

FROM THE FIELD

Critical Thinking for Deconstructing ELLs' Institutionalized Minds



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What Does It Mean “To Think”?

“To think” involves different kinds of thinking.

Unconscious thinking, for instance, does not require serious contemplation since it becomes automatic after repetition. When riding a bicycle, we do not think to move our right foot and then left foot at each time we paddle. Whereas with functional thinking, it requires some degree of careful examination to successfully complete tasks, such as filing a tax return, applying for a job, or taking a reading comprehension quiz.

When I was learning English in both EFL and ESL contexts, I mostly practiced this functional thinking to understand grammar, comprehend readings, and to communicate with people. If I were correct on the questions on a quiz, test, TOEIC, or TOEFL, I moved on—I did not think there was more to the answer. I did not question why I was learning x y and z, what agenda and ideology were behind the text, what exactly “proper” or “standard” English meant, or what was not being taught.

For Socrates, this way of thinking means philosophy; Dewey (1910), “reflective thinking,” Freire, (1970, 1973) “critical consciousness,” and hooks* (2009), “critical thinking.” This meaningful thinking is the gem of knowledge that we hope our students will polish during and after their academic endeavor. However, especially in the field of language instruction, this thinking may not be emphasized enough, and de-emphasis of that could engender ideological implications in a classroom, more precisely “linguistic imperialism,” which “threatens the linguistic human rights of speakers of other languages” (Pennycook, 2000, p. 113).

Pennycook argued the issue of ideological implications due to the effects of the “global spread of English” on

society, culture, and people. In particular, he addressed English language instruction (ELI) as one way of promoting “English linguistic imperialism” or “English linguistic hegemony,” which could muffle the students’ voice, authenticity, and agency. James Berlins likewise allegedly argued, “... a way of teaching is never innocent. Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology... and to ignore this is to fail our responsibilities as teachers and as citizens” (p. 492-93). Thus, critical thinking is a way to emancipate us from ideologies or linguistic imperialism. Bell hooks (2009), whose pedagogical values are influenced by Paulo Freire, congruently asserted that critical thinking is “the practice of freedom.” In *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, hooks claimed, “Students do not become critical thinkers overnight. First, they must learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself” (p. 8). Hooks, along with renowned scholars such as Dewey and Freire, have hitherto elucidated the vital role of critical thinking and encouraged educators to teach such skills in class; why may it not, then, be as prevalent in language instruction?

Critical Thinking as “Culturally-based Concept”

One of the reasons for this could be the idea of critical thinking as “a self-evident foundation of Western thought such as freedom of speech” (Atkinson, 1997, p. 74). In other words, critical thinking is a culturally-based concept. Atkinson stated critical thinking is: [T]he kind of behavior in which an individual is automatically immersed by virtue of being raised in a particular cultural milieu and which the individual therefore ‘learns through the pores.’ Such behavior is

almost by definition tacit—it is learned and practiced in a largely unconscious or at least unreflective way. (1997, p.73)

Thus, Atkinson and many prominent scholars have concluded that critical thinking would be too difficult a concept for ELLs to grasp (Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson and Ramanathan, 1995; Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996). Ramanathan and Kaplan, for instance, have also argued that “critical thinking is largely a sociocognitive practice that draws significantly on shared cultural practices and norms that mainstream students have (had) access to” (p.225). However, Yilin Sun (2016) and other leading scholars think otherwise.

Implication of Critical Thinking in ELI

At the 2016 WASOLE conference, Yilin Sun, a former President of TESOL, spoke about the importance of reevaluating English language instruction to meet the 21st century learning needs as known as “7C skills” due to ever-growing technological advancement. In fact, the integration of one of the “Cs” (critical thinking) in ELI is of particular interest to many scholars. For instance, Luk and Lin (2016) argued that “[critical thinking] is believed to be an essential skill that will enhance the competitiveness and employability of young people in the global arena” (p. 68).

Yang (2014) also contended that “[c]ritical thinking and English literacy are two essential 21st century competencies that are a priority for teaching and learning in an increasingly digital learning environment” (p.723). In her article of “An Online Adaptive Learning Environment for Critical-Thinking-Infused English Literacy Instruction,” she found that critical-thinking-infused instruction, which emphasized Vygotsky’s social construction learning, simultaneously improved ELLs’ critical thinking skills (“analysis, inference, evaluation, induction and deduction”) and English literacy skills (p. 742).

Similar to Yang’s study, Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) further pointed out the difficulties which EFL students face when applying critical thinking in college-level writing and conducted a study to implement critical-thinking-infused lessons in the ELI. The duo concluded

that the integration of reflective writing, discussions, and providing constructive feedback on content and form enhanced the students’ thinking skills to rhetorically analyze texts and compose writing with a solidified central claim. While rigorous studies of critical thinking in language instruction are being explored, not many seem to address why critical thinking is a necessary skill to be taught among ELLs. The answer to this why can be found in my college composition class.

Deconstruction of Institutionalized Mind

I have many ELLs who want to excel in academia just as much as I did when I was learning English. They seek “correctness” from me so that they can get a good grade. When they read, they read for information so that they can answer the comprehension questions. When they write, they write for grammar so that they can practice correcting their mistakes after getting feedback from me. After the revision, they say, “What else do you want me to correct?” or “What else do you want me to add?” They would want to get corrected, but many would also feel diffident about their own ideas, writing, or their English proficiency skills due to their ESL background. These traits seem like the norm among ELLs, but now, I find these habits of mind or collective identity as “institutionalized minds” who have lost their voice, washed away their authenticity, and deadened their agency.

De-emphasizing such an important thinking skill could not only put ELLs one step behind when globally competing with others in a job market as Luk and Lin (2016) stated, but also keep them blind to ideological dispositions and linguistic hegemony. Under such circumstances, students then may become a canned product of the institution: no individual uniqueness and no self-advocacy. Thus, critical thinking allows them to deconstruct their institutionalized minds and gives them opportunities for freedom of thinking, which becomes the heart of their voice and agency. With an emphasis of critical thinking in language instruction, we can now see not just a part of the students but their wholeness as active participants in the academic discourse.

*bell hooks is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, borrowed from her great-grandmother. To distinguish herself from her great-grandmother, hooks chooses her name in lowercase letters.

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