INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS INTO READING-WRITING PRACTICE IN AN EFL SETTING FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

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Abstract: *This paper promotes the idea of integrating critical thinking skills in language learning in order to derive learning products in the process of reading and writing for English freshmen in Ha Tinh university. The important key principle here is applying higher order thinking skills in every stage of project done because these skills empower learners to create their own products. The study was conducted on the basis of instruments like seminar, questionnaire survey, observation and interviews. The results revealed that: (1) 6 critical thinking levels of Bloom (1956) revised by Anderson (2000) were effective in academic success; (2) these critical thoughts strengthen involvement, collaboration, motivation, new discovery, language retention, better communication with their peers, confidence, self direction, facilitate project designing, and connect academic work to real- life issues.*

Keywords: *Critical thinking skills, project, critical thinking levels.*

1. Introduction

Critical thinking skills are very important for academic success as well as for future professional success in the workplace in the 21st century. This reality has been recognized by P21 adherents and educators everywhere. In fact, hiring managers are looking for employees who can use skills as reasoning and creative thinking to conduct research, to handle making important decisions, to solve complex problems, to collaborate or to carry out a project. These skills will help students learn to think deeply about the subject matter, consult appropriate sources, weigh their options, take time to digest the information or to make intelligent judgements and decisions, and consider a variety of similar scenarios.

According to John Dewey (1910), integrated skills or thinking skills are defined as follows "…a curriculum aimed at building thinking skills would be a benefit not only to the individual learner, but to the community and to the entire democracy". However, the students with whom I have ever worked find it difficult integrating ideas or skills like discussions, group projects, class readings, class writings, etc. and thinking critically about what they

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discuss, what they read, or whatever they do. The inherent reason here is that my students are quite new about the term "critical thinking" surveyed from Seminar Evaluation Form. They are not trained to think so they have to struggle with critical thinking and are unable to apply what they have learnt. For example, they do not understand the texts with new words or words with multiple meanings. That's why they often have problems reading and writing clear English and, in particular, creating something new from the lesson is often a struggle. However, instead of thinking something new, they want to remain safe inside the box in traditional lessons. Therefore, how to get them out of the box and generate new ideas is a necessity. Do we need to wait for an apple to fall on your head or do we need some specific techniques to perceive something new, useful beforehand?

In order to answer this issue, ten critical projects were implemented at Ha Tinh university with freshmen English majors in a class of reading and writing skills. The idea behind the projects was to let students think cognitively out of the box through the application of principles such as cooperative work, discussion, planning, feedback, reflection, etc., allowing learners to take control of the learning process, and in particular, to take charge of their learning outcomes.

2. Literature review

2.1. What critical thinking?

The literature indicates that there is a contradiction regarding the definition of critical thinking. While some researchers consider critical thinking as a narrow concept, others deal with it as a broad concept. According to Beyer (1987), critical thinking is defined in a narrow sense as convergent thinking. Critical thinking, in his view, is convergent (p.35), different from creative thinking which is divergent. Convergent information or information that exists as that is the way they have always been ever before. By contrast, divergence refers to how to produce a greater number of complicated ideas from a single idea, a significant number of answers from a single question, and the like. The former seems not to be in accord with the usage of current critical thinking because it does not allow people to produce quality thinking that meets standards [3].

Cuseo (1996) points out that critical thinking or thinking deeply means that not only do people know the facts, but they also take the additional steps of going beyond the facts to do something with them. It is actually deeper thinking than memorization or recall of factual information. It involves reflecting the information received, moving far away from surface memorization or sifting away from viewing learning as the reception of information from teacher or textbook and toward deeper level of learning. Critical thinking includes some activities like making judgments about actions, beliefs, asking or answering questions, assessing the logic of statements or designing a creative project. In order to think creatively for an activity, there must always be a purpose for critical thoughts because as stated by McPeck (1990:3) "thinking as always thinking about something, or meta- cognition.".

Critical projects employed here needs both divergent thinking and convergent thinking because when the phase of divergent thinking like brainstorming, question- answer creation is complete, convergent thinking is used to organize information and new ideas for the proposal.

2.2. Why project work?

Compared to routine work, project work aims to provide language learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output" [5]. This means that learners are motivated to acquire the language not only as an academic subject, but as a tool for comprehension and performance in a meaningful foreign language context. Beckett & Slater (2005) and Stoller (1997) emphasizes that project work is said to be an effective way to promote the acquisition of language, content and skills simultaneously as it establishes a direct connection between language learning and its application" [12].

Beckett and Miller (2006) also add that the purpose of project work helps learners to recycle known language and skills in natural contexts. In fact, project work is filled with active learning in which learners can engage in authentic and interesting tasks for authentic purposes both of which are sadly absent from many language classrooms (Stoller, 2006:24) to reach a common goal by means of collaborative work. These collaborative tasks highlight the main characteristics of project- based learning which put emphasis on the learner and how they exercise their critical thinking skills. Learners are more likely to retain the knowledge through this approach more readily than through traditional textbook- centered learning.

2.3. Critical thinking and project work

P21 educators really recognize critical thinking as a foundation skill for the 21st century. By integrating project work into integrated- skill classes with certain topics such as reading and writing, teachers create vibrant learning environments that stimulate higher level thinking skills [16]. In order to do a successful project, learners need to make thoughtful decisions and exercise their reasoned judgments. For this to occur, they become critical thinkers. Due to comparing with "driving questions" which are insufficient enough to evoke careful thoughts, so do project tasks come in. The principle of project- based learning is for learners to learn something, they must do something. Therefore, project tasks designed must motivate learners' careful thoughts such as figuring out what is best to create something, making judgments between choices, weighing evidence, reconsidering initial ideas, etc. to help them develop their critical thinking competencies. Not only do critical thinking projects require learners to think carefully, but they scaffold and guide participants how cognitive tasks are carried out during the project. Regarding what mentioned above, project work can be understood as an efficient way to help learners become critical thinkers as it has the high output of critical thinking. As remarked by Beckett and Slater (2005), project based learning is a way to promote the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills (p.108). Bloom's taxonomy (1956) which was modified by Anderson and Krathwohl (2000) including remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating, will be applied in practicing cognitive skills in order to create the projects.

Bloom's Taxonomy Revised Version *(Anderson, L.W. et al., 2000)*

Level 1	**Remembering:** can the student recall or remember the information?	define, duplicate, list, memorize, recall, repeat, state.
Level 2	**Understanding:** can the student explain ideas or concepts?	classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate, paraphrase.
Level 3	**Applying**: can the student use the information in a new way?	choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write.
Level 4	**Analysing**: can the student distinguish between the different parts?	appraise, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, examine, experiment, question, test.
Level 5	**Evaluating**: can the student justify a stand or decision?	appraise, argue, defend, judge, support, evaluate.
Level 6	**Creating**: can the student create new product or point of view?	assemble, construct create, design, develop, formulate, write.

Research questions

What critical thinking skills are employed in order to empower learners' success of projects?

What is the role of critical thinking skills towards that academic success?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

In order to improve the students' critical thinking from projects, it would be helpful to conduct a classroom action research. It is necessary to do so because, according to Parsons and Brown (2002), action research is the appropriate research design to solve the students' problems and improve professional practices. Mattetal (2003) proved that action research is designed to help teachers know what is actually happening in classrooms and to use that knowledge to make decisions which are beneficial for the future. Kemmis and Mc. Taggart proposed that there are four key stages in the action research including planning, action, observation and reflection (1998:10).

This action research was conducted on 10 group projects, undertaken by 21 first year English major students at Ha Tinh university during the first semester of the integrated skills (reading and writing). During the development process, the participants were asked, in groups of three, to build new projects around the learning outcomes regarding 10 units of the thought- provoking Q series and new reading, vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills. The basis of the participants' projects in each unit was formed on considering new information of each aspect of learning as the heart of critical thinking approach. The projects provided students expectations of what they would study, what their teacher would teach. When they

knew that they needed to learn content for a certain purpose, they would try to acknowledge new knowledge and skills, reinforce them, plan and complete their duty. Thus, the project work provided the focus that each lesson needed. The projects mentioned in this study were trend, color decoration (for festivals, children libraries, classrooms, clubs, etc.), good table manners, building professional sports teams, designing a family business website, describing a process, making art from trash, role-play, number importance in cultures, collaborating to complete the book "Destination B1". Outstanding features of each project included:

The inclusion of six phases as described Anderson and comments in each project.

Participants came from two distinctive branches: English language and English pedagogy.

Self- formed groups were required at least 6 roles during each project from the following: innovator, explorer, harmonizer, Devil's Advocate, Prioritizer, checker.

3.2. Instruments

It was an action research with both qualitative and quantitative methods have been employed to evaluate the result of the project experience in the light of critical thinking.

In the first part of the study, an evaluation form about the introductory seminar was done to survey the participants about the study field.

In order to measure the quantitative results, a Likert Scale was used to structure a questionnaire at the end of the semester when the project work finished which aimed to obtain information about the subjects' opinions towards critical thinking approach including their motivation, their learning autonomy, their cooperative work, their learning strategies, their self- reliance. The questionnaire was composed of 24 statements scoring on a five- point scale for each (4= always, 3= often, 2= sometimes, 1=rarely, 0=never). The mentioned statements covered levels of critical thinking skills involved.

In the third part, student group interviews after each project presented consisted of 3 open- ended questions was used to collect respondents' personal opinions about their critical project work. They are (1) Did you like building projects relating to steps done throughout each unit? Why?, (2) Did the activities of critical thinking skills help you to design your projects? What were they?, (3) Did you find something different between the lessons designed with projects and the traditional ones? What was it? This aimed to check how critical thinking had been developed into the project, how new knowledge from learning had been transferred to the project. Due to time limitation in the classroom, two participant groups were interviewed after every project.

Finally, in conduction of the research, the researcher also observed the participants' use of skills associated with critical thinking through the levels of practices. The direct observations of all occasions of participants applying critical thinking in class were conducted through three consecutive units. Each unit was observed for 50 minutes accounting for one fourth of the total time of a unit (200 minutes). The observations took place when the participants were working in groups or when the activity ended in, or even as instructor's home observation order to avoid stopping their progressive learning. The observers were both the instructor and participants as class or group secretary. To determine the reliability of recorded observations of using critical thinking skills, the core elements established for classroom observation consisted of observation steps, debriefing, action planning and follow- up.

4. Findings and discussion

To proceed the study, the instructor organized an introductory seminar of critical thinking skills aiming to survey participants' opinions as well as to form the idea of the study.

Table 1. *Critical Thinking Seminar Evaluation Results measured by Mean and Percentage*

Statements	No.	Mean	Percentage (%)				
			4	3	2	1	0
1. The content was as described in the textbook.	21	2.14	4.8	19	61.9	14.3	0
2. The seminar was applicable to my study.	21	2.38	0	57.1	33.3	0	9.5
3. Critical thinking was quite new.	21	3.81	95.2	0	0	0	4.8
4. The level was appropriate.	21	2.14	0	23.8	71.4	0	4.8
5. The handouts were helpful.	21	2.81	28.6	42.9	14.3	9.5	4.8
6. The seminar was effective.	21	2.81	23.8	47.6	19	4.8	4.8
7. The seminar was worth my time	21	2.76	19	57.1	9.5	9.5	4.8
8. The instructor had a good understanding of the topic.	21	2.95	23.8	66.7	0	0	9.5
9. I would be interested in attending more seminars on this same subjec.	21	2.81	23.8	61.9	0	0	14.3

*(**Interpreting numbers in italic**: 4 means **"strongly agree"**, 3 means **"agree"**, 2 means **"disagree"**, 1 means **"strongly disagree"**, 0 means "**no opinion**"; **Interpreting key to averages**: 2.5 or higher = agree or strongly agree; 2.4- 0.8 = disagree or strongly disagree; 0.7 or lower = no opinion).*

Overall, the total of respondents (21) to the initial survey positively commented on the introductory seminar of critical thinking and its use for designing projects although critical thinking- its concept is quite new with them.

Most of the participants agreed that the seminar was effective in terms of content, accounting for over 47% (agree) and nearly 24 % (strongly agree). More than half of participants stated that it was worth attending the seminar (57.1%) because it was perfect about materials and presentation with 42.9 and 66.7% respectively so more than 60% of them really want to attend more seminars on the same subject.

Even though the content was highly evaluated during the seminar, most participants considered it as a new concept (95.2%) so they found some activities not concerned with what the text says (over 60%). However, a significant number agreed that the seminar was applicable to their study which outweighed the number of participants who disagreed (over 30%). The success of the seminar proved that participants would accept the idea of teaching discussed.

Regarding the first research question, "What critical thinking skills are employed in order to empower learners' success of projects?" a taxonomy revised Anderson from (...) was applied for each unit including (1) remembering, (2) understanding, (3) applying, (4) analysing, (5) evaluating, (6) creating. For the second research question, "What is the role of critical thinking skills towards that academic success?", three categories were identified. In order to make these clear, the two research questions will be analyzed separately.

Table 2. *Percentage of Respondents Responding to Six Levels of Critical Thinking*

Skills surveyed	No.	Mean	Percentage				
			4	3	2	1	0
Level 1: Remembering							
1. It is important to recall information.	21	3.62	71.4	19	9.5	0	0
2. I know how to get multiple ideas.	21	3.10	23.8	61.9	14.3	0	0
3. I listen to other's ideas even I disagree with them.	21	2.48	9.5	28.6	61.9	0	0
4. I am able to give ideas that support the Unit question.	21	2.0	0	14.3	71.4	14.3	0
Level 2: Understanding							
5. I think of related words and ideas before reading.	21	3.19	23.8	71.4	4.8	0	0
6. I identify if my ideas are in the reading.	21	1.62	0	14.3	47.6	23.8	14.3
7. I know how to locate answers in the text.	21	2.76	14.3	57.1	19	9.5	0
8. I am able to explain my answers.	21	2.90	19	61.9	9.5	9.5	0

9. I identify and discuss reading skills.	21	2.62	4.8	57.1	33.3	4.8	0
10. I am able to discuss and report ideas after reading.	21	2.33	4.8	42.9	38.1	9.5	4.8
Level 3: Applying							
11. I am able to write using the ideas collected.	21	2.95	14.3	71.4	9.5	4.8	0
12. I know how to brainstorm more ideas.	21	2.76	14.3	47.6	38.1	0	0
13. I apply some vocabulary and structures for writing.	21	2.05	9.5	23.8	38.1	19	9.5
Level 4: Analysing							
14. I am able to analyze the reading text pattern and that of my writing.	21	2.71	9.5	61.9	19	9.5	0
15. I justify my thoughts, views through writing.	21	3.14	28.6	57.1	14.3	0	0
Level 5: Evaluating							
16. I know how to ask to check other's writing.	21	2.76	14.3	52.4	28.6	4.8	0
17. I review other's writing.	21	2.62	9.5	52.4	28.6	9.5	0
18. I revise my writing.	21	3.14	19	76.2	4.8	0	0
Level 6: Creating							
19. I compare ideas to select the best for projects.	21	2.90	14.3	66.7	14.3	4.8	0
20. I plan how to build a project.	21	3.48	47.6	52.4	0	0	0
21.I think about how to reach my goal.	21	2.52	9.5	33.3	57.1	0	0

22. I am ready to present any projects before class.	21	2.0	4.8	9.5	71.4	9.5	4.8
23. I am able to justify our opinions about projects.	21	2.19	4.8	28.6	52.4	9.5	4.8
24. Feedback from the instructor and class helps us to perfect our projects.	21	2.38	0	42.9	52.4	4.8	0

(Interpreting numbers in italic: *4 means "always", 3 means "often", 2 means "sometimes", 1 means "rarely", 0 means "never";* ***Interpreting key to Mean score****: 2.5 or higher = always, often; 2.4- 1.6 = sometimes; 1.5 or lower = rarely or never).*

The sub-category related to the first research question identified firstly was recalling information which refers to the ability to evoke, remember or repeat information from long-term memory. The high mean scores show that most of participants were able to do activities concerning this foundation skill. By contrast, no one felt difficult to deal with this. Over 70% of subjects agreed that it is always important to recall information before reading; 61.9% often noticed getting diverse ideas from class, and the similar percentage was correct with what they sometimes did when they listened to the ideas of others that they disagreed with.

The second category refers to understanding skills. Although participants sometimes had difficulties connecting their own ideas with the new language in the reading (mean score of 1.62), they understood points, concepts and skills stated in the reading to locate, explain, or discuss their findings (mean scores of 2.76, 2.90, 2.33 respectively).

For the third set of skills refers to applying which involves transferring what was learned into a new one. Most of subjects applied their previous and new knowledge to establish writing skills of description, proposal, opinion, letter, narration and definition and create their own writing products with mean scores of 2.76, 2.05 and 2.95 respectively.

The sub-category identified fourthly was analysing referring to breaking down the reading and writing texts in order to understand every idea in each paragraph logically. A high mean score (3.14) for opinion justification and 2.71 for the ability of recognizing the patterns proved that most of participants are able to analyze types of texts.

The fifth identified category was evaluating relating to judging the credibility of their writing product after reading. Evaluated skills listed on the chart shows that a significant percentage of participants who often paid attention to checking, reviewing and revising the writing, accounting for more than half of the total percentage.

The last and highest order skill was creating which refers to building a certain project per unit. Most of subjects mastered necessary skills from planning to finishing their projects. Of all six mentioned skills belonging to creating, planning was considered as the most important one with mean score of 3.48. On the contrary, a variety of subjects were reluctant to present their projects (2.0). In general, critical thinking skills from level one to five provided opportunities for participants to level six by expressing their ideas in a new way through building imaginative projects. The mean scores among the six groups of critical thinking skills shown on the chart suggested that participants actually performed their

cognitive thoughts well because there was seldom anyone refused to do the task. The data also showed that there was a logical development and a positive relationship among six level of critical thinking which helped participants to develop from foundation skills such as recalling, understanding to higher order thinking like creating products.

On the other hand, the following groups are related to the second research question: first, critical thoughts promote involvement, collaboration, motivation, new discovery, language retention, better communication with their peers, confidence, self direction; second, integration of critical thinking skills in such an authentic way can allow the instructor to facilitate project designing; third, practices of critical thinking allows to see how academic work can connect to real-life issues leading to success in life. The following excerpts from the interviews and the data from the questionnaire survey and classroom observation will illustrate the fact.

Table 3. *Students' responses in interviews*

No.	Question and answer
1	Did you like building projects related to steps done throughout each unit? Why? *S9: Yes, I feel more enjoyable and engaged because I can get out of the box which only guides me to follow and memorize. I have to think on feet and grammar also goes out of the window.* *S11: Sure, it is very interesting as I can create something new as project at the end of each unit.* *S14: Of course, yes, madam. I get a chance to challenge with my groupmates for an outcome.* *S21: Yes, I need following every step so that I and my groupmates can generate beautiful ideas for our project.*
2	Did the activities of critical thinking skills help you to design your projects? What were they? *S4: Of course, yes, I could raise any questions precisely to provoke divergent thinking from my partners.* *S6: Yes, teacher, asking questions to clarify a position was what I cared.* *S10: Yes, I saw multiple sides of an issue by debating with my partners in group discussions as well as in a class discussion.* *S15: Yes, I was able to create something new like projects that I and my friends tried.* *S17: Yes, I could communicate effectively with my partners in figuring out solutions for our projects.*
3	Did you find something different between the lessons designed with projects and the traditional ones? What was it? *S1: Yes, quite different. The lesson aimed to reach an outcome always requires us a lot of thinking while we often feel bored with the traditional one.* *S3: Yes, for example, being experienced types of family businesses through discussion and through the author's opinions in the text, what we could do is to create a website to advertise our future family restaurant. I never did so in other classes before.* *S5: Yes, now I can ask questions that ask my partners to give opinion or explain compared to basic question in class before.*

For the first group, cognitive thoughts enhanced participant involvement because they realized what came to class ready for a new project. They typically also empowered since they knew that what their product was like depends on knowledge they got from the critical levels. One interviewed participant replied: "*I need following every step so that I and my groupmates can generate beautiful ideas for our project*". In terms of achievement, most of respondents considered projects effective. It was worth their time to collaborate to achieve the goal set before the lesson. Factors as collaboration, motivation and better communication were discovered when most of subjects agreed that they *felt more engaged, more enjoyable, more interesting, more relevant* as they were offered chances to discover new ideas, to challenge each other for a better outcome. In addition, students develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work.

For the second group, critical thinking skills developed from bottom to top formed learners knowledge from the most basic to the highest which facilitates learning and creating in learning process as shown in table 2. One subject commented that she developed her critical thinking because she can raise questions with high- order rank instead of low- level questions that she used to.

For the third group, practice actually helped learners to improve their ability to think critically. Lifelong learning becomes the key as the educated subjects may be inspiring to pursue a career while they are working to create something. Critical practices directs participants to go beyond what might be on the final exam because they are evaluated on the basis of the outcome. Most learners stated that their academic work could connect to real- life issues. For instance, when studying about the topic "Family business", participants created different types of family businesses such as family restaurant, family bookshop, etc. Critical practice in this way inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they're studying and students are more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning.

However, In order to gain success for academic work during the semester, the classroom observations conducted with the purpose of following action steps, debriefing, action planning and following- up. Focused observations of participants' attitudes to cognitive skills in class through activities were performed in pairs, groups, and class. The notes on what observed in cycle 1 from unit 2 to unit 3 show that although they felt a bit challenging to do designed activities, they tried to do so to finish their duty. The class atmosphere became boring and stressful. Soon after the observation, questions, comments, idea sharing were performed for reflection on the cycle. The instructor made notes of participants' sharing and carefully planned to design effective activities for next classes.

5. Conclusion

Practices of critical thinking skills can help to create a productive atmosphere in class and make sure students improve their abilities. Revised taxonomy by Anderson seems more appropriate for projects, based on the final stage of the process is the stage that students are able to create their projects successfully. A process including six levels involving different skills makes students more focused on realistic communication, more motivated and engaged in classroom activities. These cognitive skills have significant roles as they demand more of

student's input. Students will have to collaborate in learning to bring the best outcome as projects. Projects integrating critical thinking skills enhance students' understanding of social, work and life skills, acceptance of other different views, confidence, tolerance and self- direction as they move through independent and group work. The study is a practical approach to the integration of skills as reading and writing as a subject in my university. It is noticed that during the process of working with language, the participants had to think, negotiate, communicate, make connections, look for appropriate ideas, build ideas to show content, complement written texts and design products. They actually work with language in action. The action took place according to the order of the six levels of critical thinking revised by Anderson (2000) leading to success when the participants produced their own products together with development of necessary thinking skills. Critical thinking and academic performance have significant relationship with each other. Due to the important role of critical thinking in enhancing professional competence, the study result implies that the students' critical thinking skills will be developed if this research is applied or continued.

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