**The challenges of critical thinking**

About the author The role of critical thinking in EAP has been the subject of heated debate among scholars and practitioners for at least twenty years. In the centre of this debate are several principal issues: whether critical thinking is a culturally-specific phenomenon, what role is played by language in critical thinking and whether critical thinking is a generic or a subject-specific skill. This article will discuss issues related to teaching critical thinking skills in International Foundation Programmes in a way that will prepare international students for the challenges of university studies. Dr Tatyana Karpenko-Seccomb Lecturer in EAP, Huddersfield University A culturally-specific phenomenon? Western vs. Confucian reasoning There is a widespread view that the major difficulties some international students experience with writing critically are rooted in cultural differences in their approach to learning in general and to reasoning in particular. It is often said that the Western type of knowledge acquisition based on questioning, reasoning and logical argumentation goes back to the Greek tradition of adversarial dialogue – Aristotelian, Platonic and Socratic – where proof and evidence are highly valued. Eastern traditions, often narrowed down to the term ‘Confucian’, on the other hand, avoid confrontational debate and strive to achieve deep understanding through memorising and repetition. (See, for example, Biggs, 2003, Egege & Kutieleh, 2004, Ennis, 1993, Floyd, 2011). Chuanyan Zhu (2011), who has conducted a project at Huddersfield University on the socio-cultural context of international students from China, explains that ‘…individuals in China are not encouraged to present opinions …openly to those who take charge of them’. As a consequence, Asian students are often stereotyped as passive rote-learners. The alleged passivity of Chinese students, however, often stems from respect for elders – it is impolite to contradict or interrupt. Biggs (2003) tries to challenge the assumption made by some Western educators that rote learning is memorising devoid of thinking and understanding. He explains that memorising, usually associated with the Confucian tradition, is based on achieving deep understanding of the subject matter. Respect for a teacher steeped in Eastern traditions limits the student to offering opinions only on achieving an intellectual and spiritual status comparable to the status of the teacher (Elsgood, 2007). The universalist approach which represents culturally-specific Western critical thinking as universal has been strongly criticised (Egege & Kutieleh , 2004). This approach may lead to the assumption that only critical thinking is good thinking, and can in the long run become counterproductive for the learning process (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). The authors offer a sensible solution: teaching critical thinking by putting it in a social, historical and cultural context so that other thinking styles are not seen as deficient, but as different and equally valid. At the same time the rationale and advantages for the ‘Western style’ critical thinking are explained and training in it given to the students early in the International Foundation Programme. Language vs. logic debate Difficulties experienced by international students in critical thinking are often attributed to reasoning and logic rather than language. Davies comments that ‘being critical at least in part is less a facility with language than a facility with logic’ (2003, p. 2). This view is challenged by the data from an experimental study by Floyd (2011) which shows that Chinese students performed better when they took a critical thinking test in Chinese. Students were tested on a so-called split-test version of the Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal ®Short Form A. Students were randomly divided into two groups. The first group took the first half of the test in Chinese and the second half in English, whereas the second group was tested the other way round. The students of both groups showed significantly better results in the Chinese half of the test. Language thus presents a multifaceted problem for international students. Firstly, as the findings of Floyd’s study demonstrate, students may find it difficult to express their ideas in a second language, which may be interpreted by teachers as a lack of critical thinking skills. Secondly, students often have difficulty with both the concepts and language of critical thinking. Language and logic are closely connected. ‘Language is … the bearer of logic – one cannot make logical moves without using a linguistic medium of some sort ...’ (Davies, 2003, p.2). A similar view is shared by Felix and Lawson: ‘Poor English and poor argument or analysis [are] inextricably linked’ (1994, p.67). Words as well as concepts such as argument, claim, evaluate, infer may need elucidation. 15 Features Features Finally, the very meaning of the word critical can be confusing. Consider the three main meanings of the word critical: 1 containing or making severe or negative judgments 2 containing careful or analytical evaluations, 3 of or involving a critic or criticism (Collins Dictionary) Students are often more aware of meanings 1 and 3, and often ignore meaning 2 which is crucial to understanding the concept of critical thinking. Generic vs. specific debate There has been a conspicuous divide among scholars on the question of whether critical thinking is a generic or subject-specific skill. Davies, for example, points out that students ought to be taught general principles of reasoning which they should be subsequently able to apply to any subject-specific discourse (2006). Opponents of the ‘generalist’ model claim that it is unlikely to fit the variety of discipline-specific thinking models and maintain that teaching of critical thinking should be discipline-specific. McPeck (1981), for example, argues that ‘… it is difficult to be a critical thinker in the domain of nuclear physics if one knows very little about it.’ There are also attempts to marry these opposite points of view: Davies (2006), for example, suggests an ‘infusion’ approach where general skills are taught in the discipline context. Conclusions It is not uncommon for international students to have difficulties in Western-style critical writing and reasoning. These difficulties are often rooted in their own cultural background. In order to provide culturallysensitive IFP teaching, it is important not to assume that critical reasoning is the only universal way of thinking. Language problems related to understanding some logical concepts of critical thinking should be addressed early in IFPs by clarifying both the actual concepts and vocabulary specific for critical analysis. Ideally, IFP practitioners ought to collaborate with subject specialists in order to develop comprehensive critical thinking skills – both generic and applied to a particular subject area, skills which will become and invaluable tool for students’ further university study. Biggs, J. (2003). Teaching for Quality Learning at University. SRHE and Open University Press. Chuanyan Zhu (2011). Social cultural context of international students from China. Huddersfield University Project: Chinese Student Experience. Davies, W. M. (2003). A Cautionary Note about the Teaching of Critical Reasoning. 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