

RELC Journal

<http://rel.sagepub.com/>

Can Thinking be Taught? Linking Critical Thinking and Writing in an EFL Context

Sandhya Rao Mehta and Rahma Al-Mahrouqi
RELC Journal published online 4 December 2014
DOI: 10.1177/0033688214555356

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://rel.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/12/01/0033688214555356>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *RELC Journal* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://rel.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://rel.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://rel.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/12/01/0033688214555356.refs.html>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Dec 4, 2014

[What is This?](#)

Can Thinking be Taught? Linking Critical Thinking and Writing in an EFL Context

RELC Journal

1–14

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0033688214555356

rel.sagepub.com



Sandhya Rao Mehta

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Rahma Al-Mahrouqi

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Abstract

While thinking critically is often perceived to be the primary purpose of reading, the question of whether it can actually be taught in classrooms has been extensively debated. This paper bases itself on a qualitative case study of university students completing a degree in English Language and Literature. It explores the way in which critical thinking can be taught in EFL contexts. The paper suggests that critical thinking is best defined as a series of skills which can be continuously worked upon by students for whom constant revision and application of these skills is a significant way of internalizing what has often been seen to be just an attitude or bent of mind. This skill is further enhanced when students get an opportunity to write on the areas which have been discussed in the class, particularly if they are of some relevance to the students' own contexts. Based on the open question format of Norris and Ennis (1989) and subsequent evaluation using the rubrics of McLaughlin and Moore (2012) which take into account the critical reading component in writing, this paper investigates the extent to which critical thinking could be enhanced through in-class social practices such as discussions and subsequent writing. The study concludes that continuous practice, both oral and written, provide opportunities for students to develop their critical thinking abilities as they become more successful in incorporating nuanced and critical ideas into their academic writings. This has implications for students' academic and personal achievements because, clearly, an inability to read critically will result in an inability to write insightfully. Various strategies are then suggested to facilitate learners' use of critical thinking skills so that they may successfully incorporate them into their writing, both in an academic context and as a life-long skill.

Corresponding author:

Sandhya Rao Mehta, Sultan Qaboos University, Post Box 42, Postal Code 123, Al Khod, Oman.

Email: sandhyamehta4@gmail.com

Keywords

Critical thinking, academic writing in Oman, transferring reading skills, student's critical abilities, EFL in Oman

Critical Thinking: An Introduction

Richard Paul and Linda Elders's famous definition of critical thinking as being 'the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, more defensible' (2002: 316) points to the continuing relevance and significance surrounding critical thinking in academic study referring, as it does, to the act of thinking as being a conscious and therefore, a teachable skill. This is diametrically opposed to such studies as those of Atkinson (1997) and Atkinson and Ramanathan (1999) which suggested that critical thinking was culturally (primarily Western) determined and that many Eastern communities could not be expected to internalize critical thinking as they had not been brought up to question authority. While this argument has been largely disputed (Stapleton, 2002), the manner in which critical thinking could be actually taught remains debated, particularly within EFL circles where it is largely found that students, while struggling with the mechanics of language formation, tend to ignore crucial critical reading skills. This is even more significant in EFL writing for, in the transition between reading and reading-based writing, students invariably seem to leave large gaps, unable to detect implicit assumptions in the text or to offer insights about them, largely owing to a lack of ease with the language itself, thus creating a situation where the language focus overtakes the focus on intelligent and critical reading.

This paper attempts to explore the difficulty faced by EFL students in employing critical thinking skills in writing university-level literary and broadly academic pieces. Based on a specific case study of 30 English majors at Oman's Sultan Qaboos University, this study investigates the extent to which students trained to read critically are then able to transfer this skill into their writing. The study contrasts samples of student writing on a given topic at the beginning and the end of a semester-long course on critical reading skills. An underlying assumption is that the university English classes consist of students with 'reasonable' levels of language proficiency and that, as future English teachers and translators, the skill in question will be an intrinsic part of their professional requirement. The critical skills of the students are evaluated using an open question format based on Norris and Ennis (1989) and the writing which followed it was evaluated using the rubrics of MacLaughlin and Moore (2012) which included the critical thinking component into it. Assessment of the student writing was done by four different instructors to retain objectivity and exclude any individual variations. The study found that students were, by and large, capable of approaching a text from a critical perspective and identify key components of audience, tone and individual voice. Yet, when confronted with the task of writing on a similar theme, the writing showed levels which were more akin to areas of definition and description rather than analysis and evaluation, often identified as key features of academic writing (Condon and Kelly-Riley, 2004; Mulnix, 2010; Fahim and Pezeshki, 2012). Further interviews with the four instructors identify some ways in which critical

reading skills could be more successfully incorporated in the writing of these EFL students, thus de-linking them from the cultural debate on whether non-Western students are capable of critical thinking, which has very often framed this discussion.

Defining the Scope of Critical Thinking and Reading

While much research in critical thinking has asserted that it should be re-viewed as a criterion for evaluation, given the background of many L2 learning cultures which may emphasize acquiescence over questioning, subsequent studies have gone a long way in asserting that critical thinking skills are differently expressed in some cultures, rather than being non-existent (McKinley, 2013). To a large extent, this confrontation is framed around the way in which critical thinking is defined as consisting of the ability to retain a personal voice (Barnawi, 2011) and have individual opinions, rather than the ability to understand implications, the target audience or the implicit argument of a text. Seen as a philosophical attitude (Sternberg, 1986) or as a 'mindless application of a set of logical principles' (Mulnix, 2010: 465), critical thinking has often been viewed as a bent of mind or a syllogism, removed from its context, making it difficult to assess the extent to which it has actually been acquired by learners. Further problematized by EFL learners who are struggling with the language, critical thinking often remains, if erroneously, a secondary goal in the second language classroom. Equally relevant is the evaluation of critical thinking as an outcome of reading, as the various tests introduced and conducted in American universities show (such as the California Critical Thinking Test, the Cornell Thinking Tests and the GMAT Critical Thinking Component). Most of these tests owe much to the Watson-Glaser Approach to critical thinking which identifies five important levels: inferencing, recognition of assumptions, making deductions, interpreting, and evaluating arguments (quoted in Cavdar and Doe, 2012: 298). This is directly related to Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive domain which includes knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Krathwohl's 2002 re-working of Bloom's Taxonomy, even if altered in some detail, retains much of the earlier focus on the process of learning. Their new stages include instructions to remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create (Krathwohl, 2002), all of which imply an essentially upward movement in terms of the learning curve.

The relation of this structured understanding of the learning process to critical thinking becomes immediately clear when the process of reading among students is closely observed. Smith (1990) outlined the way in which the debate on critical thinking in a classroom situation centered largely around two schools of thought: that of Thomas Newkirk (1989) who argued for an open, unstructured thinking process to encourage critical thought, and that of Lehman and Hayes (1985) whose approach was more structured and organized. According to Smith, this new approach facilitated the following process in reading:

1. Helping students with what they already know of a topic
2. Recognizing biases in a given text
3. Getting students to confront these biases with open-ended questions and discussions

4. Guiding students with additional readings
5. Discussing validity of these readings which are the new sources
6. Comparing the sources for positions and arguments
7. Helping students to see that there are no final answers (Smith, 1990: 352-55)

In an analysis of the various definitions of critical thinking, Fisher (2005) states that what is most important is to ensure that 'these skills are transferable; i.e. if students learn general thinking skills in one context they will be able to (and actually will) apply them to many other contexts, provided the teaching specifically aims at such transfer' (2005: 5). An immediate transfer of critical thinking skills, and perhaps an important way of retaining and evaluating it is to write about it. Much research (Wade, 1995; Condon and Kelly-Riley, 2004; Benesch, 2001; Chaffee, 2014) has explored the way in which writing is the most important strategy which would help to make the transformation from declarative to procedural knowledge and make critical thinking a life skill. This transformation, however, cannot be achieved without sufficient training in the writing classroom.

Transferring Critical Thinking to Writing

Once a process of critical thinking has been completed, it is necessary that it should be transferred into a written form, for 'writing has often been seen to be a far more reinforcing skill compared to oral discussions' (Wade, 1995: 25). Wade goes on to show that, in a classroom situation, oral discussion of what has been covered does not necessarily guarantee retention or analysis because discussions are not self-reflexive enough. What has been said cannot be taken back and this effectively silences a portion of the class which has not been able to participate in the discussion for reasons of time, personal choice or other classroom constrictions (Wade, 1995: 24). This is also re-asserted in other studies on classroom gender dynamics (Clinchy, 2000), where female students are often seen to react initially with silence and thus need another platform for the articulation of their thoughts.

Writing is thus one of the most effective ways in which critical readings might be remembered, understood and analyzed, for:

The reflective mind improves its thinking by thinking (reflectively) about it. Likewise, it improves its writing by thinking (reflectively) about writing. It moves back and forth between writing and thinking about how it is writing (Paul and Elder, 2008: 40).

Writing which is not based on critical reading might well be merely personal and exist without either context or wider purpose. It may include 'prejudices, biases, myths and stereotypes' (Paul and Elder, 2008: 40). What is crucial, therefore, is the need to ensure that critical reading and thinking skills are incorporated into the process of writing in a classroom context. This will mean that learning is being effectively utilized and applied. Condon and Kelly-Riley (2000), in a study on how students are taught to write, say that students may begin to write spontaneously but then immediately realize that they have to first think about it before putting ink on paper. He relates this uncritical way of writing to the requirements of classroom contexts, where most faculty, according to him, see that

students are writing for information and their teachers were satisfied with students voicing information without much analysis. This is further reflected in other studies such as that by Carol Booth Olson (1984) on her observation of school tests in America. Very often, she notes, questions in tests use words such as ‘analyze’, ‘discuss’ and ‘elaborate’ without students having had any training on how such strategies might actually work (Olson, 1984: 28-31). Carroll, Keniston and Penden (2008) use a similar model in their study of undergraduate students. Using Perry’s (1970) ideas, they follow students’ stages of development from what they call the ‘Dualist’ approach of viewing a text in black-and-white to where they are able to understand others’ views. Finally, there is the ‘relativism stage’, where students not only have their own view but now also have an awareness of others’ views together with an understanding of the complexity of a given area of interest. Training in writing, particularly in academic writing, which should necessarily be preceded by critical reading and thought, is an activity to which insufficient attention has been given, on the assumption that students who have reached the writing stage have naturally developed other skills such as synthesis and analysis.

Using the time-tested Socratic method of critical enquiry, coupled with Bloom’s hierarchical taxonomy of learning, certain assumptions about writing can thus be established. Hence, Wade’s (1995) listing of the various stages in which writing is learnt includes:

1. Asking questions
2. Defining the problem
3. Examining evidence
4. Analyzing assumptions
5. Avoiding emotional/personal reactions
6. Avoiding simplification
7. Considering alternate assumptions
8. Tolerating uncertainty (Wade, 1995: 25)

Olson’s (1984) reference to Fredrick and Dominic’s (1981) discussion on how cognitive psychology allows for an understanding of the writing process is relevant in this context. They mention the knowledge we have, the language skills we have, our audience, our purpose in writing and the context in which the writing is taking place. From a writing perspective, however, this issue is further problematized as it is not clear how much these critical skills have been used in the reading of the text and subsequent writing based on the readings. To a large extent, the evaluation of writing remains a contentious issue with ESL studies such as those of Helms-Park and Stapleton (2003) countering Elbow’s (1981) notion that voice was one of the most important criteria in evaluating student writing and McLaughlin and Moore (2012) suggesting that very often, a well written and organized piece of work is considered average for not including an original and new idea:

Without open-minded thinking as a basis of approaching the writing task – the thinking that prompts the writer to consider alternative approaches and possible outcomes – the writer may not achieve the level of reasoning that we expect in freshman writing. This thoughtful, fair-minded approach with its resulting careful reasoning, often expressed in a clear but neutral

tone, may well be one of the distinguishing features of “college-level” thinking and writing (McLaughlin and Moore, 2012: 158).

Given the diverse requirements in student writing assignments, the evaluation rubric would necessarily be challenging, particularly if the intent is also to identify elements of critical thought in the student essay. Thus, a very specific study would be required to be able to identify the extent to which students who had been previously trained in critical thinking and application would then be able to utilize those skills in a writing project when given sufficient input in terms of group discussions and brainstorming sessions.

Methodology

The research sample for this study consisted of 30 undergraduates who were both Arts as well as Education English majors, i.e., those following an Arts (English) program and those who were training to be English language teachers. The study was conducted in the College of Arts of Sultan Qaboos University, a national university into which students from different parts of Oman are selected based on their high school performance. These students had already undergone at least two semesters of foundation courses in reading, writing and speaking, having entered the course with a minimum Band of 6 (the equivalent of point 5 in IELTS or 500 in TOEFL). In addition, these students had completed, or were registered for a course in critical reading. All students were given copies of the selected texts which included short (1 paragraph) writings on tourism. These readings were taken from their prescribed textbook, Bailey’s *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*. The texts showed multiple approaches to the idea of tourism and the primary task was for students to identify relevant, reliable sources for further writing. The four paragraphs which were presented included a newspaper report, a piece of description from a travel brochure, a report on the percentages of tourists around the world and a reflective piece on a personal holiday in Thailand. The critical reading texts were given to students of an academic writing class after two weeks of classes in which their previous reading and writing skill courses were discussed and revised. The students also wrote a preliminary, reflective essay on what academic writing meant to them and what they thought they would get from this particular course. This was a warm up exercise in which students got to write following a long break over the summer and were given an unrecorded mark which was not added to the final course mark. This gave students a chance to understand the evaluation of the instructor as well, based on a discussion of the paper which was returned to the students. The students’ preliminary task was to answer the questions which accompanied the text. This was based on the notion of the open ended questions which were seen to be reliable sources of information with sufficient accuracy regarding critical thinking skills. Students were made to identify each form of writing and place it in a relevant genre. Further questions explored their familiarity with author intention, choice of language, nature of publication as well as the tone of the piece. Each paragraph was followed by similar questions which targeted their critical thinking abilities. These questions were given as homework without much previous discussion in order to gauge students’ existing skills.

Results of the Critical Thinking Assignment

The texts on tourism were chosen as they were outside the areas of education and humanities which were the specializations of the class. Thus, all the students were equally distanced from the topic and it could be approached from an objective point of view. The specific reading chosen for an assignment was from a chapter entitled 'Reading: Finding Suitable Sources'. This chapter consisted of four short (100-150 word) paragraphs on the topic of 'Tourism Marketing'. Each reading represented different genres such as a travel blog, a newspaper article, a student writing sample and an extended, formal writing with references. Students were given questions at the end of these readings to better evaluate the texts as sources for writing an academic essay. Following the open-ended format, questions which were asked included:

1. What does the writer of the travel blog want to convey?
2. Who do you think reading 4 (the extended academic paragraph) is written for?
3. What is the focus of the writer of reading 1 (a newspaper article)?
4. Describe the tone of all the readings as being formal/informal, ironic/sarcastic, or reflective/academic.

All these questions were given to students to answer in the class. The intention was to gauge the extent to which these students could deconstruct the purpose, point of view, overt and covert agendas as well as conviction levels of the given texts. Some of the answers given by the students are given below. The responses given below are representative of all the students:

1. What does the writer of the travel blog want to convey?:

'The writer wants to convey that Thailand is a beautiful place'; 'The writer wants to show how he went to Thailand' and 'The writer shows all the beautiful places in Thailand'.

2. Who do you think reading 4 (the extended academic paragraph) is written for?:

'It is written for a journal'; 'It is written for someone like the writer himself'; 'It is written in a somewhat complicated way, like for a course'; 'It is written for an educated person'.

3. What is the focus of the writer of reading 1 (a newspaper article)?:

'To show why tourism marketing is important'; 'the focus of the writer of reading 1 is to show how consumer behaviour is important'; 'To show why consumer behaviour should be studied'; 'To show how to do tourism marketing'.

4. Describe the tone of all the readings as being formal/informal, ironic/sarcastic, or reflective/academic:

'1 and 4 are academic, 2 and 3 are informal'; '2 and 3 are reflective'; '1, 3 and 4 are academic and 2 is reflective'; 'No paragraph is sarcastic or ironic'; 'Only 2 is informal'.

Using the format of Ennis (1993) of allowing for open-ended questions to gauge the critical reading abilities of the students, it was found that 90% of the students were able to answer the questions regarding the texts which were available in their books accurately in terms of identifying tone, distinguishing the personal from the academic narrative, identifying the targeted readership as well as make connections between two or more elements in the writing, such as the link between understanding consumer psychology and marketing tourism. Once the readings were divided into small, manageable pieces which did not intimidate the students for being complex in language and ideas, they were able to answer specific questions regarding the purpose, scope, role as well as the possible contexts of each one of the readings on tourism which they confronted. In-class discussions regarding these questions further enabled those who had doubts about certain varieties (such as the difference between the language of the newspaper article and an academic text) to distinguish between them.

Results of the Academic Writing Assignment

In continuation of this preliminary assignment of reading short texts on tourism, students were then asked to come prepared in the next class to write an essay of approximately 500 words on the general area of tourism. Two longer articles were given to them as additional readings and another class was spent preparing them for the writing assignment by giving them tips on taking notes and summarizing skills. The students were permitted to bring these notes into class for the writing assignment. On the day of the test, a question was written on the board and students were given an hour and a half to complete a 500 word essay. The topic for the assignment was 'Although tourism is an economic activity, it can also be seen that tourism is useful to understand the cultures of both, the host country as well as that of the visitors. Discuss this with particular reference to Oman'. The intention of this assignment was to allow students to explore the macro picture of tourism which had already been discussed over two classes using different perspectives but this time with the specific focus of culture. In particular, students were asked to explore how tourism encouraged the understanding of both cultures, those of the host nation as well as those of the variety of countries from where the tourists came. As Oman is officially hailed as a tourist destination and students admitted to meeting tourists frequently on the streets and in the markets, this topic was seen to be an effective way of confronting an area with which they were familiar but may not have explored extensively. As this was still a preliminary writing assignment where students had not been introduced to the APA format and other writing technicalities, the essays were meant to only have an underlined thesis statement, a title, an introduction and conclusion as well as a few paragraphs in support of the main argument. These essays were then read and graded individually by three different instructors to ensure validity. Using the rubric of McLaughlin and Moore (2012), the essays were evaluated for the criteria of focus, logic, content, style and correctness, leaving out the final element of research as it was not a requirement in this particular writing task. The grades were divided into 'Superior, Skilled, Adequate and Inadequate' (McLaughlin and Moore, 2012: 150). A final grade using these criteria was also given to facilitate final marking although the rubric only allows for evaluation of the six criteria separately. The detailed grades are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Grades given to students in their first essay.

	Superior	Skilled	Adequate	Inadequate
Content	2	1	5	22
Logic	1	5	7	17
Style	0	3	3	24
Correctness	0	2	6	22
Focus	0	1	3	26
Research	NA	NA	NA	NA
Final Grade	2	3	5	20

The most significant observation which could be immediately made on the writings in this assignment was that a majority of students were not able to focus on the main argument of the essay which was the cultural aspect of the topic. As this was not an area which was discussed at length in class, students found themselves incapable of introducing a new concept into their essays from the ones which had been discussed in the classroom, such as tourism as an economic force, examples of tourism in Oman, data concerning tourists in Oman as well as the benefits of tourism in Oman, all of which had been discussed as part of concept mapping in the classroom. When confronted with a new way of examining an old topic, students found themselves at a loss and strategized to write around the information which was already known to them. Thus the following thesis statements are indicative of the writings of the students:

1. Tourism is beneficial for a country because it will create jobs and develop infrastructure.
2. Over 17 year, Oman has been taking care of tourism sector and making plans for inviting this sector hoping to enhance the countries' economy.
3. They want to know more about Oman, but to want to know a country, you must know the culture first.
4. Tourism in Oman is vastly developing and more people from different cultures are coming to it.
5. Tourism helps the culture of the country because people come to learn about Oman.

In this selection of theses, it can be seen that only two students were able to point to the idea of culture as being a determining factor in the tourism industry itself and even these writings focused on the way in which tourists can benefit from the country visited, while the question had pointed specifically at the way in which tourism benefitted both parties, the tourists as well as the hosts. When given a chance to explore their topics more extensively, students wrote the following in their paragraphs:

1. In conclusion, tourism has many advantages and benefits. Tourism has economic benefits, social benefits and environmental benefits.
2. Every society should take care of tourism if they want to evolve their society.

3. The social benefits of tourism are precious gains for communities. Tourism encourages a community to widen its outlook and to endorse new ideas.
4. Tourism enables people to benefit from tours. They help widen one's mind. It also enables people to understand customs and lifestyles of people living in other countries. This makes people become open-minded.
5. When people come to Oman, they can see the way in which Omanis live, their language, their customs and lifestyle.

Re-drafting the Written Assignment

This written assignment was seen to be a preliminary effort on the part of the students to include such higher order thinking skills as identifying the main focus of a piece of writing, evaluating author intention, identifying tone and purpose. Seen in this context, most of the student writing had fallen short of the requirements of the course as well as the students' own expectations. Upon return of this particular assignment, one class hour was spent discussing the question by writing it on the board again and asking students to re-read the statement more critically. The discussion that ensued brought out diverse elements in the question given such as the focus on culture, the specific statement of the question that both hosts and visitors could benefit from tourism and that this was itself an argumentative sentence designed to challenge and provoke the writer. It was not necessary, students realized, for them to agree with the sentence given in the question paper but they were required to focus on the specific area of tourism which was underscored in this context. Students could still use the material in their note cards (such as the data regarding the number of students in Oman, the reasons why tourism was becoming an industry in the country as well as the opinions of some visitors, most of which were positive).

Based on this in-class discussion, students were given another opportunity to write on the same topic, this time as a home assignment but not using any more information than that in the note cards. The attempt was to reformulate the given question with exactly the same information, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to enable them to write based on the class discussion. The writings were then submitted and re-evaluated using the same rubric of MacLaughlin and Moore (2012) in which the criteria of critical thinking were embedded within the evaluation. The results of this writing assignment were tabulated into percentages. This time around, it was found that, of the 30 students who had submitted their work, only 3 students (10%) got an overall grade of 'Inadequate' while 11 students (33%) got a grade of 'Skilled'. The theses which the students wrote the second time around included:

1. Tourism is important because it is one way of understanding cultures.
2. Promoting intercultural understanding is one important outcome of encouraging tourism
3. While tourism is important for the economy of the country it is even more important to teach the culture of the country to tourists.
4. One of the ways to get to the culture of other people is through tourism.
5. When tourists come to Oman, they learn about the culture of the country and we can learn about them as well.

While students had still not grasped the essential focus of the question, which was to identify the way in which tourism facilitated the understanding of cultures on the part of the visitors (which is a given) but, more significantly, also the host nation itself, students were more able, the second time around, to identify the points of focus more clearly and argue with the specific focus on culture, avoiding the discussions on economy and statistics which had been given earlier in the class.

Discussion of the Results

An analysis of the writing tasks of students at two consecutive writing samples shows that critical thinking is a skill which can be imparted to EFL students when divided into its core components of identifying purpose, the speaker and the intention of the written text. Thus, inductive reasoning and source credibility of Norris and Ennis (1989) remain essential elements of a text, the deconstruction of which enables a sustained critical reading. When such reading is transferred to a writing context, the situation is further problematized as students find themselves unable to effectively use the information in their readings in an original piece of writing. This situation is corrected only following in-class discussions dealing with a critical reading of the topic given to the students. Based on group discussions and systematic underlining of the focus of the topic, students were able to write in a more effective manner, creating a thesis statement which was more argumentative and engaged with the topic at hand. Subsequently, they felt more prepared to read statements more (critically), looking for the main focus, the question asked as well as the suggested bias in the question. Based on the four instructors who had participated in evaluating the writing above, critical thinking and writing skills can thus be seen to be facilitated by the following factors:

1. Individual as well as group reflections on suggested topics.
2. Small group interactions followed by whole group discussion of the text under consideration.
3. Training in close reading of tasks involved in writing, especially the topic in question, to identify the focus, the connections required to be made and to understand any biases inherent in the question itself.
4. Opportunity to draft an essay which can be discussed by peers as well as instructors in order to be able to fine tune the work based on ensuing discussions.
5. A final writing from a preliminary draft which has been reviewed, based upon feedback on content as well as form.
6. Overall, the writing is on something with which the students are familiar or is, in some ways, relevant to their immediate context.
7. Subsequent training in writing on areas which are of more generic interest could be given to students as they proceed in the academic semester.

To a large extent, a review of material read in the classroom aids in the internalizing of reading skills among students in an EFL writing class. This is necessary as students may still not be ready to question a variety of texts written for different purposes and would require further practice to identify texts as well as be able to tune their language to fit the

academic purpose. As in the prescribed text which was read in the class, tourism was an area which was part of the official discourse in the media, but was also an experience which the students had personally confronted in a number of ways, including tourists coming to their villages as well as their presence in public parks and malls around the city. This also supports the idea that writing is more successful when students have a chance to explore areas with which they are familiar (Stapleton, 2002) and have received guidance in the form of discussions and drafts.

Conclusion

While the cultural debate surrounding critical thinking has been somewhat sidelined, following various studies (McKinley, 2013: 20) which called for defining it as more than just an implicit quality which is incapable of change (Willingham, 2007), the ways in which critical thinking could be encouraged, sustained and evaluated in reading and writing contexts remain insufficiently explored. While it is important to ensure that critical thinking is contextualized and tested by looking at 'actual products from students rather than from independent, separate testing occasions' (Candon and Kelly-Riley, 2004: 73), it would be a procrastination to just wait for critical thinking to be actively institutionalized across the board, as suggested by Phillips and Bond (2004). The McKinley and Moore approach, while useful in quantifying the degree of critical awareness in writing, does not measure such stylistic differences as voice and politeness in writing. This is important in the context of the EFL student where the lack of confidence is reflected in the choice of words and tone adopted for argumentative essays, owing to both linguistic as well as personal preferences. Students may not be able to convincingly argue around an issue if they do not have sufficient language fluency or even awareness of the content area. Critical thinking should thus be more useful if seen to be a set of teachable skills, as promoted by Davidson, reinforced by reflection, discussion and drafting, the evaluation of which is based on the extent to which students have been able to express themselves following a series of discussions.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Atkinson D (1997) A critical approach to critical thinking. *TESOL Quarterly* 31(1): 77–94.
- Atkinson D, Ramanathan V (1995) Cultures of writing: an ethnographic comparison of L1 and L2 university writing/language programs. *TESOL Quarterly* 29(3): 539–68.
- Bailey S (2006) *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Barnawi OZ (2011) Finding a place for critical thinking and self-voice in college English as a foreign language writing classrooms. *English Language Teaching* 4(2): 190–97.
- Benesch S (2001) *Critical English for academic purposes: theory, politics, and practice*. London: Routledge.

- Carroll DW, Keniston AH, and Peden BF (2009) Integrating critical thinking with course content. In: Dunn DS, Halonen JS, and Smith RA (eds) *Teaching Critical Thinking in Psychology: A Handbook of Best Practices*. London: Wiley Blackwell.
- Cavdar G, Doe S (2012) Learning through writing: teaching critical thinking skills in writing assignments. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 45(2): 298–306.
- Chaffee J (2014) *Critical Thinking, Thoughtful Writing*, 6th ed. Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.
- Clinchy B (2000) Towards a more connected vision of higher education. In: *Teaching to Promote Intellectual and Personal Maturity Incorporating Students' Worldview and Identities into the Learning Process. New Direction for Teaching and Learning* 82: 27–36.
- Condon W, Kelly-Riley D (2004) Assessing and teaching what we value: the relation between college-level writing and critical thinking. *Assessing Writing* 9(1): 56–75.
- Elbow P (1981) *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fahim M, Pezeshki M (2012) Manipulating critical thinking skills in test taking. *International Journal of Education* 4(1): 153–60.
- Fisher A (2010) Thinking skills and admission to higher education. Available at: www.cambridge-assessment.org.uk
- Helms-Park R, Stapleton P (2003) Questioning the importance of individualized voice in undergraduate L2 argumentative writing: an empirical study with pedagogical implications. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 12(3): 245–65.
- Krathwohl DR (2002) A review of Bloom's taxonomy: an overview. *Theory and Practice* 41(4): 213–64.
- Lehman B, Hayes D (1985) Advancing critical readings through historical fiction and biography. *Social Studies* 76: 165-69.
- MacLaughlin F, Moore M (2012) Integrating critical thinking into assessment of college writing. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 40(2): 145-62.
- McKinley J (2013) Displaying critical thinking in EFL academic writing: a discussion of Japanese to English contrastive rhetoric. *RELC Journal* 44 (2): 195-208.
- Mulnix JW (2010) Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Available at: http://academia.edu/678248/Thinking_Critically_About_Critical_Thinking, doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00673
- Newkirk T (1989) *Critical Thinking and Writing: Reclaiming the Essay*. Bloomington, ID: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.
- Norris S, Ennis R (1989) *Evaluating Critical Thinking*. Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Press and Software.
- Olson CB (1984) Fostering critical thinking skills through writing. *Educational Leadership* 42(3): 28-39.
- Paul R, Elder L (2007) The thinker's guide to how to write a paragraph. *Foundation for Critical Thinking*. Available at: http://www.criticalthinking.org/files/SAM_Analytic_Think2007b.pdf
- Paul R, Elder L (2002) *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of your Professional and Personal Life*. Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Perry W (1970) *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Phillips V, Bond C (2004) Undergraduates' experiences of critical thinking. *Higher Education Research and Development* 23(3): 277-85.
- Smith CB (1990) Two approaches to critical thinking. *Reading Teacher* 44(4): 350-55.
- Stapleton P (2002) Critical thinking in Japanese L2 writing: rethinking tired constructs. *ELT Journal* 56(3): 250-57.

- Sternberg RJ (1986) Critical thinking: its nature, measurement, and improvement. *ERIC*. Available at: eric.ed.gov/?id=ED272882
- Wade C (1995) Using writing to develop and assess critical thinking. *Teaching of Psychology* 22(1): 24-42.
- Willingham DT (2007) Critical thinking: why is it so hard to teach? *American Education*(Summer): 8-19. Available at: <http://static.dis.dk/uploads/Teaching%20and%20Learning/Critical%20Thinking-Why%20Is%20It%20So%20Hard%20to%20Teach%202007.pdf>