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Critical thinking for writing

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Abstract

Students are expected to acquire language skills such as writing, listening and speaking during their English as a foreign language learning experiences. Writing in fact in language training is one of the most difficult tasks and includes a number of skills: spelling, usage of grammar, vocabulary, organization of lexis, etc. Writing is one of the most important tools to foster critical thinking skills. Therefore, in writing lessons, students need to be able to understand and analyze what they are going to write. If students' critical thinking skills are activated during writing, very successful results can be attained. In this paper, writing was described and problems in writing activities were explained. The nature of critical thinking also was explained and the advantages of their application in writing activities and the teacher should create a supportive atmosphere in class to encourage students to write more freely, were outlined.

Keywords: critical thinking, English teaching, practice, writing.

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Introduction

Language teaching process is an art that is shaped by experience and knowledge. Like in the other field of occupation, the professionalism and qualifications are essential components in teaching (Day, 1999; Hoyle & John, 1995, cited in Aydın et al., 2016). In this respect with regard to teaching, the process of learning a foreign language is a very complex and difficult activity for the student yet an important one as it requires teacher professionalism and qualification. It is an activity that naturally includes many different thinking and other skills. Each one of these facets can carry significance for the student. Indeed, it is - and has always been - necessary that the study of any language is conducted with each of these dimensions. For example, the student will certainly need to begin by learning the proper pronunciation of words in the English language when English is being taught as a foreign language. In addition, the use of words and combination of words into sentences requires great effort in language activities in lessons. In these activities, students have to utilize the relevant and suitable rules of grammar, semantics, and other related concern areas. Aside from the need to clearly understand and utilize the basic grammar and syntax associated with the language, there is also the basic need to formulate and conceptualize ideas within a linguistic context so that the message the individual wants to convey is clear. This means that students analyze and synthesize the text thoroughly by looking from different perspectives, the last step is to evaluate the text by reflecting their own understandings by producing their own ideas.

According to Zhao et al. (2016), explicit instruction in EFL classrooms requires that teachers must not only understand how Critical thinking relates to language learning, but also be able to explain, model, and infuse the concept of Critical thinking into their lesson designs and classroom activities. In English reading instruction, for example, teachers can explicitly teach the following key Critical thinking skills related to reading through explaining, modeling, as well as student practicing. These skills involve (a) analytical skills (analysis): identifying main claims and supported reasons, identifying the writing techniques, and summarising the main idea; (b) inferential skills (inference and interpretation): making predictions, detecting the authors' purpose and tone, drawing logic conclusions, and interpreting figurative language; and (c) evaluative skills (evaluation and explanation), such as evaluating the accuracy and credibility of the claims, evidence, and sources, evaluating the logic strength of arguments, distinguishing facts from opinions, questioning the text, commenting on the author's use of language." All the same, critical thinking has many advantages in every language skill.

Thinking and Critical Thinking

One of the basic questions facing educators has always been “Where do we begin in seeking to improve human thinking?” (Houghton, 2004). Benjamin Bloom extensively contemplated the nature of thinking, eventually authoring or co-authoring 18 books. According to a biography of Bloom, written by a former student Eisner, (2002) “It was clear that he was in love with the process of *finding out*, and finding out is what I think he did best. One of Bloom's great talents was having a nose for what is significant” (Forehand, 2005). Thinking activity, on the whole, helps us find remedies for our problems, make sensible decisions, and reach our aims and goals. Thinking is not a passive process; conversely, it is an active process. So, thinking activity is able to be put into consideration in two aspects: to achieve a goal and to make a decision. According to Chaffee (2000), “thinking is a purposeful, organized, cognitive process that we use to make sense of the world”. Concerning with teaching activities, there is a tiny evidence that learners at universities grasp critical thinking knowledge and skill/s in their courses. According to Celep (1993; cited in Ungan, 2007), the Turkish education system is a type of “read and repeat” model. This means that students get knowledge which is based on rote memorization from their teachers or textbooks and give similar answers to the questions in the examinations without any original thought.

Throughout the last decades, there have been many definitions of critical thinking. The idea of critical thinking has been taken into consideration since the times of Socrates, 2500 years ago. Dewey's attempt to define critical thinking in the field of education received the largest interest because thinking is the crucial point in the learning process. Other important names in critical thinking are Ennis and Norris who gave a very similar definition on it. According to Ennis (1985), critical thinking is “reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do”. However, Norris (1985) defined critical thinking as “deciding rationally what to do or what to believe”. When we come to the 21st century, critical thinking is still of great importance in society and in education accordingly. Schafersman (1991) claims that besides its salience in education, critical thinking enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who takes an active role in society. In a similar way, experts mention that except from knowledge, students should be taught thinking and reasoning skills to enable them to think critically and come over the problems to deal with the complexity of contemporary life. At this viewpoint, having critical thinking skills becomes “the most important characteristic of successful individuals” (Baker & Delmonico, 1999).

With regard to the vital place of critical thinking in teaching and learning activities, critical thinking is considered to be a highlighted issue in the field of EFL in these days, like in other spheres of education such as mathematics, history and etc. Üstünlüoğlu (2004) in her paper, 'Language Teaching Through Critical Thinking and Self-awareness', stated that language teachers had recently concentrated on the active status of the student in classrooms, and this concentration brought cognitive learning theories on the agenda rather than behaviourism. The education system in Turkey may be a typical example of the situation as Schafersman describes, above. In a parallel way, researchers (Dayıoğlu, 2003; İrfaner, 2002,) agree with the common idea of the researchers abroad that despite its significance, critical thinking is not emphasized in classrooms. In Turkey, there have been very limited studies on critical thinking and only a few departments underline critical thinking in their curriculum (Yıldız, 2007).

Critical Thinking for Writing

Around 4100-3800 BC, the tokens began to be symbols that could be impressed or inscribed in clay to represent a record of land, grain or cattle, and a written language was beginning to develop (see, <http://www.historian.net/hxwrite.htm>). Since the Stone Age, homo sapiens has been involved in writing processes in different ways under various forms. They range from rock scripts, which depict hunt pictures, followed by the images of gods and spirits, tracing the symbolic messages from one Indian tribe to another till up to date e-letter. Throughout millenniums writing has been an integral part of human's activities. Unlike most of their ancestors in the early twenty-first century, our great-grandparents were patient and diligent enough to be able to turn writing to an everyday activity, a necessity, which bred enthusiasm for creative reflection.

During their formal education, students are mainly required to write assignments and reports to demonstrate they have mastered writing. Generally, in language teaching, usage is not focused on the real communication as Widdowson (1978) says, that is technical and practical aspects of writing are supported. Students and teachers are generally focusing on specific errors like grammar, spelling, and punctuation. However, more holistic aspects such as the sense of self and identity, writers' emotional orientation and the creative aspect which contribute to the quality of writing are less emphasized (Antoniou & Moriarty, 2008). So, students get bored and are reluctant, plus they feel the anxiety of writing in a foreign language. Anxious students show negative attitudes towards writing and find it unrewarding. Then, there arises the problems like the lack of student involvement,

student disinterest, and students' assumption that the work is useless. Especially, when the time is limited, students cannot make up their minds to produce a well-formed paper. Critical thinking is regarded as a life-long process, and universities and other educational institutions are accepted as the building blocks where the foundation of critical thinking is laid; accordingly, critical thinking has become a hot topic in education as day by day the educators become aware of the significance of emphasizing thinking critically in every field of education to help students to deal with the difficulties of real life that is getting harder and harder. Educators and researchers have recently come up with a new way of enhancing critical thinking of language students- in writing activities. Now, of the various means used to improve critical thinking in education, literature is regarded as a valuable instrument.

In a most recent study, Fahim, Miri, and Najafi (2014) explored the relationship between enhancing critical thinking skills and improving second language writing skills. They specifically investigated the role of collaborative assessment in promoting critical thinking and second language writing skill.

Marin and Pava (2017) say that a critical thinker in EFL was characterized by being an active learner who constantly asked questions and searched for information to establish relationships between L2 learning and other aspects of his daily life. It is a person who was capable of analyzing and organizing his thoughts to express them by speaking and writing, always had something to say in relation to the topics dealt in class and puts into practice what had been learned.

Problem

In writing activities, the teacher basically gives a topic for students to write about which can leave them behind with confused minds so students can be unwilling to write. Learners in general, do not have many choices except writing on a piece of paper concerning what was given by their teacher/s. The learners have to follow the rules of grammar and feedback given by their teachers. In the research of writing activity strategies, researchers tried to demonstrate effective writing activities, Flower and Hayes presented the Cognitive Processes of Writing. And then, there has been a move from written materials to some of the ways that learners compose written work with the help of cognitive activities and the manner in which they reflect their ideas and thoughts onto a piece of paper (Dyson, 1990; McGee & Richgels, 2000). From a pedagogical point of view, realizing and recognizing the needs of foreign language writers who are incompetent in writing, is valuable, (Kibler, 2010). So, teachers need to consider each student as a person, communicate with them mutually and

form empathy. The best teachers provide enough strategies to students which help them in their future academic writing assignments (Shannon, 1994).

But to concentrate on the content created by the imagination of students is important. In fact, writing should be a lively thing to combine communication and comprehension. Therefore, the ability to engage in effective critical thinking when using the English language is highly dependent upon the user's ability to effectively dissect such linguistic concepts in the first place (Tosuncuoglu, 2018).

Practice in the Class

One of the primary reasons that students do not wish to write may be that although they have enough grammar and vocabulary, they do not want to share their thoughts with anybody. They may worry that it can embarrass them before their friends and teacher. For example, let suppose a theme, which is going to be written on, is which one is important: money or love (*which is popular now among young people*). The idea that comes to a student's mind first may be news or a TV serial, or a debate etc., which s/he watched recently. Most probably it will motivate the student to make some references in writing composition.

The other student in the class can feel rather embarrassed. The student can hardly express his/her ideas in the writing. The writings may differ from one student to another student. How can we, as teachers, behave in such situations in order to let the writing process be smooth and open, and fruitful?

A first and very meaningful condition to facilitate this process is to create a comfortable and trusting atmosphere from the very beginning of the course, that is to say, that the teacher is to set up a friendly atmosphere in the class. Here, the duty of the teacher is to be helpful by providing students with a supportive atmosphere from the beginning till the end of the course, because it mustn't be forgotten that every single student is an excellent source for learning if treated as a real personality. Bright and successful papers come from creative ideas; creative ideas do not come from anything. There is to be a need, strong and fixed, leading to a further level of motivation, in order to empower the writers to create.

Such a lesson is a perfect example of a fruitful learning process, in which both the teacher and students are accustomed to working for mutual benefit. Students' fears while the teacher checks the paper as "The idea I'll have to present makes me uncomfortable" or "I don't want to be a laughed at" etc. are measurable and worth of pedagogical challenge via cooperative and other methods to be turned into a right and proper direction. Being close to

students in today's authentic learning is extremely important. Finding links between studying materials and real life makes a lot of sense in terms of students' awareness of the meaning of their writing. In addition, such references evoke students to write, they work for activating various processes for deeper and more thorough analyses.

Conclusion

There exists a powerful and irresistible relationship between the development of formidable and deep language skills with regards to the effective utilization of English as a foreign language and the parallel development of equally formidable critical thinking skills. For this reason, an educational and academic process that involves the utilization of a multi-dimensional approach to the teaching of language skills that includes a deep focus on the use of critical thinking skills will be one that naturally involves a holistic approach to education.

Together with *thinking skills*, dispositions, intellectual resources, metacognition and other related elements found in the literature, learners must be exposed to opportunities and give chances to think critically (Marin & Pava, 2017). As an implication it can be stated here that; one of the main characteristics of a teacher of critical thinking is to be a wise facilitator, to get appropriate output to reflect on every classroom taught for raising critical thinkers, current and future leaders of their countries. And if the teachers let the students feel confident, they cooperatively can reach success in composing writing. Critical thinking strategies help us encourage students to compete thoughtfully, healthily evaluate personal needs alongside the needs of the people around, to see every useful possibility or opportunity in order to forget the fear that one student will create a better writing. To sum up, critical thinking strategies help teachers encourage students to compete thoughtfully, healthily and see every useful possibility or opportunity in order to forget the fear against writing and it can be regarded as one of the most suitable means in supporting critical thinking in education since it reflects real life in the best way.

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