

Promoting Critical Thinking as a Social Practice: Shaping Students' Voice, Agency and Inter-Subjectivity in a Cohesive Framework

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Abstract:

Strict outcome-bound approaches and text-books-based instructional practices, prevalent in the pedagogy of most of the colleges and universities in English as an International Language (EIL) contexts, involve language activities, tasks, and tests that predominantly require one right answer or response. Pedagogical practices and related quality assurance mechanisms regulated by such approaches limit students' ability to be original and skeptical in reflecting upon various issues of importance and concern based on their own thinking and experiences. Such a focus, in Sivasubramaniam's (2015) and Nunn and Sivasubramaniam's (2011) view, has entirely centered on bureaucratic efficiency aimed at having a uniform curriculum for the majority of the students and a scheme of research and evaluation based on recalls, think-alouds, cloze tests and multiple-choice questions in standardized texts. In line with the socially-aligned view of competence much needed spontaneity, flexibility, and diversity accrues only through a process-centered pedagogy of voice, agency and response. In the backdrop of this as a premise, this paper aims to demonstrate how Critical Thinking (CT) can be promoted in EIL classrooms as a discursive practice that could shape students' voice, agency and inter-subjectivity in a cohesive framework. The paper shares both theoretical and practical ideas about CT and its importance in facilitating a meaningful education and aims to demonstrate some innovative tasks and activities that could be exploited to shape student's voice and agency and develop their higher order CT skills. The paper culminates in evolving a practically viable prototype pedagogical framework for promoting CT as a social practice in EIL classrooms that is capable of making Wilga Rivers's (1983) notions of 'skill-getting' and 'skill-using' a reality. Such a model will be useful for EIL practitioners in designing similar lessons with innovative tasks and activities and make the EIL class atmosphere stimulating and pedagogically more fruitful.

Key Words: agency, voice, critical thinking, discursive practice, inter-subjectivity, pseudo-bilingual situation, skill-getting and skill-using

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Introduction

Research suggests that critical thinking (CT) is a means to transform learning and society and social practice is one of the indispensable components of CT (e.g. Benesch, 1993; Atkinson, 1997; Oster, 1989; Brookfield, 1987; Shor & Freire, 1987; Fox, 1994; etc). Vis-à-vis, a common theme, as Richards (1995) rightly remarks, underlying different methods of language teaching is that second language learning is a highly interactive process (p. 138). It is a common knowledge that we, as teachers, devote a considerable amount of time in interaction with students and also in interaction among the students. And, in Ellis' (2004) view, the quality of this interaction has a lot of influence on language learning. In teaching language and communication, both in speech and writing, to use Rivers' (1987) view remains our central goal as language teachers (p. xiii) and therefore interaction must be present from the first encounter with language. Interaction, in simple terms implies *reception* as well as *expression* of meaningful messages which can become possible, referring to Rivers' (1983) view, only when the learners put to use the skills they have learnt. Therefore, active participation of EIL learners in skill-getting and skill-using, both inside and outside the classroom, is a prerequisite for developing their interactive communicative competence.

Addressing the centrality of interaction and thereby making the notions of skill-getting and skill-using a reality in the teaching-learning processes is a pedagogical issue of paramount importance. An obvious million-dollar question then is that how and to what extent Rivers' (1987) notion of making skill-getting and skill-using a reality and Ellis' (2004) notion of addressing the centrality of interaction in EIL classrooms are actually met. To take focus and direction from Mackey's (1970) typology of bilingual education becomes inevitable in this context. Mackey's typology of bilingual education suggests that the 'language switch' in bilingual classes (e.g. language switch from Arabic to English in the case of Oman) creates a 'pseudo-bilingual' situation, which can have several pedagogical implications on planning and implementation. It is a common knowledge that notions of skill-getting and skill-using remain ideals rather than reality in most of the pseudo-bilingual situations of EIL classrooms where the teaching-learning process is predominantly dictated by strict outcome-bound and textbook-oriented instructional practices which are usually dominated by one right answer approach. Obvious concern on the part of a language teacher is regarding how to fill this gap; how to improve this situation; and how to transform the pseudo-bilingual situation to a real bilingual situation in EIL classrooms. The answer or the key to this lies in promoting CT as a social practice in a cohesive interactive framework. The bulk of this paper, therefore, is devoted to discussing and demonstrating mainly this pedagogical aspect of paramount concern.

Interaction as a Social/Discursive Practice

It is a common communicative experience that most of the interactions move from one point to another without any strict structure according to the immediate need of interaction and its context, including the social context. However, narrowly-defined participation practices, regulated by strict out-come-bound and textbook-based approach, constrain individual's voice and agency to engage in untroubled interaction. This is, as Sivasubramaniam (2015) argues, because many researchers and policy makers, and therefore many teachers, influenced by rationalist/positivist tradition, believe that language competence is synonymous with closure-focused task(s) aimed at producing pre-determined meanings and outcomes which are universal, measurable, and therefore justifiable

(p. 74). This has led to an unhealthy practice of collecting evidence for language learning as a reaping or harvesting act. Consequently, to use Sivasubramaniam's (2015) words again, the accruing objectivity of inputs and outputs can run averse to our beliefs and value systems in that it not only stifles the agency, voice and subject-hood/inter-subjectivity of our students but can also preclude them from coming to terms with the quality of their language learning experiences (p. 74). Obviously, the path ahead then is to go beyond the calculable thinking and closure-focus in our educational practices in order to crack the nuts of Mackey's (1970) pseudo-bilingualism that predominantly prevails in EIL classrooms and make Rivers' (1983) notions of skill-getting and skill-using a reality in a true sense of the term. Thus, CT skills could be promoted and students' voice and agency be shaped as a social practice.

It is now time to discuss and demonstrate how interaction, within the outcome-based and textbook-oriented approach, could be promoted as a social practice in a cohesive framework.

Interaction and Critical Thinking in a Cohesive Framework

As Thakur and Al Mahrooqi (2015) argue that CT, like Lifelong Learning, is required in every domain of life. i.e. social, educational, and professional (p. 126). Incidentally, CT is not an inborn ability and is basically needed for evaluating one's own thinking process that results in a meaningful learning experience. On the other hand, everyday communication, to use Gaskaree, Mashhadi and Dousti's (2010) remark, is an event in which there is an interactional relationship between interlocutors which requires whole language, i.e. the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing associated with the knowledge of vocabulary, meaning and syntax with which thinking skills are also interwoven. This means, as Rigg (1991, p. 522, as cited in Richards and Rogers, 2001, p. 109) aptly argues that language should be kept whole and if language is not kept whole, it isn't language anymore. This indicates that language develops in a cohesive environment. Another good reason that goes in favor of interactive cohesive framework being more suitable for language teaching and learning is, to borrow Gaskaree, Mashhadi and Dousti's (2010) remark once again, that most textbooks and materials designed for EIL learners are based on isolated language skills and worst of all on separate vocabulary items and grammatical points (p. 33).

Thus, focusing on the need to address the centrality of interaction and to make the notions of skill-getting and skill-using a reality in a cohesive framework, this paper aims to demonstrate (a) How students' writing skill, as an illustrative choice, can be developed in a cohesive interactive framework, and (b) How a lively attention and maximum participation can be ensured through some learner-friendly and stimulating activities that promote CT as a discursive practice in a writing class. Put another way, the paper shows how the EIL students will be able to: (a) achieve maximum attention and participation in a writing class which otherwise turn out to be dry, dull and boring when writing is taught through a traditional textbook-based approach; (b) generate maximum authentic interaction through a writing lesson; (c) integrate language skills, critical and lateral thinking skills, and social skills; (d) enjoy humor and fun in the class, and (e) shape their voice, agency and inter-subjectivity and experience a stimulating learning experience.

Let us do this in a skills lesson and let us choose, as already mentioned, a writing skill to be taught in an interactive cohesive framework. Incidentally, writing, to use Russo's (1987) argument, is not necessarily a solitary activity but can be intensely interactive. As we normally

write to be read, our writing improves as we respond to the reactions of others. Interaction implies both reception and expression of messages which involves Rivers' (1983) notions of skill-getting and skill-using (p. 43). But, it must be noted that interaction takes place when interest, i.e. attention to the communicative act is present. Where there is no interest, there may be a perfunctory exchange of words, but communication of personal messages does not take place. To promote interaction in another language, we must maintain a lively attention and active participation among our students. Students need to participate in activities that engage their interest and attention, so that the interaction, to use Rivers' (1983) approach, becomes natural and normal (pp. 104-13). In the theory of second language acquisition Ellis (2004) views it as a "natural developmental route to learning" (p. 63).

With this as a backdrop that much needed spontaneity, flexibility, and diversity accrues only through a process-centered pedagogy of voice, agency and response, what follows next is a cohesive pedagogical framework to promote CT as a social practice in EIL classrooms.

Setting/Creating a Context for a Writing Lesson

The most important objective in language teaching and learning is to provide learners with the opportunities to activate their prior knowledge and use the newly-learnt knowledge in their real life. Creating a context serves as a warm-up activity and helps the learners connect their already-learnt knowledge with the new knowledge to be taught. Doing this also helps in ensuring better learning motivation and participation. For demonstrative purposes, the focus here is on argumentative/reflective writing. The following activity can be used as a context-setting activity for the following reflective writing task which is intended to engage the learners to think and argue in the area of the teaching point using a picture prompt.

Brainstorming Activity: Reflect upon the intelligence of the driver in the following picture. Would you consider him as stupid?

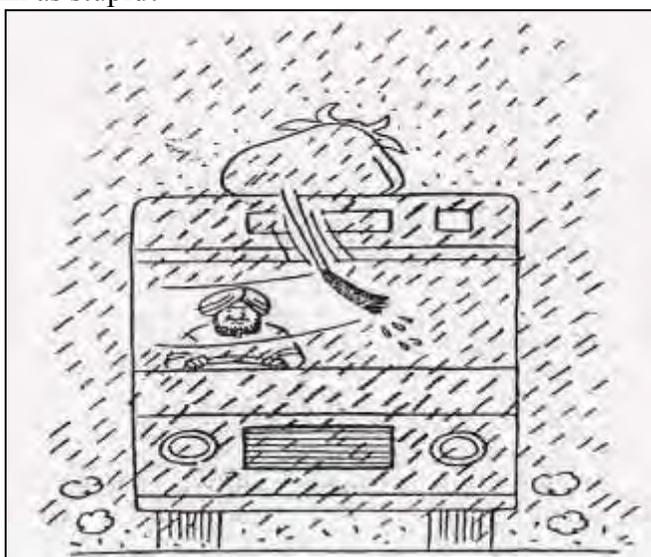


Figure 1. Have you seen cow's tail as a wiper?

Figure 1 is bound to generate diametrically opposite views, which is true to most of the situations when we reflect upon issues of importance. Duality is a prerequisite of CT which lays fertile ground(s) for disagreements and arguments for resolving those issues and disagreements.

Developing Effective Arguments: A Demonstration

Do arguments play an important role in reflections? Why are arguments important and what is their utility in society? Yes, they are important. We need to argue in order to (a) take a sound personal position on issues of concern and controversy, (b) be assertive and to stand up for our ideas, (c) reinforce the value or truth of our ideas to other people, (d) consider different points of view, (e) present pros and cons of an argumentative issue, (f) rule out alternatives and suggest a logical solution, and (g) convince/persuade an opposing audience to adopt new beliefs or behavior.

Critical and lateral thinking are the cognitive skills that have been highlighted in the selection of crisis stories as a source material for ELT. The following story, which has a situation of crisis and the problem-solving task in it, can be effectively used for the learners to depart from formulaic language learning to critical thinking, lateral thinking and decision-making and thereby to produce knowledge rather than reproduce knowledge. Situations of crisis offer a fertile scope for arguments; therefore, after examining the worth of arguments, let us argue on an issue of crisis that is involved in the following crisis story, taken from Thakur, (2013, pp. 187-189).

Crisis Solving Task: Find a responsible, practical, logical and fair solution to the crisis in the following story. Do as suggested below:

- Read the story, discuss in your group, and try to arrive at a best-possible and reasonable solution to the crisis in the story.
- Arrive at a consensus within your group.
- State your views with convincing arguments to the participants in other groups.
- Listen to the counter arguments coming from the other groups.
- Refute/Defeat the opposing arguments by giving stronger arguments.

Crisis in the Lifeboat

Seven people somehow managed to escape in a lifeboat when an ocean liner sank in the sea. However, to the given situation of crisis, only five people can survive for the reasons of space and supplies in it. Therefore, two persons have to be discarded from the lifeboat in order to save the life of five people. As the ocean has hungry sharks the abandoned people are bound to be killed. You have to justify the reason why you chose the two people to be abandoned to death and why you selected the other five to be safe on the lifeboat.

You have to make your selection from the following 8 people: (a) One year old baby on the lifeboat, with its grandmother, who is in a very bad health condition due to suffering from a rare but possibly treatable disease. (b) The baby's grandmother, who is 55 years old with a good health but is terribly depressed as her husband died an unnatural death recently. (c) The captain of the ocean liner that sank and caused this crisis, aged 31, having ten children to look after, whose wife is dead, and he has no insurance. (d) There is a 45-year old woman who is pregnant and people on the ship are gossiping that she is a woman of loose character. She is wearing a heavy make-up and is seen using vulgar language which suggests that the gossip may be true. (e) There

is an 80-year old scientist who was on the team which had developed the atomic bomb, which killed millions of people in Japan during World War II; however, his current research might possibly lead to a cure for lung cancer in the near future. (f) There is also a young 21 years old bright college student with an IQ of 180, who is an excellent American football player. But he was in prison for two years for disobeying the government's condition to join the army. (g) There is one more old man whose age is 75. He is a doctor with a super-specialization in treating rare childhood diseases from which the one-year old child on the lifeboat is suffering. Some people think he is very religious and kind person. But most of them do not know that he is a drug addict and police suspect with some preliminary indications that he might be selling drugs to young people.

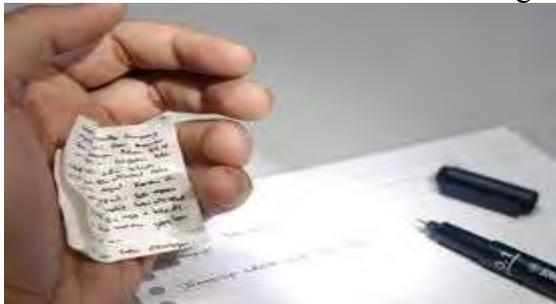
From solving crisis through effective arguments, we can move to evolving an argumentative topic, through an ethical topic of importance, from the field of education in order for expanding the classroom activities.

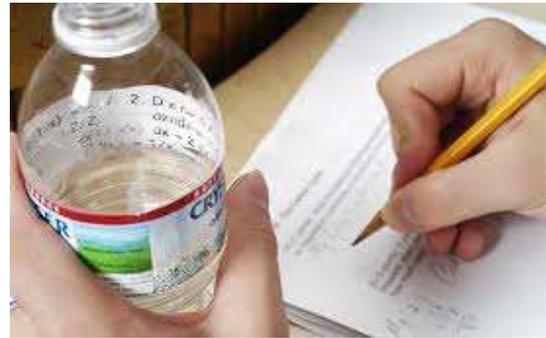
Evolving a Topic for Discussion

Social and ethical issues chosen for discussion provide a vibrant scope for shaping voice, agency and subject-hood. Let us explore an issue of highest importance from the field of education.

Brainstorming: Some crucial issues that affect the teaching-learning process and the prospects and life of students adversely may be brainstormed from the point of view of students/teachers/management before showing the following pictures to evolve a topic for consideration and discussion.

Task: Observe and examine the following situations:





(Source: Google Image)

What do above pictures suggest? The pictures obviously suggest the following:

There are innumerable ways of cheating prevalent in exams!

Therefore, a question of serious concern arises:

Can the cheating in exams be stopped?

This question will certainly pose a duality of opinions: Many people will be of the view that it is possible to stop cheating in exams. Similarly, many others will be of the opinion that it is impossible to stop cheating in exams. Any one of the above aspects can be used as a topic for discussion and a task can be assigned as the following:

Task: Reflect upon and argue for or against the following (in pair/group):

Topic: It is impossible to stop cheating in exams! Do you agree or disagree? Do as the following:

- Develop arguments in favor of your stand/position on the topic.
- Select strong/powerful arguments from your list.
- Think of possible counter argument(s).
- Give concession to the opposing argument(s).
- Refute/Defeat the counter argument(s) by giving convincingly stronger arguments.

Developing an Argumentative Essay: At this juncture, the students could/should be introduced to the structure of an argumentative essay and the language needed for developing arguments.

Preparatory Steps

- Introduce the structure of a typical essay.
- Present a model argumentative essay and involve students in analyzing its structure.
- Next, students to develop an argumentative essay on the *cheating question* following the structure of the model essay.
- Then the students to peer-review each other's essay and improve upon it.
- Finally, the students to write final draft of the essay and submit for instructor's feedback.

Extension Activity: A new but closely related topic for argument can be further assigned as a classroom activity or, in case of lack of time, as a homework task.

Task: Reflect upon a situation of concern in the following picture and do as directed:



(Source: Google Image)

Think about the following critically and develop a well-structured reflective essay using your knowledge and competence gained through the preceding activities.

- Is cheating helpful or harmful in society?
- Do you agree or disagree with the anti-cheating measure adopted in the above picture?
- How ethical or unethical this anti-cheating measure is?
- Can there be better and more effective anti-cheating measures than shown in the picture? Discuss what and how.
- Do you think this kind of dictatorial approach to control cheating can be justified in view of human rights?

Like cartoons there is a real exaggeration in the above picture which may help us to see below the surface (between the lines) of what we read and see and it can offer a wide-ranging opportunity to discuss our experiences of life, feelings, and opinions, which result in more authentic expression and communication.

Conclusion

The issues of interaction and promoting CT as a social practice, in this paper, have been linked with shaping voice, agency and inter-subjectivity in a cohesive framework as against strict outcome-bound approaches and textbook-based instructional practices in order to make Rivers' notions of skill-getting and skill-using a reality in EIL bilingual classrooms which otherwise remain pseudo-bilingual in reality. The paper culminates in a non-technical framework through which it is demonstrated as to how a writing skill could be integrated with other language skills as well as with CT as a discursive practice through the use of pictorial presentations and dualities and controversies involved in them. The paper emphasizes that students need to participate in activities

that engage their interest and attention so that the interaction, to use Rivers' (1983) approach to skill getting and skill using, becomes natural and normal (pp. 104-13). Through interaction and interpersonal relationships, argumentative use of language plays an important role as the learners engage in argumentative discussion to meet the mutual understanding and thereby shape and strengthen their voice, agency and subject-hood / inter-subjectivity. Through such an approach, the students are able to expand their ability to be original and skeptical in reflecting upon various issues based on their own thinking and experiences and as a result they become more informed and responsible individuals. Therefore, the paper explicitly and unambiguously underlines that addressing the centrality of interaction and thereby making the notions of skill-getting and skill-using a reality in the teaching-learning processes and to promote CT as a mutually-cooperative practice are of paramount importance given the seriousness of pedagogical issues under consideration. The paper strongly advocates that the key to better educational planning and its success lies in promoting CT as a social practice and shaping students' voice, agency and inter-subjectivity in a cohesive framework as demonstrated in the present paper.

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