

Critico-creative Thinking Pedagogy in ELT

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Abstract

Teaching and learning English is an energizing, purposeful, and vital experience for developing learners' competence, confidence, and creativity. It is only possible when we let our learners think critically and creatively in our ELT classroom. This article deals with the theoretical concept of critico-creative thinking as a pedagogy reflecting the practical experiences in general and in ELT in particular. It aims to suggest both teachers and learners to adopt the critico-creative pedagogical strategies while teaching and learning English.

Key words: Critical thinking, teaching creatively, critico-creative pedagogy, ELT.

Background

“Teaching is a complex interaction including subject matter, content, teacher characteristics, student characteristics, pedagogy, resources, and learning context” (Campbell, 2000, p. 50). Beyond the shadow of a doubt, as Campbell (2000) mentioned, one of the influential key factors in the process of language teaching and learning is teacher. Teacher plays a fundamental role in students' progress or lack of it. According to King Rice (2003 as cited in Ghaemi & Taherian, 2011, p. 8), teaching is a complex activity that is influenced by the many elements of teacher quality. Teacher quality is a powerful predictor of student performance. The educational system needs teachers who are researchers and in line with the new methods in teaching. These teachers think critically and always look for new teaching techniques to be effective teachers. They know how to treat their

students. In other words, they know how to be effective reflective teachers. Ur (1996 as cited in Ghaemi & Taherian, 2011, p. 10) believes that good teachers know how to challenge students. They know their students thoroughly and understand each student's leaning styles, thus they teach in a way that students will not only learn but also be intrigued by the information provided to them. Quality teachers understand students and have the capability to reach them, and know them on a personal level, to help and mentor them. Although it is difficult for a teacher to be able to reach all of his/her students in a personal level, successful teachers try their best because they need to have the students' attention and respect in order to teach them.

Critical thinking as pedagogy

Critical thinking can be defined as the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing,

synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. Critical thinking, like many other phenomena, has been defined variously by many scholars. So it is worth discussing some of those definitions. Ennis (1989 as cited in Fisher, 2011, p. 4) defines critical thinking as a “Reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do”. This definition implies that critical thinking enhances our judgmental ability.

Critical thinking is based on universal intellectual values that excel subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. In short, critical thinking is that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem- in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them. Wade (1995 as cited in Ghaemi & Taherian, 2011, p. 21) identifies eight characteristics of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves asking questions, defining a problem, examining evidence, analyzing assumptions and biases, avoiding emotional reasoning, avoiding oversimplification, considering other interpretations, and tolerating ambiguity. The researcher thinks that when our EFL teachers become familiar with these characteristics and do their best to apply them in their teaching career, they will become successful.

As a matter of fact, it is the thinking process through which people tend to gather knowledge, deconstruct the gathered knowledge and create

new knowledge. The people who think critically do not take anything for granted, no matter who says. Instead, they raise vital questions and problems, formulate them clearly, gather and assess relevant information, use abstract ideas, think open-mindedly and communicate effectively with others (Rana, 2012, p. 1). Critical thinking is sometimes known as ‘*critico-creative*’ thinking. We have two reasons for this. Firstly, it is sometimes considered as ‘negative’, as if one’s only interest is in severely criticizing other people’s arguments and ideas. Secondly, being good at evaluating arguments and ideas one often has to be very imaginative and creative about other possibilities, alternative considerations and different options. A good critical thinker does not see only faults in what other people say, you need to base your judgment on the best arguments you can devise and this often requires that you think of relevant considerations other than those presented. Critical thinking is sometimes called as “thinking outside the box” and “thinking laterally” (Khatri, 2013, p. 48). To conclude, critical thinking is that mode of thinking which stimulates higher level of thinking in individuals, and enables them to take rationale decisions analyzing different contexts skillfully and wisely.

Critical thinking is an important aspect in any learning process which can be achieved through collaborative learning. Critical thinking has been a well-established subject and a debatable research field across disciplines for a very long time. It was first introduced by Greek philosophers and has been used since the Greek Empire up to now, obtaining a significant, influential status during its extensive travel all over history. Many historians believe that the roots of critical thinking can be traced from

Socrates' teaching practice and vision 2,500 years ago. He brilliantly revealed a probing questioning method that individuals could not logically justify their assertive claims to knowledge. Promotion of critical thinking in a classroom requires a teacher to follow principles of cooperative learning, learner autonomy, many techniques of teaching such as individual work, pair work, group work, project work, jigsaw, etc. The point to be noted while carrying out these activities is that we need to ask thought-provoking questions, allow learners think independently, encourage them to raise vital questions, etc.

Teaching English creatively

Creativity involves the capacity to generate, reason with and critically evaluate novel suppositions or imaginary scenarios. It is about thinking, problem solving, inventing and reinventing, and flexing one's imaginative muscles. As such, the creative process involves risk, uncertainty, change, challenge and criticality (Cremin, 2009, p. 4). Creativity not only involves the generation of novel ideas, but also the critical evaluation of them; it involves both selection and judgment as some ideas are rejected, while others may be pursued in more depth.

If teachers are to adopt innovative ways forward in their English teaching, they need to reconcile the tension between the drive for measurable standards on the one hand and the development of creativity on the other. As children move through school, they quickly learn how the system works and suppress their spontaneous creativity. Teaching for creativity, by contrast, focuses on developing children's creativity, their capacity to experiment with ideas and information, alone and with others. The two

processes are very closely related. Teachers need to be able to stand back and let the children take the lead, supporting them as they take risks, encounter problems and map out their own learning journeys, setting their own goals and agreeing some of their own success criteria in the process.

Creativity also critically involves making connections with other areas learning, with other texts and experiences. Through their own questioning stance, creative teachers actively encourage pupils to make associations and connections, perhaps through connecting to prior learning, making links between subjects and/or across different media for example. Such teachers make personal connections in the context of literature discussions and share inter-textual connections to prompt children to make their own connections.

The creative process may involve rational and non-rational thought and may be fed by daydreaming and intuition as well as the application of knowledge and skills. The ability to give and receive criticism is an essential part of creativity, so teachers will want to encourage evaluation through supportive and honest feedback, as well as self-reflection and review. When learners are engaged in mindful, negotiated and interactive practices in English, they are more prepared to review their ongoing development work, as well as reflect upon the decisions they have made and the final outcome produced (Cremin, 2009, p. 9).

Creative teachers, as Sternberg (1999) suggests, are creative role models themselves; professionals who continue to be self-motivated learners, value the creative dimensions of their own lives and make connections between their personal responses to experience and their

teaching. Such teachers are willing and able to express themselves, even though this involves taking risks and being observed in the process. In reflecting upon the combination of practice and theory offered, it is hoped that teachers will appreciate more fully the potential of teaching English creatively and teaching for creativity in English.

Reflecting my experience of teaching through critico-creative perspective

As per the nature of the course of study and my exposure on the ELT theories, ideas and practices obtained from attending national and international conferences, workshops, seminars and trainings, I planned to translate all of them into reality expecting to be a figure of appreciation not only in the heart of learners but also in the eyes of administration. The first lesson of the course prescribed to be taught from the book *New Directions: Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking* is 'American Values and Assumptions' written by Gary Althen. I started my first lesson with university level students for the first time from my own introduction letting them get chance to guess with appropriate clues. I asked them to guess my first name by providing one clue: "My first name is after any one of the three supreme gods of Hindu. Can anyone guess?" Somebody said Bishnu, some others guessed 'Shiva' and very few of them said 'Brahma'. I asked them to raise their hands who said 'Bishnu' and asked rest students to clap loudly for their accurate guess. After letting them to guess my name, I introduced myself as 'busy Bishnu'. Then I asked all the students to think and write one adjective after their first letter of their name which characterizes them best or at least they prefer to be called or introduced by that word. After few minutes later, I asked,

"Did you complete your task? Are you ready?" "I asked them to introduce with their first name along with one adjective that characterizes them best from the first letter of their first name. Each student introduced himself or herself by remembering the names and adjectives of their previously introduced friends. During the introduction with an adjective, some students reported that it was very difficult to find adjectives. I helped them find suitable adjectives.

Having done the introduction chapter, I asked them to think and write a paragraph about the American people, their way of life they have known or imagined, their behavior and daily activities, the norms and values they are guided by, their perspectives towards other people and the world, etc. The students were asked to share their writings and after that they were divided into five groups assigning the names after the first letters of the key feature of American values and assumptions: individualism and informality (I), competition and change (C), privacy and progress (P), equality (E), time (T), and action and assertiveness (A). Each group was assigned to read the given key features of American values and assumptions given on the reading text and list out some key points. After that, they were asked to share their understandings among others and think about their own practices in their own context and culture regarding the key features. They were asked to involve in group discussion, 'Americans are not trained in close-knit interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation or any other collectivity (Gardner, 2005, p. 5)', what about in your context and culture? 'Individualistic Americans naturally see themselves being in competition with others (Gardner, 2005, p. 7)', what about you in your

context? Americans believe ‘History doesn’t matter, it’s the future that counts’, what do we think? etc. After the discussion, they were asked to write an essay on “Nepalese Values and Assumptions” as their home assignment. At last, the lesson was summed up. Can we create critical thinking-friendly environment in our ELT classroom?

What I enjoyed in my first class of university level students was that I was not feeling of teaching and being tired of crying loudly but just playing with them and letting them to do something themselves rather than preaching them everything from my best effort. For the first time, I felt like teaching. It was a fun creating and playing with content letting the learners to explore themselves and facilitating the learners to explore the subject matters wherever they need. When I tried to continue of teaching from that perspective I encountered some challenges too because the expectations of the students and current practice of teaching were not compatible. I did not provide any notes and summary of the texts rather let them write themselves. The students complained to the administration and to me demanding that I should provide summary of the reading texts because this is what they will be asked in the examination. They wanted to learn what would be asked in the examination; not the thing that creates fun and burden to think and do activities themselves. They asked me to give them the summaries of the lessons and tips, which were supposed to be very important for the examination purpose. The students were worried about the examination; rather than learning something with their own best efforts. Then I thought to change my teaching strategies to provide my perspective on the subject matter as the note to them not at the beginning but at

the last of the discussion after letting them to read, think and write something on the subject matter. Although it can be problematic in large classes, we can create learning- friendly environment through critical thinking perspective by changing the software of students and teachers’ traditional perceptions and practices of teaching-learning process.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is an essential skill that everyone should develop in course of time to find out more distinct aspect of anything than that is: the higher the level of education, the greater is the importance of critical thinking. Therefore, we should let the learners be well-informed that they are basically responsible for their learning. They should not be just passive receiver of knowledge, but also active participant in the classroom. Creating critico-creative learning-friendly environment in ELT classroom is urgent in the post-method practices. For that, it is necessary to change both policies and practices of teaching learning. As for teachers, they should become aware that being critical thinkers will help them increase their teaching success. It fosters their inferential abilities and enhances their deep understanding of teaching. CT will help them become flexible, reflective and effective teachers who are critical thinkers and this can reflect on their students as well in that it can help the students to apply argumentation and reasoning and implement it to all language skills. EFL practitioners and material developers should arrange some in service courses for EFL teachers to familiarize them with critical thinking benefits and advantages in teaching. Through these courses EFL teachers can properly exploit their potentialities of applying higher CT ability in

improving their teaching success. In these courses, teacher trainers should provide EFL teachers with information on the characteristics of critical thinking. They should also make them aware of thinking instructions and their usefulness in EFL domain.

About the author

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