

Developing Critical Thinking Among Young Adults in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Language teachers primarily focus on the four language skills, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. In addition to language skills, it is essential to develop 21st century skills among learners so that they are able to function effectively in the current globalized world. The language classroom is an excellent space to foster 21st century skills that involve the 4Cs—Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication. Of the 4Cs, this article focuses on critical thinking skills and presents classroom activities that could be implemented to develop this skill among young adults. The aspects of critical thinking that are discussed in this article are reflective thinking, evaluating statements, verifying hypotheses, utilizing creative thinking, and problem-solving.

Keywords: Critical thinking skills, 21st century skills, description, interpretation, culture, problem-solving

Introduction

In academic contexts, the term ‘21st century skills’ is popularly used to identify the necessary skills that may assist learners to navigate and prosper in the current globalized world (Teo, 2019). These skills enable learners with the ability to solve problems that they would face in the real world as global citizens of the contemporary world (Kivunja, 2014). The language classroom is a good platform to create opportunities for teachers to develop 21st century skills in learners. 21st century skills comprise of 4Cs—Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication. According to the World Economic Forum (2015), 21st century skills equip learners in manoeuvring challenges in dynamic

environments like their school, home, and professional spaces. The need for developing the 4Cs among young people is increasingly expanding especially when they enter their professional fields. Hence, language classrooms could be the platform for developing the 21st century skills among learners, thus reducing the gap between industry and academia.

Among the 4Cs, the role of critical thinking in education has been a popular topic for research and debates in the recent decades (Enciso et al., 2017). Therefore, this article discusses critical thinking skills and classroom-based activities that could develop critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is considered one of the aspects of global competencies and a core ability for 2030 (OECD, 2018). However, due to the complexity of this construct, arriving at the standard definition of critical thinking is rather challenging. Over the years, researchers have proposed various definitions of critical thinking (Liu & Pásztor, 2022). Thus, owing to the variety of definitions and the lack of consensus among researchers, a multitude of definitions and categorisation of the construct of critical thinking is available in the literature. For instance, in the academic field, critical thinking is often synonymous to the notion of higher-order thinking skills in Bloom's taxonomy (Cáceres et al., 2020). As given in Bloom's taxonomy, cognitive skills could be categorized as per their level of complexity. Thus, higher-order thinking skills include aspects like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In this regard, critical thinking involves reflective thinking, evaluating statements, verifying hypotheses, utilizing creative thinking, and problem-solving (Liu & Pásztor, 2022). The classroom activities discussed in this article have been designed based on the definition of critical thinking, which defines this construct as "a systematic form of analytical thought that reduces biases by taking into account multiple factors related to the object of analysis and considering these from multiple perspectives" (World Learning, 2018).

Context

Typical Indian classrooms are highly diverse in terms of linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the learners. Although such diversity could be challenging to reconcile in the classroom, nonetheless it creates opportunities for learners to develop critical thinking skills (Dasgupta, 2021; Pascarella et al., 2014). Language classrooms could use learners' linguistic and cultural experiences and teaching resources however, often their linguistic and cultural identities are disregarded to create a

homogeneous environment for learning the target language (Dasgupta, 2021). With this backdrop, this article presents activities that could be undertaken in the classroom to develop critical thinking skills among young adult learners.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills in the Classroom

As discussed earlier, the language classroom provides an apt environment for developing critical thinking skills as it often offers diversity in terms of language and culture that is essential for developing critical thinking skills. The diversity available in a multilingual classroom offers “the best possibilities for preparing coming generations to participate in constructing democratic societies in a globalized and intercultural world”, as claimed by Hornberger (2009). This section describes three activities that can be introduced in the language classroom with young adult learners. The activities are as follows,

1. Cultural Bump
2. Description v/s Interpretation
3. Problem-solving

Critical thinking examines assumptions and involves thinking that is free from bias. Many of our assumptions are based on or rooted in our culture, and different values are expressed in different ways. Such cultural differences (e.g. differences in low-context and high-context culture) often make it difficult for individuals to be free of bias and assumptions and look at situations from somebody else’s perspective. In the first activity, learners are expected to examine assumptions and develop the ability to consider the other person’s point of view.

As critical thinkers, learners are expected to distinguish between what has been observed and interpretation of what has been observed. It is common to give interpretations based on observations and such interpretations could be correct often but not always. Critical thinking demands the ability to be objective rather than jumping into subjective interpretations. In other words, critical thinking requires the ability to differentiate between observation and interpretation, and be conscious of assumptions and explore alternative possibilities or realities. The second activity aims to create awareness among learners to differentiate between observation and interpretation.

Critical thinking involves the ability to look at the situation from multiple perspectives, employ knowledge and data, adopt logical arguments, and explore creative alternatives to effectively solve problems. Often solving problems requires examining a conflict/difficulty/situation from various perspectives, facts and designing a solution based on it. The third activity involves understanding the situation,

Exploring the alternatives and weighing alternatives in the light of consequences.

Aspects of critical thinking the activities are based on, or at the end of the activities, learners will be able to

- view situations from multiple perspectives
- examine assumptions
- distinguish fact from opinion
- explore alternatives/demonstrate creativity

1. Cultural Bump

Reflect upon a situation when you have had a disagreement or misunderstanding with a person who belonged to another culture/state/country. Write two paragraphs on the situation (350-500 words). In paragraph one, consider the following questions:

- What was the disagreement or misunderstanding you had with a person who belonged to another culture/state/country?
- Briefly narrate the incident from your own perspective. Describe the encounter, what cultural beliefs shaped your own responses, and how you interpreted his/her actions based on your beliefs.
- What were your expectations from the other person?
- Was the issue resolved? If yes, how?

Paragraph Two: Reflect on the same incident imagining that you are the other person. Now, narrate the incident from the perspective of the other person. Consider the following questions:

- What cultural beliefs influenced the other person's behaviour?
- What did the other person expect you to do?
- How would the other person want to reconcile the conflict?

(adapted from World Learning, 2018)

2. Description v/s Interpretation

A. Four images are given below. Each image carries a statement below it. Decide if that statement is an observation or an interpretation.



1. Two women are smiling.

(Image source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/es/foto/concepto-de-reuni%C3%B3n-familiar-dos-mujeres-de-diferentes-edades-hablando-en-el-patio-de-gm1197182207-341719012?phrase=mother%20care>)



2. Meeting friends after a long time.

(Image source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/es/foto/mayores-saludoen-en-la-cerca-del-jard%C3%ADn-con-nuevos-apretones-de-manos-gm1226356569-361297801?phrase=may%20people>)



3. The students are learning a lot.

(Image source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/es/foto/las-j%C3%B3venes-universitarias-se-concentran-en-hacer-ex%C3%A1menes-en-el-aula-las-alentadoras-gm1299530623-392123211?phrase=students%20learning%20seriously>)



4. These are different kinds of footwear.

(Image source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/es/foto/variedad-de-zapatos-c%C3%B3modos-de-moda-femenina-de-todas-las-estaciones-sobre-un-fondo-gm1279108197-377816723?phrase=shoes>)

B. Observe the image given below and write 5 statements describing only what you see there. Then, write 5 interpretive statements about the image which is more than mere descriptions and mention further details that you believe could be true about the image.



(Image source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/es/foto/calle-de-tiendas-de-moda-gm493689806-77025991?phrase=shopping>) (adapted from World Learning, 2018)

3. *Problem-solving*

a) Imagine you have survived a shipwreck and stranded on an island with three other fellow passengers who are from different countries. In about 300-350 words, write down an original plan that you think is the most suitable for all of you for surviving on the island till you get rescued.



(Image source: <https://sites.psu.edu/siowfa13/2013/11/01/stranded-what-do-you-do/>)

b) Evaluate your plan using the self-assessment rubric given below. (10 Points)

Evaluation Rubric

	<i>Amazing</i>	<i>Progressing</i>	<i>Think Harder</i>
Point of View	I have looked at the situation from point of view of all three co-passengers (3pts)	I have looked at the situation from point of view of two co-passengers (2pts)	I have looked at the situation from my point of view alone (1pts)
Reasoning	I have given at least three reasons to justify why my plan is the best for everyone (3pts)	I have given two reasons to justify why my plan is the best for everyone (2pts)	I think I have the best plan, so I did not give any reason (1pts)
Problem-solving	I have written down at least three steps/ideas to ensure we survive on the island (3pts)	I have written down two steps/ideas to ensure we survive on the island (2pts)	I have written down one step/idea to ensure we survive on the island (1pts)
Creativity	My plan is completely an original idea (1pts)	I have taken not more than two ideas from movies/other sources (0.5pt)	All my ideas are borrowed from my friends (0pt)

Conclusion

Critical thinking skills are indispensable to be successful in the current globalized world. Often young adult learners enter their professional field where they are expected to collaborate and work with colleagues from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It would be rather difficult for such learners to flourish in a workspace that is diverse in terms of language and culture. They are expected to navigate among the differences, solve problems, and work together with other people. Language learning classrooms can provide the space needed for raising awareness among learners about the multiple realities and possibilities that they may face in their professional life. Hence, developing critical thinking skills among young adult learners could be a step towards preparing them to function effectively in the industry.

The activities presented in this article could be undertaken to develop critical thinking skills and build a classroom that raises awareness about the existence of multiple perspectives.

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