
Integrating Critical Thinking in Language Learning Through Project Based Learning

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ABSTRACT:

There has been an enormous outcry in inculcating critical thinking in English language teaching. Until recently, language teaching has been more generic with the four skills of language. The recent changes in the industry demand the academia to look into the ways in which language has been taught and learnt more effectively. The very purpose of education is to teach students think and reflect critically to the world around them. This paper promotes the idea of integrating critical thinking in language learning through project based learning. Project based learning is perhaps one of the few best hands-on methods where Bloom's higher order thinking skills is applied in every stage of project done.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Bloom's Taxonomy, and Project Based Learning.

INTRODUCTION:

"I think therefore I am" said Renel Descartes. Thinking is human form. But how we think and what we think is crucial in thinking. Greek scholars like Aristotle, Socrates emphasized the importance of instilling thinking skills in students' mind. For ancient philosophers, thinking critically is an integral part of learning. The goal of teaching students thinking skills has one main purpose: rationality in understanding and accepting ideas. With commercialization of education, the importance of critical thinking has been lost so as the essence of learning. Learning has become selective, with few objectives in mind. Recent day's trend in education is bringing back everything into limelight and there has been too much study about everything to find the best possible ones. Critical thinking in language classes has received much attention in recent days. A great number of methodologies have been tried to achieve the maximum effect in language classes.

CRITICAL THINKING AND BLOOM'S TAXONOMY:

Critical thinking encompasses reflective thinking, reactive thinking, lateral thinking, and vertical thinking and so on. American educational psychologist, Benjamin Bloom, his student Anderson (who later modified the last two levels of higher order skills) and De Bono have advocated the idea of critical thinking whereas Ronald Case believes that critical thinking is not a different thinking but the ordinary thinking with clarity in mind. However, there is difference between critical thinking and creative thinking. Something should be created in order to be critical about it. Critical thinking is considered as 'cognitive strategy' which involves higher order thinking skills, mental processes of ideas, data, images and symbols.

It is quite contrary to rote learning. In rote learning, students memorize concepts and theories whereas in critical thinking, students check the validity of the concepts and theories, and check the genuineness of the evidences. Students learn to argue, compare and contrast and evaluate their ideas. Norris (1985) has observed “critical thinking ability is not widespread. More students do not score well in test that measures ability to recognize assumptions, evaluate arguments and appraise inferences” and also found “Having a critical spirit is as important as thinking critically. Critical spirit requires one to think critically all aspects of life, to think about one’s own thinking, and to act on the basis of what one has considered when using critical thinking skills.” Similarly, Robinson notes, “while the importance of cognitive development has become widespread, student’s performance on measures of higher order thinking ability has displayed a critical need for students to develop the skills and attitudes of effective thinking”. Bayer notes that critical thinking has two important elements: one is the frame of mind and the other is the number of specific mental process (1985).

CRITICAL THINKING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING:

The initial goal of teaching language is to appreciate literature in particular language and to master the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Language teaching has evolved and reached different dimensions. Different methodologies are tried to suit different needs. The demand in communication skills has made language learning a critical one. Applying critical thinking in language teaching enhances students’ language proficiency. Integrating critical thinking helps to bring out the higher order thinking skills in students. Pedagogical theorists like Chamot, Tarvin & Al-Arishi, Chapple & Curtis, Davidson,) emphasize the fact that critical thinking promotes language learning.

PROJECT BASED LEARNING:

On loose terms, project is defined as task; any task, either new or modified, altered. There is a divided opinion on the definition of project and task. Some critics say they are the same while others argue they are different in objectives. Objective, outcome, duration, selection of text, demographic factors are the factors which distinguish project from a task. Projects are generally considered to be for longer duration; few days to weeks. Moss & Van Duzer, (1998) define project based learning as “an instructional method which conceptualizes learning by problems and products to develop”. Project Based Learning exposes learners to real world issues. It gives students the opportunity to understand the world around them and the concepts and prepare them to face and solve society’s problems. While searching for projects, students will explore and engage in reading which an essential component of learning is. Autonomy is given to students since all activities- brainstorming for ideas, planning, designing, evaluating etc. are done by students themselves mostly. Wrigley (1998) supports this view that most projects involve various well planned and well guided processes. And it also promotes unconscious learning.

Selection of projects is crucial both for teachers and students. Projects can be chosen according to their discipline which will help the students in learning the core subjects.

Blog posts, website designing, biography writing, product designing, writing for mass media, advertisement, e-magazine, newspaper column, designing a brochure, designing elevator control using sensor, bio-gas, alternative energy, green cars, documentary, short film, awareness

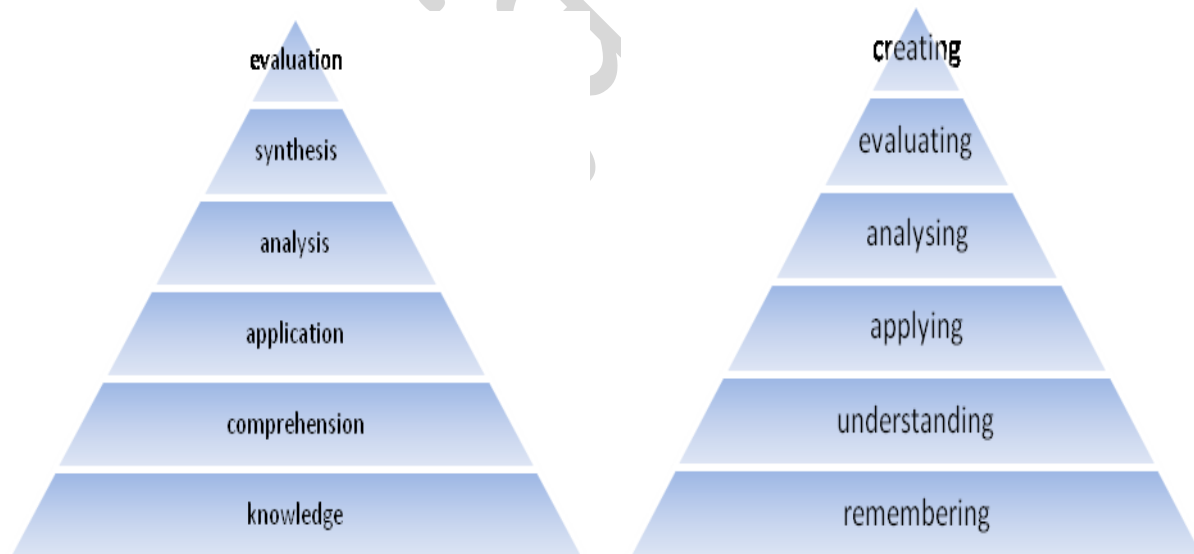
programme, etc. can be considered. These projects are real. Students may have to design them in their real life.

PROJECT BASED LEARNING AND CRITICAL THINKING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Project based learning in language classes has the high output of critical thinking. Stoller remarks “project work results in improved decision making abilities and critical thinking skills and problem solving” (27). And Beckett and Slater point out “project based learning is a way to promote the simultaneous acquisition of language, content, and skills” (108). Project based learning equips learners with better ability to conceptualize, apply previously taught knowledge, interpret, debate, defend, compare and contrast, analyze pros and cons, and assimilate (synthesis) few new ideas into a newer one. Blooms higher order cognitive skills are applied in every stage of the project.

There is a clear distinction between general projects and projects in language classroom. General projects (other than English Language) have the objective of bringing the end product whereas projects in English language classes require careful consideration of language skills: grammar, diction, coherence, organization etc., besides the end product. As stated earlier, the recent focus in communicative skills has given more importance to nuances of language learning. Bygate, Skehan and Swain say “A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning to attain on objective” (11)

TAXONOMY:



Bloom's taxonomy of the cognitive domain (1956)

Revised taxonomy of the cognitive domain modified by Anderson and Krathwohl

Sample project - Blog post

Collection of information – identifying all related information of blog	Level 1
Understand what and how a blog looks like and understanding the function.	Level 2
Application of the idea of blog	Level 3
Analyzing the need and the requirements of blog post, analyzing the items to be included, addition and omission are analyzed	Level 4
Evaluating the blog with the certain criteria that was discussed in the class	Level 5
Creating the product- blog ready	Level 6

Sample project - e magazine

Collection of information – identifying the aspects of magazine designing	Level 1
Understand what and how an e-magazine looks like and understand its feature and function.	Level 2
Application of the idea of e- magazine	Level 3
Analyzing the need and the requirements of e- magazine, analyzing the items to be included, (addition and omission are analyzed). Analyze the pros and cons of e-magazine (why e-magazine is better than a hard copy, the number of readers, is it open access reading or only for subscribers, will readers prefer e-magazine over the hard copy, the funding, type of advertisers, etc.)	Level 4
Evaluating the e-magazine with the standard set of criteria that is designed to create e magazine- compare and contrast this one with some other similar magazine- evaluate to find out if it suits the requirements of a magazine- redesign or modify if necessary.	Level 5
Creating the product- e magazine – ready.	Level 6

Though these two taxonomies have similar function, revised taxonomy by Anderson seems more appropriate for projects, based on the rationale that a finished product or project will be the final stage of the process after careful and thorough examination.

ASSESSMENT:

Assessment of the projects should be done in stages. And assessment must be done for all the four skills as well as for the application of critical thinking skills. Portfolio maintaining, rubrics, students diaries are to be assessed. Team participation, content, soundness of evidences, style, format should also be included. Final product and presentation is equally important.

Assessment must be done in stages and it is recommended to assess as the following:

- LSRW Skills
- Relevancy of the content
- Style and format
- Application of Critical Thinking skills

- Portfolio Maintaining
- Rubrics
- Team participation

CURRICULUM (RE)DESIGNING:

English courses are designed differently by different Universities. Yet they have a common goal; to prepare students employed. And the industries' requirements are rapidly changing often. Learning will be never static. To meet the industry needs, English courses are focusing on day to day correspondence. In short, they are of functional English. Introducing project based teaching and learning in language classes is challenging. Nevertheless, projects are best given as assignment components. For example, students can be given a project of designing a website which could be done individually or in groups.

CONCLUSION:

Project based learning is a practical approach to language learning. Learners will engage in higher order cognitive skills. Students' higher order cognitive skills of analyzing and evaluating have significant roles as they demand students' input more. Students will have to engage in collaborative learning in order to bring the best product. Projects integrating critical skills enhance students' tolerance, acceptance of others' view, understanding and all social and live skills.

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