Critical Thinking Skills

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Introduction

Along with communication, collaboration and creativity, critical thinking occupies an important place as one of the 4Cs of 21st century learning. The English language classroom, whether real or virtual, is a place where statements, opinions, discussions and debates are a fundamental part of teaching and learning. Therefore, it's important that students are equipped with critical thinking skills to enable them to present their own ideas coherently and to analyse other people's ideas with confidence. As teachers, we need to find ways of developing those critical thinking skills in our learners throughout their English learning journey, from young learners who are still formulating their basic conceptual outlook on the world to young adults who need to navigate their way through what is often a confusing array of claim, counter-claim, information and misinformation.

Bloom's taxonomy

A very useful tool for organising any work on critical thinking skills is Bloom's taxonomy. First introduced in the middle of the 20th century and revised in 2001 to meet contemporary needs, Bloom's taxonomy sets out a hierarchy of learning objectives, each expressed as a verb and often presented visually as a pyramid with layers labelled *remember*, *understand*, *apply*, *analyse*, *evaluate* and *create*, in that ascending order.
As language teachers, Bloom's taxonomy can help us systematically focus on the different components that comprise critical thinking, enabling us to design and plan activities that target and develop the components of critical thinking.

Classroom activities

Classroom activities that develop critical thinking skills can often be adapted for different levels of English ability and cognitive sophistication.

Categories

In this activity, students are given a set of things (objects, animals, etc.) and they work together to put the things into different categories. Given a set of animals, for example, younger learners might work in pairs to put them into categories such as *farm animals*, *wild animals* and *pets*. Older learners might put the same set of animals into categories such as *vulnerable*, *endangered* and *critically endangered*. These tasks require students to apply their knowledge and evaluate. The same task can be adapted to encourage students to practise their creative abilities by asking them to come up with the categories themselves, and by encouraging them to come up with as many weird and wonderful ways of categorising the animals as they can think of. These might include 'animals that make/don't make a nice sound', 'animals that are/aren't more intelligent than a cat' or even 'animals I would/wouldn't eat'!

Everyday Objects

Creative thinking can also be developed through the activity *Everyday Objects*. Students are given photos of simple everyday objects and are asked to work in pairs or groups to think of novel uses for the objects.
A hairbrush, for example, might be used to massage feet, or a spoon might be used as a shoehorn to put shoes on. Alternatively, you can give every pair or group a paperclip and ask them to come up with as many alternative uses as they can, from using it as a hair grip to bending it and using it as a smartphone stand.

What if…?

Some activities lend themselves well to times when you are working on a particular grammar structure with a class. An activity that is useful for developing critical thinking when you are working on conditional sentences is *What if…?* In this activity, you give the class a hypothetical question, often the more unusual the better, and students work together to consider the consequences. For example, you might give the class a question such as: *What if the colour red suddenly disappeared?* Students then come up with ideas such as: *We would have to redesign traffic lights.* Other questions might include: *What if all animals were the size of a dog?* or *What if snow tasted of strawberries?*

Critical analysis

Critical thinking skills are often employed to construct or to analyse arguments and points of view. As our students discuss, debate, read, listen and watch in the classroom (and beyond), they encounter many points of view, ranging from those on which there is a broad, well-established consensus to those that are widely disputed. It's vital that our students develop the skills they need to critically analyse the views and claims that come before them, as well as the skills they need to construct their own arguments. This can be a vast area, but it's not necessary to rebuild your entire curriculum around critical thinking in order for it to have an impact. Focusing on a few key areas of critical thinking, such as assumptions and bias, can have a noticeable effect.

Advertisement Assumptions

A good activity for focusing on assumptions and bias is *Advertisement Assumptions*. In this activity, students are placed into groups and either given a set of advertisements in different media to consider, or are asked to select their own favourite ads or ads they find interesting. Students are then asked to decide together what the underlying assumptions of the advertisements are. For example, an advertisement for a car that shows a family driving while the voiceover describes the safety features of the car assumes that parents are concerned about keeping their children safe, and that they are prepared to pay for peace of mind. It might also make assumptions about what a typical family looks like, or about various aspects of their lifestyle. This analysis of advertisements can then lead into considering the underlying assumptions of longer texts that present a point of view.

Steel Man Technique

This activity helps students explore alternative points of view. Having to deal with different points of view is a very common problem that we see in the world outside the classroom. One aspect of this is when people stick to an opinion and defend it once they are publicly committed to it, even in the face of convincing evidence to the contrary or strong opposing arguments. The *Steel Man Technique* is a good activity to counter this. Sometimes, when people argue against a point of view, they attack a 'straw man' – in other words, they don't consider the opposing point of view correctly but instead choose a slightly different, weaker position to attack, creating the illusion that they have won the argument. With the *Steel Man Technique*, students are asked to do the opposite – to put together the strongest version of the opposing argument they can come up with. For example, a group of students might be given a set of statements about the environment and are asked to choose one that they all agree on. The statements might include things like: *Everyone should become vegetarian to reduce the production of greenhouse gases* or *We should all buy less to reduce our use of natural resources*. Having chosen their statement, students then work together to construct the strongest argument they can think of against their opinion. For the second statement above, for example, the strongest argument against this opinion might include the economic consequences (job losses, company closures, etc.) of taking that action. Groups then compare the arguments they have come up with and reflect on whether they find anything convincing in the opposing view or if their understanding has become any more sophisticated.

Conclusion

There are a number of benefits to focusing on critical thinking skills in the English language classroom. It encourages our students' curiosity and promotes high-quality discussion and debate. Most of all, it provides our students with the tools they need to actively engage with the vast array of information, claims and opinions they encounter every day of their lives.

Further reading

Bowkett, Stephen, *100+ Ideas for Teaching Thinking Skills*, 2nd Edition (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007)

Cottrell, Stella, *Critical Thinking Skills* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

Matthews, Ruth and Jo Lally, *The Thinking Teacher's Toolkit* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010)

Trilling, Bernie and Charles Fadel, *21st Century Skills: Learning for life in our times* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), Chapter 3