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Aspects in the Development of Critical Thinking in Asian EFL Higher Education: A Critical Review

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Abstract:

Critical thinking is one of the most demanded skills for educational goals, job security, and problem solving in the lifelong process of 21st- century learners. Thus, various specialised courses in education have adopted approaches that integrate critical thinking throughout the curriculum. From the perspective of English language teaching, teachers, researchers, and syllabus writers are committed to the development of learners' language acquisition through critical thinking as a language pedagogical approach. Empirical studies have frequently demonstrated a high positive correlation between leaners' critical thinking skills and their language proficiency gains. However, in the Asian EFL context of higher education, the practice of critical thinking skills in language classrooms is not yet well supported widely. In order to clarify the essential place of critical thinking in EFL education, through the insightful discussion on the relevant literature background, this critical review of the literature suggests ways to improve English language teaching that incorporate critical thinking in three major areas: (1) language teaching instructional strategies that incorporate critical thinking, (2) language teaching materials that incorporate critical thinking, and (3) pedagogical content knowledge about critical thinking skills for language teachers. Therefore, this study aims to raise awareness among teachers, researchers, educational scholars, and regional and national authorities in the Asian EFL higher education context about the representation of critical thinking in language programs and teacher training in the roadmap for future English language education.

Keywords: pedagogic content knowledge, classroom instruction, language teaching materials, critical thinking integration.

Introduction

Incorporating critical thinking into every subject area is clearly effective not only for improving learners' academic achievement in line with their educational goals, but also for enhancing their open-minded analytical thinking,

decision-making, and problem solving, ultimately contributing to their employment and lifelong well-being as informed citizens. The widespread critical thinking education from European scholars has provided solid support for the demand and teaching practices for critical thinking skills in the context of first language education (Zhao et al., 2016). However, the implications of critical thinking in the Asian EFL context are controversial. Some argue that Asian EFL learners are inefficient at practising critical thinking because cultural influences prevent them from asking critical questions or asserting personal opinions, and these behaviours contradict their core cultural norm of collectivism. On the other hand, other scholars argue that critical thinking can be taught and trained regardless of learners' cultural background (Guo, 2013; Rear, 2017). In clarifying this view, we need to look into Rear's (2017) discussion of the evidence supporting the real challenges for Asian EFL learners to effectively use critical thinking skills. He stated that it is weak language skills that prevent students from producing well-crafted arguments and compositions. Language barriers are the most likely cause of impediments to the development of critical thinking skills in Asian learners. It is undeniable that language proficiency contributes to desirable academic performance, which indicates that students are good at critical thinking skills applications. Reciprocally, critical thinking has also proven to be an essential component of language acquisition. Assuming this relationship between language acquisition and critical thinking development, Asian EFL teachers need to establish the reciprocal effects of learners' language proficiency and critical thinking. They are also encouraged to observe pedagogical interventions that best suit their learners' learning behaviours and learning situations.

The Concept of Critical Thinking

Ennis (2018), a leading authority in the field of critical thinking education, reflected on the concept of critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking in deciding what to believe or do" (p. 166). Ennis emphasised that critical thinking is the key to decision making and rational thinking to achieve desired outcomes. Critical thinking is known to have no simple, universal defining statement. Scholars have defined critical thinking in ways appropriate to their specialities such as philosophy, psychology, and education, but there is some overlap in their definitions. Halpern (2014) tried to pull up the main concept of critical thinking from what scholars had defined:

> Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed—the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions, when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task. (p. 8)

Elder and Paul (1994) proposed critical thinking as the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria

and standards for analysing their own thinking. Dummett and Hughes (2019, p. 4) defined the concept of critical thinking by three *R*s _*reflective thinking*, *rational thinking*, and *reasonable approach*, referring to "a mindset that involves thinking reflectively (being curious), rationally (thinking analytically), reasonably (coming to sensible conclusions). Recognising which thinking activities are not critical thinking helps to eliminate the widespread misunderstanding and misuse of the term and brings readers closer to the idea of critical thinking. According to Smith (2002), noncritical thinking includes unorganised mental activities, mental abilities or activities lacking procedural content, application of declarative knowledge, mental activities as ordinary cognition, and simple mental habits.

The Role of Critical Thinking in English Language Education

While critical thinking is broadly defined in each perspective of philosophy and psychology, the concept of critical thinking is broken down into taxonomies in the field of education, for example, Bloom's Educational Taxonomy by Bloom et al. (1956), and the Revised Taxonomy by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). These educational taxonomies are developed mainly for the purpose of measuring and evaluating educational goals and learning outcomes (Rear, 2017). These critical thinking taxonomies serve as key learning goals in EFL education around which language curricula and instructional strategies are developed. By encouraging language learners to think critically in language lessons, teachers give learners the opportunity to have a deeper, more rational thought process about language input rather than by practising traditional rote learning.

There are three primary reasons for the payoff of critical thinking skills acquisition: *increased information literacy*, *job opportunities*, and *transferrable skills*. First, increased access to information via the Internet and digital media enhances the development of critical thinking in the field of education. Students in this digital media age need to be able to evaluate the authenticity of information they encounter (Trilling & Fadel, 2019). In today's digital environment, it is much more important for learners to know how to handle the information than what knowledge they have (Katz, 2007). There is always a high chance that they can be the victims of disinformation if not aware. As critical thinkers, learners can avoid deceitful influences of fake news, fraud, demagoguery, propaganda, etc. (Nilson, 2021). In a world where information is so readily accessible, the emphasis has shifted from the acquisition of knowledge to the evaluation of information. Thus, critical thinking becomes an essential armour to wear in exposing oneself to 21st- century literacies such as visual literacy, information literacy, media literacy, and cultural literacy. Second, critical thinking is one of the most demanded skills that employers seek from graduates in job market (Kivunja, 2014; Nilson, 2021). Critical thinking is now considered one of the learning and innovation skills that employers look for in college graduates because it is the most important learning and innovation skill (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Third, because critical thinking is a transferable skill, once students develop thinking skills and competencies, they can apply them to

new situations, problem solving, and better decision making beyond the classroom. With the ever-evolving nature of technology, where knowledge and information can be accessed with a single mouse click, it is clear that students should invest more time in developing transferable skills and learning principles than knowledge systems (Weil, 2016). Critical thinking activities are particularly relevant for language learners because they must perceive language input in a thoughtful and autonomous way instead of through rote learning (Dummett, 2016).

Critical Thinking Incorporated Language Instructions

Embedding critical thinking in subject-specific contexts across curricula is strongly recommended to develop learners aligned with educational goals (Bailin et al., 1999; Ennis, 2018). Through critical thinking integrated language teaching pedagogy, English language teachers can apply effective classroom teaching techniques to foster learners' thinking skills and language skills at the same time as a context-based approach (Alnofaie, 2013). Case studies and research findings provide guidelines for language activities that create opportunities for learners to demonstrate thinking (Itmeizeh & Hassan, 2020). Critical thinking instruction can be categorised into four instructional approaches based on the degree of direct or indirect involvement: (1) the general approach, (2) the infusion approach, (3) the immersion approach, and (4) a combination of the general approach with the infusion or immersion approach (Ennis, 1989). In the infusion approach, critical thinking skills are embedded in subjects and explicitly introduced; in the immersion approach, critical thinking skills are implicitly introduced. Of the four approaches, the immersion approach is the most commonly applied method even though the significant growth of learners' critical thinking skills in the immersion approach is found lower than the other three approaches. On the other hand, explicit approaches to teaching critical thinking have been successful in their empirical studies (Halpern, 1999). Studies have pointed out that implicitly incorporating critical thinking into curricula is less effective than a direct approach (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011).

Dummett (2016) identified two common misconceptions among ELT teachers regarding the application of critical thinking activities in the language classroom. First, teachers mistakenly believe that critical thinking activities can only be applied at higher language proficiency levels, such as B1+ and above. Second, teachers misunderstand that critical thinking activities are primarily applicable to receptive language skills such as reading and listening. In fact, critical thinking can be incorporated into all levels of the language classroom and into all four language skills. For example, when teaching grammar, teachers can teach inductive reasoning to understand grammatical rules. In teaching vocabulary, teachers can elicit learners' critical thinking processes by comparing words, such as synonyms and antonyms, and understanding the literal and figurative use of words. Ultimately, thinking activities can be applied to pronunciation instruction, including analysis of pronunciation patterns. For productive language skills, the reliability and efficiency of a learner's language output can be assessed against specific assessment criteria that are articulated by

the thinking skills required.

There is always room for critical thinking in the instruction of both receptive and productive skills (Dummett & Hughes, 2019). Receptive skills instruction allows learners to examine the reliability and relevance of information from reading comprehension exercises. Learners can explore writers' or speakers' true intentions behind the text or the speech, separate facts from opinions, and look for bias in the text. When teaching productive skills such as writing and speaking, teachers can introduce appropriate exercises such as brainstorming, concept mapping, multiple perspectives, creative thinking, being aware of the listener, and choosing the right register and tone. Of these, concept mapping is widely used as an effective method for understanding texts and generating ideas. A concept map is a graph consisting of nodes and labelled lines connected to show the directional relationship between a pair of concepts (for more details, see Ghanizadeh et al., 2020). Learners need continuous feedback and training from teachers until they are fully aware of the structure of the arguments and problems to transfer the acquired thinking skills into novel situations beyond subject-specific classroom experiences. In practice and training, teachers' questioning plays a central role in reinforcing critical thinking in language learning exercises. The questions that are asked in class are generally defined as low-level questions that require students to gather and recall information. Therefore, higher-level questions that require students to apply activities such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation should be introduced more to students (Nappi, 2017). Teachers can effectively plan questions in the classroom to lead students to more strategic and critical thinking and increase the level of students' cognitive demands through questioning.

Dummett (2020) asserted that teaching critical thinking in language lessons has twofold objectives that language learners should be able to "think critically about language" and the "ideas expressed in that language" (p. 15). Hughes (2014) also described well how English language learners can be trained with critical thinking skills and language skills at the same time through the use of 20 classroom activities. Some of the examples are shown in Table 1 as a list of classroom activities with targeted language practices and thinking practices. Over the decades, the effectiveness of various educational models that integrate the critical thinking framework as an interdisciplinary approach can be clearly witnessed in various language teaching contexts (e.g., Tiruneh et al., 2014). Notable examples of educational intervention theory include Bobkina and Stefanova's (2016) English reader-centred critical reading approach to teaching critical thinking in literacy texts, Yang and Gamble's (2013) critical thinking-enhanced activities such as debates and peer critiques, and Halpern's (1999) four-part instructional model of real-life critical thinking that transfers learners' thinking skills beyond the classroom context. Halpern's proposed method uses these four parts such as dispositions, skills approach, structure training, and metacognitive monitoring as follows:

Dispositions: awareness and willingness to engage in cognitive exercises that require effort or understanding when it is appropriate to effectively apply

critical thinking skills

Skills Approach: learning critical thinking skills and activities such as reasoning, argument analysis, hypothesis testing, recognizing possibilities and uncertainties, problem solving, and decision making

Structure Training: training in the structural aspects of arguments through purposeful exercises and feedback

Metacognitive Monitoring: consciously monitoring one's own thinking processes when engaging in thinking activities and problems

These four elements proposed by Halpern serve as a blueprint for teachers to create goal-oriented language lesson plans. For example, in Table 1, activity 1 encourages the development of learners' disposition to think, activities 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 target the development of thinking skills, and activities 4, 9, 10, and 11 target the development of structure. In addition to classroom instructional interventions such as those described in the previous examples, critical thinking skills need to be continually incorporated into how

Table 1

ELT Classroom Activities Developing Critical Thinking (Hughes, 2014)

Types of the Tasks	**Language Practice**	**Thinking Practice**
1. Developing a Critical Mindset	Expressing Opinion, Agreeing, Disagreeing	Basic Awareness of Critical Thinking
2. Recognising Context	Speculating an Incident in Different Contexts	Seeing Things from Another Point of View
3. Evaluating Reliability of Sources	Discussing News and Media	Evaluating Reliability of Information
4. Identifying Arguments	Learning the Use of Discourse Markers	Identifying Arguments and Supporting Evidence
5. Facts or Opinions	Expressing Opinions with Reasons	Contrasting Writers' Facts with Opinions
6. Reading Between the Lines	Identifying Connotation and Denotation	Identifying Implicit Meaning
7. False Conclusions	Language for Concluding and Summarising	Evaluating supporting evidence Conclusion
8. Writing Headlines	Summary Writing	Analysing a Text for Essential Meaning

9. Preparing Group Presentation	Language of Presenting	Bringing All Stages of Critical Thinking and Applying Relevant Ideas
10. Assessing a Presentation	Assessing Language Used in Presentation	Assessing Arguments and Opinions
11. For-and-against Essay	Writing for-and-against essay	Analysing Arguments and Drawing Conclusions

Learners' language skills and performance are assessed. Traditional language tests that train learners' lower-order thinking skills, such as memorising facts and knowledge, should be upgraded to tests that ask learners to hone their critical thinking skills rather than parrot learning (Marin & Pava, 2017). In addition, more open-ended questions are encouraged for learners, as they tend to stimulate learners' cognitive thinking skills more than multiple choice questions. For more practical ideas to develop learners' thinking skills through language activities, it is recommended to refer to the detailed lesson plans and teaching methods in *The ELL teacher's toolbox: Hundreds of Practical Ideas to Support Your Students* by Ferlazzo and Sypnieski (2018). Their teaching manuals are teacher-tested strategies and they are designed to cover all four language skills.

Critical Thinking Incorporated Language Teaching Materials

Over the past several decades, there has been a growing interest in incorporating critical thinking-enhanced activities into language teaching materials. For the purposes of this article, language materials refer to language textbooks, as they are an important part of the language teaching and learning process. Key participants in the language textbook include course book writers as developers, stakeholders and language program directors as decision makers, and teachers and students as consumers. In EFL education in terms of material development, critical thinking is not as widely disseminated as its pedagogic approaches although there is a growing interest in material development and evaluation in recent years (Dummett, 2016; Dummett, 2020; Dummett & Hughes, 2019). The reason for this is that language teachers are not very autonomous in their choice of language textbooks and materials. The policy is that the prescription of language textbooks in schools is usually determined by language program coordinators and officials rather than by teachers who actually have close contact with the textbooks. As a result, language teachers tend to ignore their effective roles in evaluating textbooks in their own classes. Despite this reality, language teachers need to recognise the fact that they are not merely neutral mediators. They have the potential and creativity to fully utilise prescribed textbooks and create an effective teaching and learning environment. Moreover, the ability to evaluate language teaching materials is one of the essential skills that ELT teachers must possess. Only through critical analysis can teachers explore the potential contributions of the textbooks they use, understand

how the materials are developed, and make the best use of them (MacDonough et al., 2013). As Littlejohn (1998) argued, when examining language textbooks, teachers need to critically raise issues about learner autonomy, involvement in problem solving, and emphasis on learner-centred approaches.

Empirical studies conducted by teachers on the practical application of prescribed language textbooks will contribute greatly, as teachers are the first responders who can understand the feasibility of the proposed syllabus and test it in a real classroom environment (Barnawi, 2011). There are two ways in which English language teachers evaluate language teaching materials: predictive and retrospective evaluation (Ellis, 1997). Predictive evaluation takes place before the materials are used. This evaluation looks at how the materials will contribute to the classroom. In contrast, retrospective evaluations are conducted during and after the materials are used. The purpose of this method is to test the validity of the predictive evaluation. These evaluation processes are labour- and time-intensive, but Ellis suggested that they could be done in a manageable way by what he called "micro-evaluation or evaluating a teaching task" (p. 37). Ellis's micro-evaluation of teaching materials has seven steps to follow:

- choosing a task to evaluate,
- describing the task,
- planning the evaluation,
- collecting the information for the evaluation,
- analysing the information,
- reading conclusions and making recommendations, and
- writing the report.

The advantage of such a micro-evaluation of language teaching materials is to show how effective the materials and the tasks within them are for a particular group of learners and to identify possible weaknesses in the design of the tasks. A similar process of evaluation can be effectively conducted by asking oneself the following six questions suggested by Anderson (1992) as follow:

1. **Why**: For what purpose are materials evaluated?
2. **Whom**: For whom the material evaluation is conducted? Is it for the teachers themselves or for others to share?
3. **Who**: Who are the evaluators, are they a teacher using the material in class, an outsider, or a researcher?
4. **What**: What will be evaluated? Is the content of evaluation survey from students and teachers or language performance outcome collected from students' language output?
5. **How**: How is an evaluation done? Are evaluation methods about textbook analysis, test analysis, classroom observation or self-report?
6. **When**: When is the material evaluation done, before the material is taught or while the material is being taught?

Thus, examining the degree of emphasis on critical thinking in language textbooks reveals its potential contribution to language learning programs (Birjandi & Alizadeh, 2013; Solihati & Hikmat, 2018; Ulum, 2016). Previous

studies frequently found out that there is an imbalanced integration between lower order thinking skills (memory, comprehension, and application skills) and higher order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills) in language textbooks. Researchers from language textbook analyses in EFL context concluded that higher order thinking skills are weakly used in most of the language tasks and activities. For this reason, teachers should justify and supplement necessary activities that can elicit learners' thinking skills. Traditional teaching methods and examinations focus primarily on the learner's memorisation and recall of facts and knowledge. It is essential that learners not only know knowledge, but also know how to use the knowledge effectively. Therefore, teachers' pedagogical methods, teaching materials, and assessment methods need to focus on eliciting higher order thinking skills beyond the learner's level of knowledge. As Brookhart (2010) clearly argued in his higher order thinking skills assessment manual, higher order thinking is the highest level of cognitive thinking in which humans apply critical thinking, solve problems they face, and transfer and apply acquired knowledge to new contexts.

EFL Teachers' Pedagogic Content Knowledge on Critical Thinking

Efforts to develop learners' critical thinking should begin with the inputs to which learners have access such as teachers, since the true quality outcomes of teaching are heavily dependent on teachers' ongoing professional development (Johnston, 2003; Kowalczuk-Walędziak et al., 2019). Although teachers recognise the importance of critical thinking activities as intellectual stimulation for learners' overall academic achievement, the reality is that teachers are not sufficiently reinforcing thinking activities beyond recall and comprehension skills (Brookhard, 2010; Choy & Cheah, 2009). In this last section, to create a greater impact on teachers' professional readiness for their learners to meet the demand of current educational goals and job opportunities, we recommend two major aspects to focus on __ critical thinking awareness and its practical application. Cottrell (2017), an internationally recognised scholar of critical thinking, explicitly emphasises these two major elements of awareness and practice in his international best-selling textbook, *Critical Thinking Skills: Effective Analysis, Argument and Reflection*. In fact, people unconsciously apply thinking skills in their day-to-day problems. Cottrell reasoned his assumption by indicating how people are naturally well equipped with survival skills originally. He stated that awareness is recognising and consciously applying the skills and strategies people possess. Dummett (2016) also stressed the same point, encouraging teachers to sensitise students to critical thinking activities in the classroom. Fundamentally, teachers need to better understand the process of critical thinking so that they can train their learners with basic thinking strategies in specific academic areas (Chan & Yan, 2007). Researchers conducted an awareness survey to determine the extent to which English teachers understand the concept of critical thinking and its use in the classroom, and the results showed that teachers support the importance of critical thinking but need training to improve it (Ketabi et al., 2012; Stapleton, 2011).

In addition to the act of awareness, practice or practical application of

critical thinking is an important contributing factor to the development of critical thinking in teachers. Critical thinking is not, in fact, a new skill for people. The act of critical thinking is something that people inevitably apply in their daily lives. What matters is the level of one's knowledge and awareness applied to tasks and problems that possess different difficulty levels. What is important is the degree to which one's knowledge and perceptions are applied to tasks and problems of varying difficulty. Practice is essential to critical thinking. To properly utilise critical thinking skills in problem solving, human judgment, and evaluating the credibility of information, teachers should train themselves to improve their critical thinking skills just as people could train the muscles in their bodies. Thinking exercises and training effectively turn people into critical thinkers over time. After equipping themselves with critical thinking skills, teachers should expand their knowledge by creatively applying acquired knowledge in real classroom situations. Teachers are not the neutral medium that only conveys textbook content and instruction to learners. The more teachers develop their critical thinking skills and teaching methods, the better the learning outcomes will be. Teachers are also encouraged to conduct case studies and to critically evaluate prescribed materials they use in order to discover the teaching methods that best suit their learners' personalities, learning goals, and learning situations.

Education essentially begins with teachers sharing knowledge (a given curriculum in a formal school setting). In the transfer of knowledge from teachers to learners, there are two types of knowledge, which differ greatly in the way they are transferred (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The first type, *declarative knowledge*, is knowledge about things presented to the learner in the form of language or symbols. The second type, *functional knowledge*, is informed to the learner through actions. In order for university faculty to support quality teaching for higher education, Biggs and Tang addressed the issue of the imbalance between the two types of knowledge delivery. It is because university pedagogy has traditionally tended to focus more on declarative knowledge than on the functional knowledge. On this issue, teachers and academic professionals need to recall Kivunja's (2014) paradigm shift in education. Kivunja elaborated on the different stages of the pedagogical paradigm shift in education over the centuries. According to his statement, in the past, learning was viewed as the transfer of knowledge from teachers as the giver of knowledge to learners as the receiver of knowledge in a classroom environment. However, this passive approach to learning has shifted into a learner-centred approach in order to meet the demands of 21st-century employment industry. Thus, learners can no longer be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge. Passive learning habit and spoon-fed teaching traditions are no longer favoured in education. Along with a new pedagogical paradigm in which learners' role is more emphasised, the traditional view of teachers as an authority figure needs to be abandoned. Instead, learners should be exposed to autonomous learning strategies to solve problems.

Conclusion

Higher educational attainment through critical thinking skills is more than material well-being. Critical thinking is a transferable skill, and once mastered, learners can effectively apply it beyond the classroom to achieve desired outcomes throughout their life journey, including learning and careers. Learners' educational attainment can be measured by their thinking skills and reasoning abilities that make them better decision makers and face life problems with effective intellectual traits, leading their successful life with wise and analytic choices (Nilson, 2021). The Asian EFL community still faces problems in fostering critical thinking due to cultural background, inadequate education and training for teachers, lack of knowledge and awareness of the concept and important role of critical thinking, exam-oriented educational practices, and teacher-centred mode classroom environment. The purpose of this paper is to identify key aspects of EFL education that enable the integration of critical thinking. Despite the challenges they face, teachers, syllabus writers, and state authorities need to pay constant attention to the professional development of teachers, to teaching materials that can address the challenges of the new educational paradigm of the 21st century, and to the development of learners' critical thinking skills from classroom practice to the real world. In diverse teaching and learning situations around the world, there is one basic principle that is common to all learning programs and to all learning materials developed. That principle is that the orientation of language instruction should meet the actual need and goal of a specific language learners group in a specific context. Learners' learning goals and needs can include any number of possibilities, such as academic objectives, daily communication needs, foreign language and cultural understanding, business activities, and expanding global knowledge and experiences (McDonough et al., 2013). After all, the use of critical thinking skills plays an essential role on the path to these learning goals in the EFL society.

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflicts of interest.

The authors of this paper certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; membership, employment; affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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