DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH READING ACTIVITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Introduction

In order to activate students' critical thinking skills, English teachers need to present alternatives, different ways of interpreting texts and different conceptions of the world. The importance of thinking in today's education requires the main concept of critical thinking in which there is always more than one way to see things and that it is always up to the individual to judge just where the truth lies on any given issue. Regarding the flexible nature of critical thinking, the writer proposes a teaching practice that can be modified in different ways. This is because the implementation of critical thinking skills and meaning in language teaching is not new and an absolute format has not been recommended so far. The underlying principle is that language learning is improved through increased motivation and naturally seen in meaningful contexts. When learners are interested in a topic and are given chances to negotiate meaning, they will be motivated to discuss things critically and at the same time, acquire language to communicate. As stated in the introduction, both critical thinking skills and meaning can be incorporated when teachers do collaborative activities, i.e., pair work and group work. Therefore, the writer would illustrate teaching stages of an English lesson that essentially integrate critical thinking skills and meaning. For practical reasons, the writer would apply a series of teaching stages in a reading lesson (adapted from CELTT 1 Handbook, 2008). The teaching of Reading is chosen as an example since it provides ample opportunities to exploit students' skills in English learning arise through reading texts. In this case, the proposed reading lesson draws on the lexical approach, encouraging learners to notice language while reading followed by activities involving meaning discovery and critical thinking skills. Accordingly, teachers can flexibly diversify methods and forms of classroom teaching and learning, improve learners' overall and specific language competence, introduce learners' to the wider cultural context, and increase learners' motivation. More specifically, the teaching stages of the reading lesson are in the following:

(1) Eliciting ideas
- Give students one or two pictures which can be interpreted in various ways (see some alternative pictures and activities in Doff, 1998).
- Ask students what the pictures are about (Let the students speak freely in this stage).
- Dictate key words from the reading text.

The objective of this stage is to introduce the topic of the story to students and to give them an opportunity to express their ideas openly. This is expected to be an initial chance for the students to activate their thinking process and encourage them to exchange ideas critically. In

doing so, the teacher needs be tolerant with any ideas or interpretations proposed by them as an adage says, "A picture is worth a thousand words". Then, by dictating the key words, the teacher is indirectly fostering the learners to relate more easily to the characters and actions in the text later.

(2) Highlighting lexis and their meanings/vocabulary
- Check the words dictated (ask them to exchange their work with their partners first).
- Check meaning of any words that may cause difficulty.

The purpose of this stage is to focus attention on meaning of key words in order to prepare students for the next prediction task. In this stage, the teacher should use guided discovery and contextual guesswork to discover meaning of the dictated words. Guided discovery involves asking questions or offering examples that guide students to guess meanings correctly. In this way, the learners are engaged in a semantic process that helps vocabulary learning and retention. Then, contextual guesswork means using the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning, or in some cases, guess from the word itself, as in words originated from Latin or Greek.

(3) Giving the title of the story
- Give students the title of the story they are going to read (Prompt them to the title).

This is an extra stage which is also aimed at assisting the students to do the following prediction task. The teacher can simply write the title on the white board without giving any information about the text. It is expected that the students will be curious and triggered to predict the text topic by relating the title and the dictated key words. In this way, the teacher prepares the students' mind gradually before dealing with the whole text. Metaphorically, it is like a motor cyclist warming up his motor cycle before riding it on streets.

(4) Predicting text
- Put students into small groups and ask them to predict the story based on the title and key words given.
- Ask few students representing their groups to tell the class their predictions.
- Encourage other groups to ask questions, share ideas and even criticize each other if necessary.

The goal of this stage is to prepare students mentally to read the text by creating a version of the text first in their minds and give the second chance to exchange ideas critically. In this stage, it is important that the teacher should not judge whether they are right or wrong as the judgment might hinder the students to speak up and reveal their opinions openly. Let them freely predict what the text is about and discuss it in groups. Furthermore, discussing their predictions in class is also a good chance for them to communicate and challenge other people's ideas. This collective interaction is necessary to stimulate their critical thinking skills for the more challenging tasks later.

(5) Ordering jumbled paragraphs/Skimming
- Hand out cut up version of the text (the students are still in groups)
- Ask students to skim the story and order the paragraphs
- Ask them what they looked for to help them decide on the order of the paragraphs.

The objectives of this stage are to apply group work in order to negotiate meaning and to do skimming. Working in groups help fostering learning independence, and especially in

ordering jumbled paragraphs, the students can exchange information and negotiate meaning when discussing new vocabulary items and ambiguous sentences. It is also expected that group work will be a motivating element, as students skim the text together, share ideas, and argue with each other constructively. This is a crucial stage of polishing up students' critical thinking skills in which the teacher should only monitor and not interfere much in their classroom discussions.

(6) Listening for the right order
- Play a cassette telling the right order of the story.
- Ask students whether or not their prediction is correct

This stage is aimed to provide the correct order and a reason for gist reading. While students are listening to the cassette and matching their paragraphs order, they are indirectly reading the whole text and paying attention on pronunciation and grammatical forms in the text. This introduces the pupils to correct pronunciation and grammatical constructions without making them a conscious focus. This kind of 'inductive learning' is more interesting, meaningful, and natural than 'deductive learning, in which learners are presented with rules with which they then go on to apply'. It 'pays dividend in terms of the long-term memory of these rules'.

(7) Reading comprehension
- Ask some short questions based on the story

The purpose of this stage is to focus on overall meaning and main ideas in the text. This is a usual teaching stage in which the teacher commonly uses Wh-questions to check whether or not the students are able to find out and understand main ideas and specific information in the text. In other words, Wh-questions are utilized to make sure that the students grasp the overall meaning of the text. It is advisable for the teacher to ask short questions that make students find the answers in and beyond the text. The teacher should not spend much time on this task since the final task is also aimed at measuring students' comprehension.

(8) Acting out the story/Speaking
- Put students into groups of 3, one person for each character in the story.
- Ask them to act out the story or do a mini drama.

The objective of this stage is to measure students' comprehension in a fun, non-verbal way. In this final productive stage, the teacher can ask the learners to discuss the most practical 'scenario' before acting out the story. This extra oral practice potentially strengthens the previous collaborative activities in a relaxed, enjoyable way. This is in line with Lightbown and Spada's ideas (2003) that the more the students are provided with extra oral practice in a target language, the more they will be able to speak it communicatively.

Conclusion

By applying the eight teaching stages above, the writer expects English teachers to consider that the realization of critical thinking skills and meaning is feasible when teachers apply pair work and group work in which students think actively and negotiate meaning. The stages of pair-work and group work are also useful the students' communicative competence. In the productive stages, the students have more opportunities to get more language exposure and practice. It would engage the learners talking to one another to exchange information communicatively and critically. They talk in order to communicate, activate thinking process, and exchange arguments, not just to practice the language.

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