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# Teaching critical thinking in the language classroom

**Ana Tatsumi**

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**In this article, Ana Tatsumi, our ELT consultant from Brazil, discusses the importance of critical thinking, considerations for teachers and students, and shares some classroom activity ideas.**

Consider the game "This or that": you will be given questions, and for each of them you must state your preference. They are:

a) a rich breakfast dish with eggs, bacon, pancakes and maple syrup or a healthy green smoothie;

b) watching a movie at home or going out with friends on Saturday night;

c) buying a new car (yours is fine, by the way) or going on a luxurious 2-week vacation anywhere;
d) a very demanding, high-paying job or a 9-to-5 more stable position.

Making decisions is something we go through since childhood – from choosing which games to play or books to read to deciding on the best time to buy a house, we all must face issues, analyze and make decisions. The problem, however, is how to do that – and for us, teachers, how to teach it.

Critical thinking is not a fad. In fact, there is nothing new about it. Why then is it one of the so-called 21st century skills? "To prepare students for this ever-changing and unpredictable world we live in" would be the standard answer, but let's think further: why is critical thinking important?

Before we answer that question, let's start with what critical thinking is. Take for instance the definition below by Tara DeLecce:

> *"Critical thinking means making reasoned judgments that are logical and well-thought out. It is a way of thinking in which you don't simply accept all arguments and conclusions you are exposed to but rather have an attitude involving questioning such arguments and conclusions. It requires wanting to see what evidence is involved to support a particular argument or conclusion."*

## Why critical thinking is important for our English students

If we take this definition and we try to break down the idea of preparing students for the world we live in, it is fair to say that critical thinking is important in several ways. For one, it helps students observe an object (fact, person, data) from different points of view, like an artist making sketches of a model from different angles, observing every detail, discovering new things at each new angle. That makes them get out of their comfort zone and challenge their preconceptions about the object (or even misconceptions, depending on what they have previously learned about it), and create new, better-informed ones.

Critical thinking also has an impact on students' interpersonal skills. By thinking critically and seeing things from different angles, students become more open-minded and empathetic, better communicators, more inclined to collaborate with their peers and receive and discuss their ideas. Thinking more about students as individuals, it is possible to say that critical thinking helps them develop their creative side by allowing

their thinking process to run more freely, and explore more possibilities. It will make them better decision-makers, and with practice, also help them save time to make those decisions.

## How students can apply critical thinking

Quick research may show you different ways to do it, but there are elements in common:

1. Identify the question, that is, what you would like to know;
2. Do research on it. It is important that students use reliable sources of information;
3. Apply the information found in your research to the initial question;
4. Analyze it, and do more research if necessary;
5. Draw conclusions, make decisions, prioritize them;
6. Take action and create steps to make your decisions applicable to the initial question.

It might not always be possible to follow all steps in the language classroom, depending on the activity. That should not mean we should not teach critical thinking, even (and especially) to young students. Rather, we should encourage it. It can be as simple as asking "Why?" when someone makes a statement in class, or "How do you know?", or "Where did you see that?". The goal is not to discredit the student, but rather to have them start thinking about it, from different angles, in new ways.

## Example activities

In case you feel your students do not have the language necessary to express themselves in English, you may want to have them use their thinking skills by exploring the space they are in. Total Physical Response (TPR) activities are also helpful, for they associate language and movement, and students start "producing language" by responding with their bodies.

For activities that are about the language, you can have students categorize words (good for vocabulary learning), make comparisons, memorize or sequence (facts in a story, names), think of cause and effect, and so on. Not only do these activities activate their thinking skills, but they are also very practical – you can fit them in any moment of the lesson.

If you have more time, you can go through all the steps above as the process for something bigger – a project, for instance. Projects also promote creativity and collaboration in class, for students will have to put their minds together and negotiate meaning, solve problems, and create something that will be the end product of the project. Another possibility is to flip the class – have students do research before class, and bring their findings to be applied to a topic proposed and have an informed discussion about it.

# Considerations for teachers

These suggestions may be used with students at different ages, but we also must remember our role as teachers, and the things we should do to reach the end goal, which is to make them think. In that regard, there are some things we should consider:

- Start early: it's important to tailor the activity for the children's age, but it is possible to have them use their brains as early as possible;
- Do not answer their questions right away: teachers want to help students by giving them the answers so they can move on with the task, but if the main goal is to make them think, you may want to give them time to find the answers on their own. Alternatively, have them work in pairs or groups and try to find the answers together. That is not just an opportunity to foster collaboration, but you may be surprised at how creative your students get;
- Ask and encourage open-ended questions: you will foster critical thinking by asking questions and having students think of the answers, but you will also be the model they will copy. Whenever the occasion calls, allow them to ask questions to you and their classmates. That will help you motivate inquisitive students, who may in turn become open-minded adults;
- Help students develop their own ideas: we should not expect them to develop critical thinking skills overnight, without any support. Help them with their tasks by providing scaffolding – techniques/strategies to help them move progressively towards their goals (you can help them in their research, organize their thoughts, or put ideas in perspective), so they can not only complete the task, but also have a sense of achievement, which is a great motivator to keep working;
- Encourage students to think in new ways: creativity is the capacity to think in new ways, and to see associations and relationships that others may not have seen before. By encouraging students to do that, they will naturally become better thinkers and more creative people;
- Encourage understanding and respect: one of the consequences of exercising critical thinking is the development of intellectual empathy, which is the capacity to put oneself in someone else's place and understand their thoughts and feelings. By doing so, students are more likely to become fair-minded, ethical thinkers. In that context, the notion of respect may be developed more naturally, but it should always be fostered, as in any teaching environment;
- It is not just about science and facts: critical thinking will not only make students intellectual empaths, but it will also help them become aware of their own knowledge and the need to address different ideas constantly – and through research and reasoning, they shall accomplish their tasks with integrity. So why not apply their skills to discuss issues from other subjects, such as Math, Literature, History, Sociology, or even moral issues, for example?

*For more on critical thinking, read*

*How you can encourage critical thinking in the era of 'fake news'.*

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## Reference

Tara DeLecce. 2018. What is Critical Thinking? – Definition, Skills & Meaning. [ONLINE] Available at: https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-critical-thinking-definition-skills-meaning.html. [Accessed 6 April 2018].

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