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TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS VIA CULTURE

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In this deliberately moving world, especially with the expanding information and globalization, analyzing the information has become very crucial. In this regard, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, together with many educational institutions around the world, set “21st century skills” in order to prepare students to their professional future (1). The skills of the 21st century are broken into three categories such as learning skills, literacy skills and life skills. Critical thinking is the first of ‘the four C’s’ of learning skills category and the other three are collaboration, communication and creativity. Therefore, as educators who shape tomorrow’s professionals and leaders, we need to focus on teaching above mentioned skills from children’s early ages in the framework of local and global cultures, and accordingly, this paper will focus on teaching critical thinking in school classrooms.

The theoretical analysis of modern studies on various aspects of critical thinking at the philosophical, social, psychological and pedagogical levels demonstrate scientists' high interest in the theme. In order to form a clearer picture of the term, it is important to define the meaning of the term "critical thinking".

The concept of "critical thinking" appeared in the second half of the 20th century, however research in this field was conducted by many scientists long before the term was invented. The first historically known appeal to the category of "thinking" is found in the 5th century BC in the philosophical views of the Eleatic School. The main issue of the philosophy of Parmenides is the ratio of thinking and being. The ontology of Parmenides influenced the development of critical thinking as an important tool for the search for truth (2). Sophists Gorgiy, Prodiq, Protagoras made a great contribution to the philosophical development of the understanding of thinking. In their philosophy, reason becomes the personal power and ability of a person. To be wise among sophists meant to be able to think freely, which coincides with the ability to express thoughts in free and competent speech (3). The further development of the concept of "critical thinking" found its continuation in the works of Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and Kant, where thinking is viewed as a special form of cognitive activity, as a historical phenomenon that presumes continuity from generation to generation, as the possibility of knowledge fixation using language. According to Kant and Socrates, the art of asking questions and finding the right answers to them is one of the methods of developing human abilities (4). To mention later definitions, the Cambridge dictionary states that critical thinking is the process of thinking carefully about a subject or idea, without allowing feelings or opinions to affect you. More detailed definitions explain the term such as 'skilled and active interpretation of observations and communications, information and argumentation'. Lipman M. defines critical thinking as a process of independent and responsible decision-making based on criteria and context using self-correction (5).

Russian and Kazakh researcher also have made a great contribution to the definition of this complex concept. Clarin M.V. considers critical thinking as rational, reflexive thinking, including both abilities and predispositions (5). Raimbekova G. discusses that critical thinking is curiosity, the ability to develop their own point of view on a particular issue, the ability to defend it with logical arguments (6). Providing similar definitions to critical thinking, foreign and local researchers and educators of different periods agree that the development of critical thinking is a priority in education.

From an educational perception, the aim of preparing students with a skill that can be useful both in school and in life at large would be the most important concern. Therefore, from this educational angle, critical thinking should be viewed in terms of its practical, teachable, and measurable aspects. As modern scholars have discussed, one of the main concerns in modern world is advancing people's skills in correctly assessing and making rational decisions on the devastating amount of information we receive from the Internet, television, and other mass media sources. Public and private education institutions undoubtedly bare a big amount of responsibility in this regard.

In many educational institutions around the world, developing critical thinking skills is agreed to be very important. Increasing students' abilities to critically consider the reliability of information and arguments is one of the most essential elements of education. This view is shared by many higher and school education professionals of western and eastern countries. For example, in New Zealand, critical thinking is considered as one of the core skills students are required to acquire throughout university and added to student's "graduate profile"(7). Such profile is consisted of student's personal qualities and skills. Asian University for Women in Bangladesh can show us another example: on its website, the university states that its mission is to prepare students with "strong skills in critical thinking, analysis, and communication" (8).

Although the majority of educational organizations from around the world are concerned about developing students' critical thinking skills, there is not much information on student's opinions and awareness on the topic. There had been no researches conducted on what students think of critical thinking skills or other skills they need to acquire before they graduate from secondary

schools or universities, or how they need to develop such skills. A question arises here on indication factors of critical thinking and what abilities should a student is to acquire with critical thinking.

American psychologist Halpern D. believes that critical thinking requires building logical conclusions, creating consistent logical models and making informed decisions (9). Plous S. connects the development of critical thinking with the ability to assess and make decisions that are influenced by cognitive and motivational factors, some of which are responsible for the thought process and others for the feelings of a person (10). Richard W. Paul links the development of critical thinking with intellectual standards. In his opinion, students should learn to design actions, develop the intellectual standards underlying rational learning (11).

In addition to intellectual and logical skills, in most academic articles, culture is considered as one of the essential indicators of critical thinking. Since language is an essential part of culture, at all times, culture of the country where specific language is spoken, was taught parallel to this language. Foreign language teachers just did not use the phrase 'teaching critical thinking' before the term was invented as an official skill. For example, to a second grade student in Kazakhstan, it would not be possible to teach the meaning of English words 'King' or 'Queen' without explaining the monarchy system in Great Britain since our country does not have such system. Learning small facts about countries while learning English, students have been learning to look at things from different sides, whereby unknowingly acquiring critical thinking skill.

Bearing this in mind, we should also mention bilingual or bicultural students whose critical thinking skills are affected by several cultures. Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle indicated that cultural conditioning could be an important advantage in critical thinking since many bicultural or bilingual children emerge to be skilful critical thinkers and they rarely base their decisions on cultural or moral stereotypes (12).

To discuss typical portrait of a critical thinker student, throughout experiences in school lessons conducted by Ricci and Su, in which they used the case study mode in teacher education and organizational leadership, students possessing critical thinking skills received higher scores and came up with logical results. These students who used critical-thinking varied from other students by the followed: they first answered the questions with challenges within the case study, they offered various reasonable combinations of alternative solutions, and they selected the best alternative from given combinations and clarified the decision with pros and cons as well as its reasonability (13). Such processes allow students to come up with new conclusion in strategic planning if they end up in similar to case study situations.

Most educators agree that average student's portrait, possessing critical thinking skills, should contain curiosity and activeness; core skills needed for learning; listening skills and clearly stating own position; self-sufficiency. Speaking of which, students should be able to work in collaboration with others, to be responsible for their own education, to increase their interest in education and the process of learning. Moreover, the efficiency of perception of information should be improved.

For the students to be able to think critically and have above mentioned abilities, complex, multi-angled methods and technology should be used. Personality oriented approach is of favour in classrooms to develop students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking-focused lessons need to be comprised of understanding and recalling the early studied information on the matter, finding and acquiring new knowledge on the theme and then applying such in practice.

Let us consider practical approach to developing critical thinking in foreign language classrooms. A foreign language, on the one hand, helps in obtaining professional or other information, and on the other hand, is a tool of communication. However, effective communication can only be talked about if a person has correctly perceived or transmitted information. In this regard, it is increasingly possible to hear from educators and psychologists that communicative competence is effective only if a person has critical thinking skills.

In order to develop critical thinking skills in foreign language classrooms, the technology should be based on a three-phase lesson structure. In the first phase "Evocation" students repeat existing knowledge, show their interest in the new topic and set their own learning goals. An im-

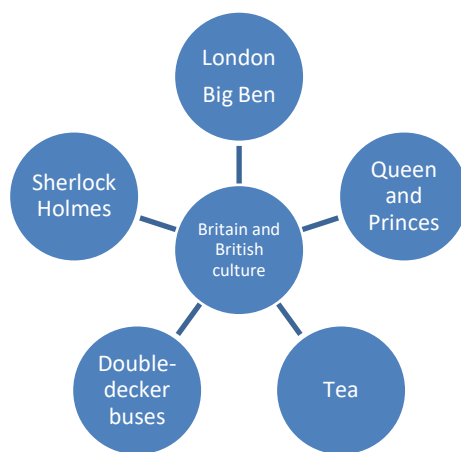
portant aspect in the implementation of this phase is the systematization of all the information that emerged as a result students' self work. The teacher is very important at this stage to listen to all opinions. At the same time, at this stage there are no "right" or "wrong" statements, the rule is very important: "Any opinion of students is valuable". At this stage, effective use of "interrogative words", which allows solving two tasks at once - extracting information and developing skills in compiling interrogative sentences, can be helpful. For instance, learning the topic "Cities of Great Britain", different questions can be asked and written on the board. Students are welcomed to write questions also. Taking into account that at this stage any intervention by the teacher is excluded, even grammatical errors are not corrected. In the course of reading the text, the students extract the necessary information; answer the questions posed by them. At this stage, it is also possible to use the technique "Clusters". The essence of this technique is that information relating to a phenomenon is systematized in the form of clusters around the key topic.

The second phase is called "Realization of Meaning". At this stage new information is received and students' goals are adjusted. This stage can be called the semantic stage. If we keep in mind that during the first phase students have determined the directions of their knowledge, then the teacher, in the process of explaining, has the opportunity to place accents in accordance with the expectations and the questions asked. The organization of work at this stage may be different. This may be a story, lecture, individual, pair or group reading, or watching video. In any case, it will be individual acceptance and tracking of information. In the process of realization of the semantic stage, the main task is to maintain the activity of the students, their interest and the inertia of movement created during the challenge phase. At this stage, the "interrogation" technique can be used; it allows students work in pairs. To explain the technology, two students read the text, stopping after each paragraph, and ask each other questions at different levels on the content of the text. This technique contributes to the development of communication skills.

The third phase "Reflection" includes thinking, the formation of new knowledge, as well as the setting of new learning goals. In the process of reflection, the information that was new turns into acquired knowledge. Reflection of the process becomes the main goal of both the teacher and the student. Some of the judgments may be quite acceptable for adoption while other judgments cause a need for discussion. In any case, the stage of reflection actively contributes to the development of critical thinking skills. In this regard, the speech exercises at this stage become creative: the organization of round tables; writing creative works; project protection. At this stage, "cinquain" technique can be used.

Other than 3 phase technology, foreign languages educators use different techniques and games such as "Mind-maps", "Wordplay", "Wien Diagram", "Tree game", etc. Role-playing, conferences, online bridge, talk shows as well as debates are helpful in developing students' critical thinking skills.

To discuss one of the above mentioned methods, mind-mapping, introduced by psychologist Tony Buzer, can be very handy in teaching foreign languages (14). It can be explained as an intellectual map and it helps students systemize the knowledge on a given topic. For instance, the learners of 9 "A" grade at 15 secondary school named after I. Zhanbolatova located in Aktau have a topic on culture in their educational program. Great Britain and its culture's mind map for lesson "Cultural heritage" could look as shown below and extended by learners at the lesson (Pic.1).



Pic. 1. Mind-map on “Cultural heritage”

The level of critical thinking will be sufficiently developed if student shows the ability to find the most important and essential signs in a large flow of information, analyze, draw conclusions, formulate their statements.

In conclusion, it is important to mention that a foreign language lessons contribute to the development of critical thinking through a variety of material and interactive approaches. Kazakhstan’s policy is to prepare skilful professional who are competent in world human resources market. In order for that to happen, it is important not only to teach basic knowledge and foreign languages, but also 21st century skills including critical thinking and reasoning. In this case, teaching critical thinking skills in foreign languages classrooms helps in achieving two goals: a foreign language is both a goal and a learning tool.

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