Enhancing critical thinking in foreign language learners

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Abstract: Critical thinking refers to the individuals' ability to think and make correct decisions independently. Critical thinking has been used in first language acquisition for a long time and has been recently introduced into foreign language teaching contexts. Nowadays enhancing critical thinking in learners is considered one of the foreign language teachers' tasks due to its high position in foreign language classrooms. There are various factors affecting language learners' critical thinking skills. Two of these factors are materials used and types of activities introduced and worked on in the classroom. Therefore, through managing classroom materials and activities, language teachers can help learners develop critical thinking skills. This presentations aims at introducing some ways in which language teachers can enhance critical thinking in foreign language learners through using materials and activities which require critical thinking on the part of learners. The teacher can prepare, choose, and/or adapt already existing materials so that they enhance learners' critical thinking ability. Also the teacher can choose activities which demand learners to develop critical thinking skills since not all activities lend themselves to critical thinking on the part of learners. In this presentation, some suggestions for language teachers to make sound choice of such materials and activities will be presented.
Key words: critical thinking, language teaching, materials, activities.

Introduction

Critical thinking has been recently introduced and gained a high position in foreign language teaching (FLT) settings so that nowadays enhancing critical thinking in learners is considered one of the foreign language teachers' tasks. Many different factors can affect learners' critical thinking skills. Materials used and types of activities introduced and worked on in the classroom are two of these factors. This presentation argues that through managing classroom materials and activities, language teachers can help learners develop critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking

Many different definitions have been proposed for critical thinking by various educators such as Lipman (1991); Norris and Ennis (1989); and Siegel (1988). However, there is not much difference among these definitions. As Elder and Paul (1994) state, critical thinking refers to the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria and standards for analyzing their own thinking. Moreover, as Maiorana (1992) maintains, critical thinking aims at achieving understanding, evaluating different perspectives, and solving problems.

Critical thinking in language teaching

The promotion of critical thinking into the FLT classrooms is of high significance for several reasons. Firstly, if language learners can take charge of their own thinking, they can monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully. Second, critical thinking expands the learning experience of the learners and makes the language more meaningful for them. Thirdly, critical thinking has a high degree of correlation with the learners' achievements (Rafi, n.d.). Different studies have confirmed the role of critical thinking in improving ESL writing ability (Rafi, n.d.); language proficiency (Liaw, 2007); and oral communication ability (Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.).The learners may become proficient language users if they have motivation and are taught the ways of displaying critical thinking in foreign language usage, which signifies that the learners must have reflection on their production of ideas, and they may critically support those ideas with logical details (Rafi, n.d.). Language development and thinking are closely related and the teaching of higher-order thinking skills should be an integral part of an L2 curriculum. Educators have emphasized the importance of developing higher-order thinking skills in foreign language classrooms (Chamot, 1995; Tarvin & Al-Arishi, 1991) and empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking skills along with the foreign language (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1994, 1995).

In fact, language learners who have developed critical thinking skills are capable of doing activities of which other students may not be capable. Implied in the study by Mahyuddin et al (2004) is that language learners with critical thinking ability are capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum; capable of making decisions and solving problems; capable of using their thinking skills, and of understanding language or its contents; capable of treating thinking skills as lifelong learning; and finally intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually well-balanced.

However, in spite of the fact that there is little argument among theorists and educators about the importance of thinking skills in language development, in typical school settings, language learning and thinking skills are often treated as independent processes (Miraman & Tishman, 1988; Suhor, 1984). In other words as Pica (2000) states, in the tradition of English language teaching methodology, the integration of language and thinking skills has been peripheral. It is argued (e.g. Kabilan, 2000) that even communicative language teaching, which emphasizes the use of language as a communication tool, does not really help students to become proficient in the target language. He suggests that for learners to be proficient in a language, they need to be able to think creatively and critically when using the target language. So, it is implied that even communicative approaches to language teaching do not develop critical thinking among learners.

Due to the advantages mentioned for enhancing critical thinking in language learners and also little practice in this regards in FLT settings, as Brown (2004) asserts, in an ideal academic language program, the objectives of the curriculum should go beyond linguistic factors to develop critical thinking among learners. In fact, the effectiveness of language teaching will depend upon what is being taught, in addition to language, which learners can consider as a purposeful and relevant extension of their horizons (Widdowson, 1990).

Language teachers are among practitioners who can greatly influence the type of learning by language learners. Therefore, one of their responsibilities is to help learners develop critical thinking abilities. Maybe even more than L1 teachers, L2 teachers have reasons to introduce their students to aspects of critical thinking because if they do not (Davidson, 1998). As Lipman (2003) says, teachers are responsible for promoting critical thinking in the learners other than helping them to go from one educational level to the next. The responsibility of foreign language teachers is to help their learners acquire critical thinking skills while learning the language. As Mahyuddin et al (2004) assert, there is plenty of room for improvement in incorporating the thinking skills into our curricula.

Enhancing critical thinking through materials

Obviously the type of materials used in the foreign language classroom has a significant effect on the way of learning and trying to learn. Some materials are not appropriate in classes in which the promotion of critical thinking is a major goal; that is, they do not lend themselves to the type of learning promoting critical thinking. On the other hand, there are materials which require the learner to think critically if they want to develop critical thinking skills. For example, materials which can be analyzed, synthesized, discussed, argued about, classified in different ways, etc. are suitable for enhancing critical thinking among language learners. So as Scanlan (2006) suggests, critical thinking skills should be embedded in the subject matter and integrated with language teaching.

Authenticity of the materials is a key factor in making the material appropriate for the purpose of promoting critical thinking in language classes. The reason is that the learners can see some meaningfulness in the materials which gives them encouragement and motivation to talk about it. The type of materials must also give the learners a degree of understanding of the relationship between taught material and the real world. When learners gain a deeper understanding of content matter and its relationship with self and society, their effort for controlling their own learning increases (Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.).

Some authors argue for the appropriateness of content-based material for the development of critical thinking (e.g. Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.). They believe that a content-based approach reawakens the language learners' desire to study English, increases language acquisition, prepares learners for the role English will play in their future life, engages students' interest, helps them to become independent learners, and fosters their development as English speakers better than curricula which are built around textbooks that frequently change topics and show little real concern for content.

Enhancing critical thinking through activities

The second factor introduced here as having the capability of improving critical thinking skills among language learners is the type of activities used in the FLT context. In the previous section, the importance of materials used in the classroom was emphasized; however, the best type of material for this purpose can be useful only when they are introduced and worked on appropriately. In other words, the type of activities used in order to introduce and teach the materials must have the potential to promote critical thinking in the learners.

The empirical findings indicate that the teachers subconsciously provide the answers to the learners (Kabilan 2000). In this way, the teachers get from the learners the opportunities and the rights to question, and the learners are not encouraged to reason and show higher order thoughts (Bruss & Macedo, 1985; Freire 1973). So we need to use activities which require learners to become more active and questioning. Activities such as

group work, project-based work, and presentation skills which reflect the overall instructional goal (Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.) can be considered appropriate for this purpose.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2001-2002), a non-departmental organization sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills in the U.K., asserts that modern foreign language teaching must incorporate activities to help children reflect on their own thinking processes and language-learning strategies. It then outlines activities to include: (1) identifying and understanding the relations between the foreign language and first language in terms of lexis, syntax, and grammar; (2) drawing inferences from unfamiliar language and unexpected responses; (3) using their grammatical knowledge to guess the meaning of new words and structures; (4) using language creatively to express ideas, attitudes and opinions; (5) adapting and revising language for their own purposes; (6) identifying and using language patterns; and (7) managing their own use of language-learning strategies. These are fully in line with the type of activities needed to promote critical thinking among language learners. So classrooms aiming at developing learners' critical thinking ability must use such activities.

Different authors have suggested different ways of increasing thinking skills among language learners. For example, Kabilan (2000) suggested the use of the pedagogy of questioning based on Freire's constructs (1970, 1973); Zainuddin and Moore (2003) in their experiment proposed a structured controversial dialogue technique for developing critical thinking among language learners; Kasper (2000) based on his experiment suggested engaging language learners in sustained content study within collaborative learning communities as well as using information technology resources to improve learners' linguistic and thinking skills. Of the suggested methods and techniques, content-based teaching (suggested by Brinton et al, 1989; Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.; Liaw, 2007; and Stoller, 1997) is an approach considered by many as an effective way to teach language skills while supporting the development of critical thinking.

Among the skills that teachers should focus on for this purpose are forming relationships; comparing and contrasting; classifying; evaluating; ranking; identifying right from wrong, facts from opinion, cause and effect; summarizing; generalizing; interpreting; identifying main, supporting and detailed ideas as well as making decisions and solving problems (Mahyuddin et al, 2004). Classroom activities need to provide learners with different opportunities to share their ideas, reflect on their learning, and engage in extended communication with peers, teachers, and others both inside and outside of the classroom (Kusaka & Robertson, n.d.).

Conclusion

Critical thinking is what needs to be enhanced among language learners due to its significance in developing effective language learning. So promoting critical thinking skills is considered one of the tasks' of language teachers. They can do this task through various ways, including choosing appropriate materials and activities.

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