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## **A practical approach to critical thinking among EFL learners**

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**Abstract:** There is no dispute among academicians when it is stated that critical thinking is an important study skill of the 21st century. It goes without saying that critical thinking has been playing a significant role in learning for the last few years but, the pertinent question is ‘Are learners serious and focused in developing the skill during the learning process?’ At the same time, teachers and lecturers as well are not so successful in developing the skill of analysis and evaluation among learners before they form opinions. We fail to see critical thinking skills among students even at the higher level of education. Bearing in mind these scenarios, this presentation aims to identify the need for integrating critical thinking into English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in the general foundation program (GFP) and to provide an insight for teachers to design and use learning strategies to inculcate the skill of ‘thinking out of the box’ among learners. The study attempts to explore different strategies which enhance critical thinking among learners.

**Keywords:** critical thinking; strategy use; metacognitive skills.

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## 1 Historical review

Thinking skills programs have begun to be an important topic and desirable goal in higher education (Halx and Reybold, 2006). Critical thinking is not a new method in the teaching and learning process. Socrates discovered critical thinking in ancient times through a method of questioning as rational thinking evaded individuals when justifying claims to knowledge (Vardyan and Zhanna, 2011). This method of probing questioning is now known as ‘Socratic questioning’ and is the best teaching strategy known in inculcating critical thinking among learners.

He established that though a person may be in power and highly positioned could yet be deeply confused and exhibit irrational thinking. Socrates believed that probing questions are important for thinking before one accepts ideas which are worthy to believe. In this approach of questioning, he emphasised the need of thinking for lucidity and rational regularity. This practice was later followed by Plato, Aristotle and the Greek sceptics, who accentuated that ideas or things appear very different from what they really are and that only a skilled thinker could probably look through the way things look on the surface to the way they really are beneath the surface. In the later ages, the practice of methodical thinking appeared in the writings and teaching of likeminded thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas who intensified the acute need for a latent power of reasoning which is to be scientifically inculcated in individuals.

### 1.1 Objectives of the study

- 1 To explore practical approaches to enhance critical thinking among students.
- 2 To investigate the reasons for lack of critical thinking among students.
- 3 To study the outcomes of the approaches used.

## 2 Literature review

A study by DeSimone (2013) in ‘Teaching and assessing ‘critical thinking’ in undergraduate business education’ mentions that one of the main problems regarding teaching critical thinking skills is that there are different conceptualisations of the meaning of CT itself (Cook et al., 1996) and the institution of a wide variety of methods to accomplish the teaching of CT skills. Students with strong and positive attitudes regarding critical thinking will have strong normative beliefs associated with the skill, and these beliefs, in turn, will affect self-identity as a critical thinker (Celuch et al., 2009). Snyder and Snyder (2008, p.91) similarly suggest that “students should be thinking about their thinking.” They also assume that: “people who can hear don’t always listen, people with the ability to learn, don’t always think critically.” They also assume that students do not know ‘how’ to think critically.

A study by Kanik (2010) on ‘An assessment of the’ conceptions of critical thinking and practices for critical thinking development at seventh grade level’ states two approaches to the teaching of thinking skills (Lipman, 1994): this view of thinking suggests that thinking consists of a set of specific skills, such as comparing, ordering, classifying, and predicting, which are considered to have wide applicability and generalisability across all subjects (Lipman, 1994). Accordingly, the skill-oriented

approach suggests that the critical thinking skills should be taught directly or explicitly through separate courses or instructional units in courses. However, the other one is the content-oriented view. The proponents of the content oriented view suggest that thinking cannot be separated from content as it is a way of learning content.

Zohar and Dori (2003) stress that successful learning can be attained by incorporating the thinking skills into all school level subjects, which allows students to use the skills in a meaningful context and helps them learn the subject matter deeply and apply it out of school settings (Beyer, 1988; Eggen and Kauchak, 2001; Johnson, 2000). Therefore, the integration of the critical thinking skills into the regular curriculum is stressed in this view. According to Quitadamo et al. (2011) critical thinking is an important skill that every college-bound student will need to develop. Instructors need to find ways to enhance students' critical thinking skills, especially in the science classroom (Quitadamo et al., 2011). This framework includes that utilisation of Bloom's taxonomy to link between debates, increased metacognitive skills, and higher-order function as a result of debating (Magno, 2010).

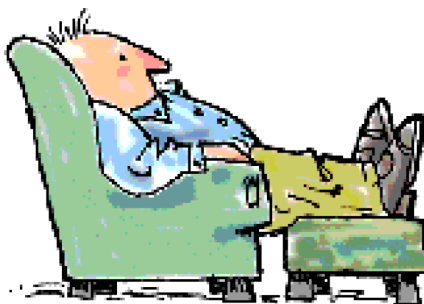
Many educators such as Littlewood (1996), Sheerin (1997) and Wenden (1991) focus on learners' willingness and ability to take responsibility for their own learning and to develop effective learning strategies. According to Purdie et al. (1996, p.87), autonomous learners are "purposeful, strategic, and persistent in their learning." They have the ability to evaluate their own progress in line with the goals they have set and to refine subsequent behaviour in the light of that self-evaluation. Robbins (1999) and Yang (1998) provide evidence that teachers play an important role in promoting students' awareness of language learning strategies, their self-direction in learning, as well as their experience of overall autonomy.

Brown and Campione (1990) argue that, for any literate community, texts are major sources of information and anybody who intends to join such a community should know how to learn from reading and writing. By reading they mean the ability to understand and construct meanings, critically evaluate texts and apply new knowledge creatively in other situations.

Definition of critical thinking: critical thinking is when you turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream.

That's a pretty good definition, isn't it?

**Figure 1** Critical Thinking defined (see online version for colours)



*Source:* Dowden (2002)

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 skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking imposing intellectual standards upon them (Elder and Paul, 2008).

Critical thinking calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends (Glaser, 1941).

Dewey (1909, p.9) called critical thinking ‘reflective thinking’ and defined it as “an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.”

- 1 *Webster dictionary*: using or involving careful judgment about the good and bad parts of something.
- 2 *Oxford dictionary*: the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgement.
- 3 *Cambridge English dictionary*: the process of thinking carefully about a subject or idea, without allowing feelings or opinions to affect you.
- 4 *Dictionary.com*: critical thinking is disciplined thinking that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence:
  - Wenden and Rubin (1987, p.19) define learning strategies as “... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information.”
  - Richards and Platt (1992, p.209) state that learning strategies are “intentional behaviour and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to better help them understand, learn, or remember new information.”
  - Faerch and Casper (1983, p.67) stress that a learning strategy is “an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language.”
  - According to Stern (1992, p.261) “the concept of learning strategy is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques.”
- 5 *Metacognition* allows people to take charge of their own learning. It involves awareness of how they learn, an evaluation of their learning needs, generating strategies to meet these needs and then implementing the strategies (Hacker et al., 2009).

### **3 Metacognitive strategies**

According to O’Malley and Chamot (1990) metacognitive strategies involve thinking about (or knowledge of) the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring learning while it is taking place, or self-evaluation of learning after the task had been completed.

## 4 Background of the study

As per Bloom's taxonomy, critical thinking involves high order thinking skills. According to Socrates, the best teaching strategy is appropriate questioning. The study firstly explores the nature of critical thinking in EFL classrooms.

**Figure 2** New version of Blooms' taxonomy (see online version for colours)



*Source:* Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)

Tan's study in 2007 explored the attitude of students towards critical thinking in an EFL classroom. The study was done on teachers' questioning behaviour, which found that university students confronting higher-order questions preferred remaining silent rather than venturing into an unsure idea, fearing that it might not meet the teacher's expectations and that it might be negatively evaluated. The study points out that critical thinking is practised in classrooms when the teacher even after successfully eliciting an answer from the student, would ask the student a series of questions of how s/he arrived at the said answer, requiring a justification to the answer.

Much research has been conducted on high order questioning, the results of which show that students have improved their thinking skills.

## 5 Significance of critical thinking skills

According to the study by Danuwong (2006) on 'The role of metacognitive strategies in promoting learning English as a foreign language independently' strategy use plays a significant role for successful learning through different disciplines and enhances an effective independent learning system. Research studies suggest that metacognition is essential in learning both content and language learning. However, research also proves that metacognition is specific for a certain area of study. This insight into strategy use that students from diverse disciplines have and that these strategies enhance autonomy when learning content knowledge and language. Understanding of learners' existing knowledge and experiences and learning about learner independence (in learning the major subject discipline) can provide. The teacher/instructor is to be provided with specific and clear guidelines on ways of how students develop autonomy in language learning. Consequently, learners will be equipped with suitable learning strategies to improve learning and 'learning how to learn'. Furthermore, this awareness on the

importance of critical thinking will enhance learners' preparedness to engage in careers and professions with adequate confidence and assurance to endure and improve the acquired information and knowledge.

“...don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21st century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking.” – President Barack Obama [Harvey et al., (2014), p.77, <https://www.districtadministration.com/article/gearing-new-assessment>]

According to Rayhanul Islam (2015) critical thinking is the ability to analyse the way you think and present evidence for your ideas, rather than simply accepting your personal reasoning as sufficient proof. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities from solving problems in class assignments, to facing real world situations. It is a valuable skill for students to master that can be applied to any situation in life that calls for reflection, analysis and planning.

It can improve the way we express our ideas, in learning how to analyse the logical structure of texts. Critical thinking also improves comprehension abilities and helps to come up with creative solutions to problems not just having new ideas. It must also be the case that the new ideas being generated are useful and relevant to the task at hand.

According to Elder and Paul (2008) authors of 'Critical thinking development: a stage theory', students who know how to analyse and critique ideas are able to make connections across disciplines, see knowledge as useful and applicable to daily life and understand content on a deeper, more lasting level. Rather than relying on teachers and classroom time for instruction and guidance, students with critical thinking skills become more independent, self-directed learners. Zhang (2009) writes that critical thinking enables students to assess their learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, and allows them to take ownership of their education.

## 6 Methodology

A case study was conducted to investigate how strategy use could enhance critical thinking among students in level 3 from the general foundation program (GFP), across three semesters. The qualitative data was collected through classroom observations and informal interviews with students and teachers while the quantitative data was obtained through teacher surveys and result analysis of the three semesters.

The following strategies were used in three consecutive semesters.

- Strategy 1 Students were divided into small groups and were given case studies to come out with solutions. The solutions were presented to the class through a PowerPoint presentation. The A model template of the case study was given to students before the beginning of the task:
- Strategy 2 According to the study by Tawil (2016) classroom debates enhanced students' overall critical thinking which proves that debating is an important instructional tool for students gain the skills necessary to be better critical thinkers. Therefore, based on this research finding students were engaged and evaluated on their performance in debates and group discussions believing that these techniques enhance critical thinking as it requires students to think critically before they form their opinions and arguments.

The debating topics were derived from the six units of the *Intermediate Level Language Leader* course book by David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent, used in the Language Centre. However, care has been taken to see that the topics were close to students' life. The students were divided into groups and were asked to choose any one topic and were given a week's time to prepare for the debate. The students, in their respective groups, were assisted by the teacher in making clear arguments with reasoning before the actual debate.

Strategy 3 *Text analysis* is thinking critically about the objectivity of a text and trying to understand the purpose of the text. It helps to recognise the structure of the text and understand how a text is put together, draw inferences from the text and perhaps challenge the author's view point. Students were provided with an extensive reading text from the student's area of study or a newspaper and magazine article for analysis, covering prediction, deduction and inference.

Strategy 4 *Content-based instruction (CBI)*: students were given different topics in pairs. Students procured information from different sources, such as websites, reference books and encyclopaedias. The information was shared through a PowerPoint presentation. CBI is a methodology that aims to integrate the teaching of content with language teaching goals, i.e., to "concurrent(ly) teach ... academic subject matter and second language skills".

Approach: use of handouts: the handouts included low level questions on issues covered for academic reading and writing, to procure information on themes with a critical evaluation. The themes included telecommuting, global warming, advertising, pollution, population explosion, crime and tourism. The students visited the college library to collect information on the themes and delivered a presentation in a PowerPoint format to the class. This activity was included in the continuous assessment and students were evaluated.

Strategy 5 *Graphic organisers*: another way to enhance critical thinking among students is to use graphic organisers. A graphic organiser requires students to use different critical thinking skills. Different graphic organisers were used in the reading skill to recognise text patterns, review material, organise information and to integrate prior knowledge with new information.

## **7 Summary of classroom observations**

Every semester two classes of the level 3 reading skill were observed. A total of six classes were observed in the three semesters. Handouts were designed and marking criteria for the continuous assessments were fixed. The strategies were included in the course outlines to ensure that the strategies were used by all the teachers in the classrooms. Students participated well in the debates and case studies, while their response in CBI, use of graphic organisers and text analysis was average.

## 8 Summary of teacher and student interviews

The teachers and two students from each class were interviewed after the classroom observation. The students said that the tasks were interesting and enabled them to think about forming opinions and recommending solutions to problems specifically in case studies and debates. The students opined that text analysis, CBI and the use of graphic organisers need more practice in class. The teachers expressed that the attempt to improve the critical thinking skills of students was successful to a certain extent and they stated that more practice and hours are required for effective results among all students.

### 8.1 Summary of teacher survey

The following are the details of lecturers and students who have taken the survey in each semester.

**Table 1** Details of students' survey

<i>Semester</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
1	50
2	50
3	50

**Table 2** Details of teachers' survey

<i>Semester</i>	<i>Number of teachers</i>
1	6
2	6
3	6

**Figure 3** Analysis of students' survey (see online version for colours)

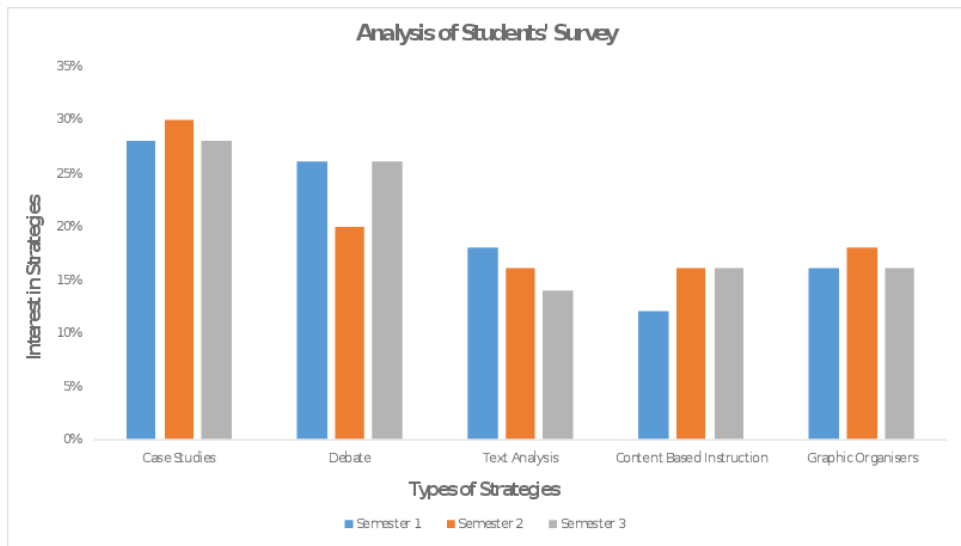
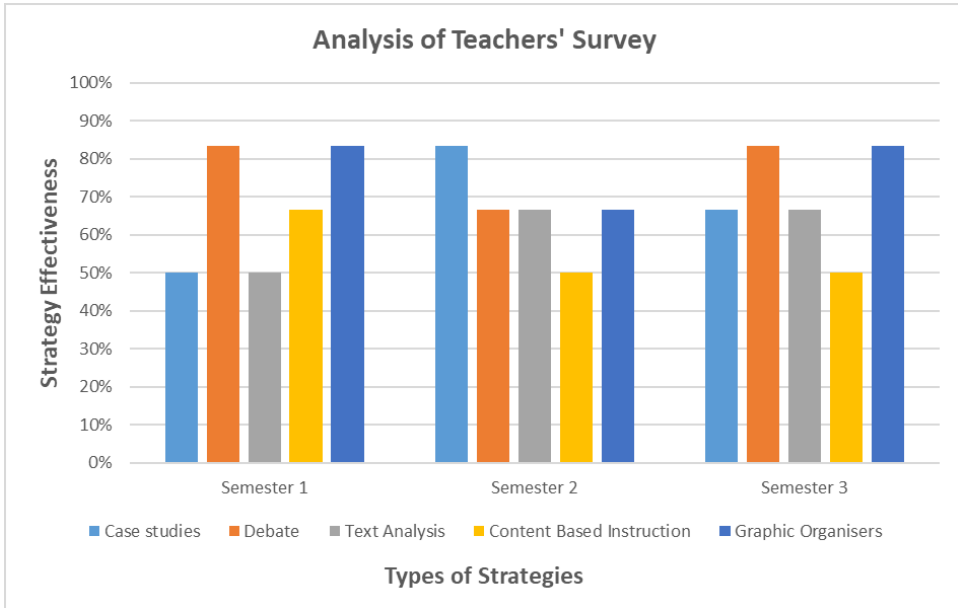




Figure 3 indicates that majority of the students showed interest in case studies and debates across the three semesters. The graph also indicates that students' interest in text analysis, CBI and graphic organisers was less than in the other strategies.

**Figure 4** Analysis of teachers' survey (see online version for colours)



**Figure 5** Result analysis across three semesters (see online version for colours)

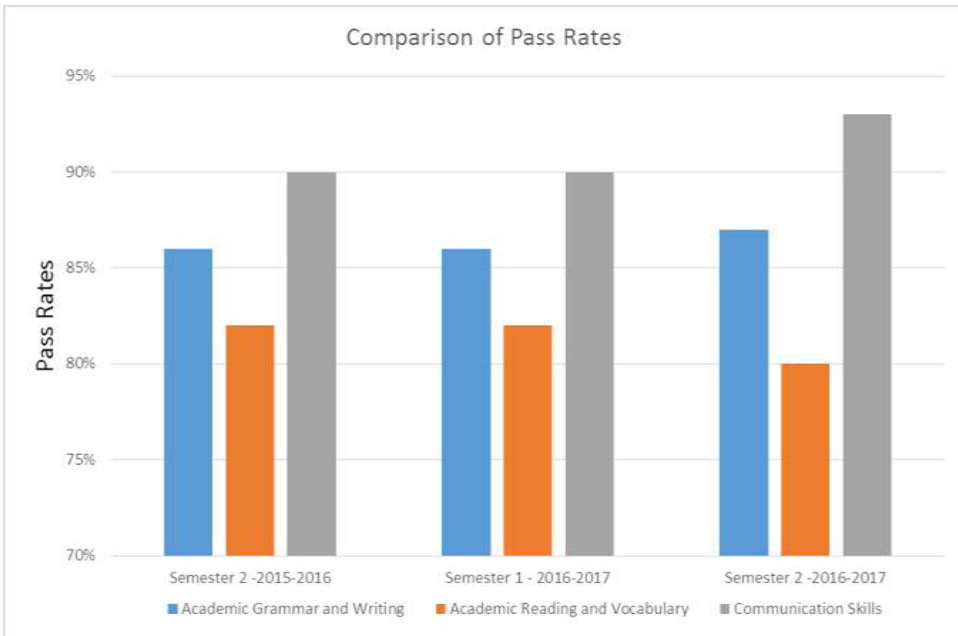


Figure 4 indicates that most of the teachers found the use of graphic organisers and debate effective to enhance critical thinking among students. The graph also shows that the percentages remained the same for text analysis and CBI in two consecutive semesters. The graph shows a fluctuation in percentages for the case studies across the three semesters.

Figure 5 indicates the highest percentage in communication skills which involved learners in debates. Next, the chart shows the pass rate in the writing skills remained steady in all the three semesters. However, the graph indicates that the pass rate in the reading skill which included graphic organisers, CBI and text analysis decreased in the third semester of the study.

## 9 Findings

The study shows the following findings:

- 1 The classroom observations show students participated well in the debates and case studies, while their response in CBI, use of graphic organisers and text analysis was average.
- 2 The student interviews indicate that the tasks were interesting and enabled them to think about forming opinions and recommending solutions to problems specifically in case studies and debates.
- 3 The students opined that text analysis, CBI and the use of graphic organisers needed more practice in class.
- 4 The teachers expressed that the attempt to improve the critical thinking skills of students was successful to a certain extent and that more practice and hours were required for effective results among all students.
- 5 The results of the student survey indicate that the majority of the students showed interest in case studies and debates across the three semesters.
- 6 The results of the student survey also indicate that students' interest in text analysis, CBI and graphic organisers was less than in the other strategies.
- 7 The results of the teachers' survey indicate that majority of the teachers found the use of graphic organisers and debate effective to enhance critical thinking among students.
- 8 The survey also shows that the percentages remained the same for text analysis and CBI in two consecutive semesters and a fluctuation in percentages for the case studies across the three semesters.
- 9 The result analysis indicates that the highest percentage in communication skills which involved learners in debates.
- 10 Next, the chart shows the pass rate in the writing skills remained steady in all the three semesters. However, the graph indicates that the pass rate in the reading skill, which included graphic organisers, CBI and text analysis decreased in the third semester of the study.

## **10 Limitations of the study**

The current study was conducted only with a small sample and for only three semesters of level 3 of the course. The sample was selected from only one research site. However, this study raises an alert about the different strategies that could be used practically in EFL classrooms by teachers to enhance the critical thinking skills of students.

## **11 Discussion of the findings**

Finally, the study shows that using different strategies was found to be a good attempt to enhance thinking skills of the students at level 3. It indicates that the strategy-use approach enabled students to take charge of their own learning and developed their cognitive abilities suitable for the needs of higher education to a certain extent. The presentation identifies the need for integrating critical thinking into EFL teaching in the general foundation program and it provides an insight for teachers to design and use learning strategies to inculcate the skill of critical thinking among learners.

## **12 Conclusions**

This paper has discussed a practical approach to enhance critical thinking among EFL learners by exploring different strategies. It is evident that learners need to be aware of their own learning to achieve their goals.

The study highlighted how different strategies could be used in EFL classrooms to enhance metacognitive thinking in students.

Firstly, teachers should explore innovative strategies, taking into consideration the learning styles of learners. The above-mentioned strategies enable teachers to assist students in using strategies such as problem-solving, prediction, skimming, scanning, guessing, summarising, paraphrasing and inference, specifically in the reading skill. The strategy-use approach enhances the metacognitive skills such as independent learning and problem-solving in teams.

The study concludes that strategy use in language acquisition indeed has an impact on critical thinking at the GFP level and that it can be applied to any situation in life that calls for reflection, analysis and planning. However, the result analysis shows that strategy use needs careful planning by teachers for a positive outcome in inculcating critical thinking skills among EFL learners.

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