share the values of the speaker or author.

### ACTIVITY 4

Have students write or discuss their five most important values, and have them rank those values from most important to least important. First, act as a model for your students by stating what you value. Here are examples of some things you might say:

- I value family, friends, money, education, and career.
- Family is most valuable to me because my family has supported me throughout my life.

- My friends are valuable to me because, through them, I can share my happiness, unhappiness, and other important matters.
- Money is valuable to me because it enables me to live comfortably.
- Education is important to me because it excites me and makes me a more interesting person.
- My career is valuable to me because people respect me for what I do.

Ask your students to state what they value in order of importance. Make sure they give their reasons. This activity will help make students aware of their values and why they have certain ones. The exercise also gives them practice in speaking and listening to English.

## Breaking habits

Habits can be quite useful, especially habits that we repeat regularly, such as when we eat our meals and how we go to school each day. Without habits we could spend much of our time deciding what to do next. On the other hand, when we need to think imaginatively or critically, we have to break habits. A good thinker does not get stuck in a rut. Good thinkers are imaginative; when one method does not work, they try a new one. Instead of seeing things only one way, they see many possibilities. When good thinkers make plans, they are also willing to break them to follow a better idea. They create “versions” instead of only one way (Boostrom 1994, 123).

To practice creating new thought patterns, have your students do the following activities. They may help students break habits of negative thinking.

### ACTIVITY 5

Ask students to keep an appreciation journal in which they write about everything they appreciate about themselves, their lessons, or even their teachers. If they look puzzled, direct them by giving them the following sentences to complete:

- I like English lessons because \_\_\_\_\_.
- I appreciate my family because \_\_\_\_\_.
- I love the way my friend speaks with me because \_\_\_\_\_.
- I enjoy school because \_\_\_\_\_.

It could be an interesting experience to find at least one positive sentence even from stu-

dents who say they hate school or learning a foreign language.

#### ACTIVITY 6

Shifting perspective is another way to break habitual negative thinking. The following activity requires students to use language that describes what they want. For example, instead of saying “I don’t want to be sick anymore,” they can say “I want to be healthy.” (Note that the former focuses on sickness, while the latter focuses on health.) Likewise, “I don’t want to fail in English class” may be changed to “I want to succeed in English class.”

Ask your students to write or say as many sentences as they can that shift their negative opinions to positive ones. Also ask them to state why they want to transform negative habits into positive ones. As a follow-up activity, discuss the benefits that students receive from positive thinking.

#### A new point of view

We think that the way we see things is exactly the way things are because of the influence of egocentricity. Egocentricity is the inability or unwillingness to consider other points of view. It results in a refusal to accept new ideas, views, or facts. Trying to see a new point of view—or at least being open to seeing something differently—is an important strategy for critical thinking (Boostrom 1994, 39).

Considering a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives, remaining open to alternative interpretations, accepting a new explanation, coming to a conclusion, and creating a new point of view are goals that can be achieved in language classes to activate critical thinking. Carefully chosen activities will help students identify their points of view, seek other points of view and identify strengths and weaknesses of those points of view, and strive to be fair-minded in evaluating all points of view (Paul and Elder 2002). Activity 7 can be used to practice a new point of view.

#### ACTIVITY 7

1. Divide your class into 3 groups (If your class is large, you can have more than 3 groups.)
2. Give each group Form A, Form B, or Form C, each of which represents a philosophy. Instruct the group members to communicate with each other as if they believe in the philosophy represented on their form.

- Form A: You believe that human beings are fundamentally bad and brutal, have animal-like instincts, and always look for pleasure. The best way to control human beings is to threaten and punish them.
- Form B: You believe that human beings are fundamentally good and can realize their potential if they are not prevented from doing so. There is no need to control human beings. The only thing to do is to show them love and understanding.
- Form C: You believe that human beings are neither good nor bad. Society and the environment they live in determine whether they will be good or bad. The way to control human beings is to persuade and reward them.

3. Each group of students is a jury that will decide on a punishment for a suspect who is 25 years old, has lost his wife and his job, and has sole responsibility for the care of his 10-year-old son. Explain that the suspect was caught stealing food that costs \$40. Each group must judge the man’s actions and decide his punishment according to the philosophy assigned to them (even if they do not believe that philosophy). They should not show their form to other groups.
4. Give the students 10 to 15 minutes for discussion. Then ask each group leader to present the group’s verdict to the entire class.
5. After each group gives its verdict, ask the group members how they felt having to support a view they don’t believe in or listen to a point of view they don’t share.
6. End the activity by asking the students which philosophy actually appeals to them and why.

#### Evaluation

Evaluation is an important element of critical thinking. Critical thinkers use evaluation to:

- become aware of their values and to understand why they are values.
- consider different points of view.
- recognize the difference between evidence and interpretation when exploring assumptions.
- check the limits of their knowledge.



- distinguish between prejudice and fact.

Because evaluation is an important part of critical thinking, teachers should focus their assessment efforts on important learning goals, not just those that are easily measurable. Evaluation should be related to valid, reliable, useful information (Gersten 1996).

During the process of evaluation, the number of questions to ask is limitless, but you can select questions according to the level of thinking you want your students to follow. Thorpe (1992) categorizes questions into four types: summary and definition, analysis, hypothesis, and evaluation. To promote critical thinking, teachers should ask their students analysis, hypothesis, and evaluative questions instead of summary and definition questions. In reading lessons especially, teachers have the opportunity to apply these categories. Activity 8 describes some possibilities.

#### ACTIVITY 8

Read the following narrative to your students:

##### *Rain Forests*

In the rain forests of the tropics, native peoples have been losing their land rapidly to development. Companies that invest in the rain forest have been taking over large areas of land for logging, agriculture, cattle raising, and mining. When the forest disappears, so does the indigenous way of life.

Foreign investment has been increasing the demand for forest products, but it hasn't brought the land itself back under native control. Corporations from industrialized nations have been inviting tribes to participate in the rain forest harvest, to gather nuts or copaiba oil. This cooperation with outside companies has been changing the native culture. More native people have been working for foreign bosses and have been selling products to foreign markets, rather than to traditional local markets. Companies that have been advertising rain forest products have been selling products such as hair conditioner and skin creams. Consumers are eager to support products that can benefit native people without harming the forest, and they are happy to hear that some profits return to the rain forest countries.

However, some native peoples are cautious. They feel that reliance on foreign markets

weakens their independence. They ask why they need the foreign companies and what benefits come from foreign markets. They have been selling diverse forest products in their own local markets for years and have been conserving the forest at the same time. Native people have been asking for protection of the rain forest and preservation of their traditional lifestyle (adapted from Corry 1993).

Make sure that all students understand the reading, including key vocabulary. As a follow up activity, ask such questions as the following:

#### **Analysis Questions:**

- Why have native people been losing their land?
- What are the reasons for companies to invest in the rain forests?
- What are the reasons for some native peoples to be cautious?
- What is the main concern related to the foreign companies that have invested in rain forests?

#### **Hypothesis Questions:**

- What would happen if the foreign companies hadn't invested in rain forests?
- What will happen if foreign companies continue to invest in rain forests?

#### **Evaluation Questions:**

- Is it logical or illogical for native people to work for foreign bosses?
- Do the foreign companies make the forest and native ways of life disappear?
- What is your solution to the conflict?
- What are the advantages or disadvantages for native people working for foreign companies?

The questions above motivate students to think critically more than summary and definition questions, such as:

- Who has been losing the land rapidly to development?
- What are the big foreign companies doing on large areas of land in the rain forests?
- Who is concerned about the investment of foreign companies in rain forests?

Classroom climate contributes to critical thinking. In an open and democratic classroom, students feel free to express their opinions and feel confident doing so. In such class-

activate and develop critical thinking in their students, language teachers need to set up tasks and activities and adjust their teaching programs and materials to promote such thinking. Teaching language through critical thinking enables learners to recognize a wide range of subjective analyses, to develop self-awareness, and to see linkages and complexities they might otherwise miss.

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