

Promoting Critical Thought in the EFL Class

-- Chuck Sandy

At every ELT conference I've attended over the past few years, any session with the term *Critical Thinking* in its title has often been standing room only. Critical thinking has clearly become a hot topic in ELT, yet many teachers remain confused about what the term means. This is hardly surprising. A simple web search for a definition of critical thinking will turn up literally hundreds of possibilities. What most of these definitions have in common is that they describe a kind of thinking that Daniel Kirkland describes in his 1995 book, "I Know What it Says ... What Does it Mean?" as being, "... concerned with reason, intellectual honesty, and open-mindedness as opposed to emotionalism, intellectual laziness, and closed-mindedness," and that require skills which I've defined as learning strategies which encourage students to be thoughtful, reflective, and engaged.

While developing such thinking skills is obviously a worthy goal, is it possible to begin doing so with even lower to intermediate level English language students? I firmly believe that it is. If you are not yet consciously nurturing critical thought in your classes, you could begin almost immediately by making use of some of the following ideas. They're appropriate for almost any level and can be used with whatever textbook you happen to be using at the moment. All that may be required is a simple shift in focus.

1) Give students time to think through their responses before having them answer.

In practice, many of us tend to reward those students who are most vocal while penalizing, in one way or another, the quieter students, the ones who attempt to take the time to think things through, and while doing so, slow things down. With our frequent emphasis on pace and the spontaneous answer, it's hard for many teachers not to jump in and finish a slow student's response, or to pass quiet students by in favor of those always ready with some answer. The truth is, those quiet students are often the ones with the most thoughtful responses, simply because they're taking the time to think things through, working out not only the language of what they want to say, but what it is they really do want to say.

One simple way to begin encouraging critical thought in your classroom is by providing students with the chance to reflect and work out their answers before asking them for a response. Begin by offering 10-20 seconds of silence after asking straightforward questions and a minute or so for anything really thought provoking. Be sure students have scrap paper and dictionaries handy as they silently work out their responses, and be ready to help with any inquiries they may have about how to respond. Then, encourage them to try out their ideas with a partner -- even in their native language if they wish -- before doing so in English. Your students will be surprised by all of this at first, but they'll soon come to realize that your purpose is to show them that what they say is as valuable as how they say it.

2) Make full use of discussion questions in your textbook.

Many teachers tend to rush through textbook discussion questions, having students quickly work through them in pairs or groups without ever following-up to find out what ideas students have come up with. Nothing says “you’re ideas don’t really matter” more clearly than this. Think of textbook discussion questions as springboards from which your students can leap rather than as something to get through before moving on to the next thing. Teach your students how to respond to each other’s ideas with level-appropriate comments such as “That’s a good point. Thanks” or “That’s an interesting idea. Thanks for sharing it.” Also, be sure to teach your students how to question and challenge each other with follow-up questions they can ask such as, “What do you mean by X” or “What does Y mean to you?” Then by all means, take the time to listen to what your students have to say. Follow-up with related inquiries and questions. Encourage students to give reasons to support their answers, while discouraging lazy responses and sloppy thinking. Encourage debate and welcome a diversity of ideas, and by all means let your students hear your thoughts on the question at hand. Discussion questions aren’t there simply to provide language practice. They’re there to get people thinking, talking, and listening to each other.

3) Adapt discussion questions so that they’re relevant for your students.

In one class I recently observed, the teacher adapted a discussion question for her high school students so that students were ranking the popularity of available after-school activities and proposing an additional offering instead of working with the less likely ideas proposed in the textbook. In another class, the teacher changed one of the textbook discussion questions so that it focused on a local issue of concern instead of a more global issue and had students brainstorm possible solutions. In both cases the teacher was providing students with something the textbook authors couldn’t -- immediacy and relevancy – while promoting critical thinking skills. Although authors do their best to provide meaningful discussion questions, you may find that they’re not always entirely relevant for your particular group of students. Take the time to adapt them so that they are, and consider having students write discussion questions of their own to ask others in groups. You wouldn’t be surprised to know that students often come up with the best discussion questions of all – ones completely relevant and interesting for their classmates.

4) Make full use of textbook content

Ask students to think about textbook content in a variety of ways. For example, if there’s a factoid in the textbook about music CD sales in the US, have students compare that with music sales in their own countries, or with their own music buying habits. Have them then look at that data to see what questions are not being asked. For example, how many people are downloading music illegally or borrowing CDs from their friends? Ask them to think about the information from various perspectives. For instance, how might their responses be different if they were music producers thinking about developing an online music store or a singer trying to break into the US market? Naturally, your

questions will need to be level and age appropriate, but almost any textbook content can be easily worked with in different ways and used to promote critical thought.

5) Work with class survey or poll results.

After doing class surveys or polls provided in your textbook, encourage students to use the information they collected to draw inferences and reach reasoned conclusions. Teach students how to present their information in a variety of ways such as on simple bar graphs or even using a set of Power Point slides. Then give students the chance to share their findings with others and discuss them in pairs or groups or as a class. Doing so not only teaches and reinforces easily transferable skills, but also shows students that the data they collected for a classroom activity is worth considering.

6) Have students look for additional or contrasting information.

When students seem intrigued by a topic introduced in the textbook, guide them through a simple web search or library hunt to find either additional information or information that provides an alternate viewpoint or contrasting opinion. If you have students do this individually or in pairs, you can then have them follow-up by sharing the material they discovered in groups. If you wish, have students write discussion questions for the material they located so that they have the opportunity to lead a small-group discussion.

In Conclusion

If you're working with teen-agers or young adults you might find that it may take your students a while to get used to being in a language class where their ideas and thought-processes are taken as seriously as their language development. Still, I think you will find that they'll welcome this shift in focus, for most young people are still working out for themselves what their opinions are and love having the opportunity to ask questions, explore ideas, and look more deeply into issues as they discover who they are. By challenging them with thought-provoking questions and new ways of looking at even familiar ideas, then listening carefully to what they have to say, you'll be helping your students grow while giving them a beginning foundation in critical thought.