

Thinking Skills – A Motivational Factor In English Language Teaching

by

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Current Trends in Education

All lessons are lessons in thinking

Gilbert Ryle

In 1991, The Malaysian Prime Minister unveiled his plan for Malaysian development popularly known as Vision 2020. In his plan, the Prime Minister set nine targets of national development that need to be attained by the year 2020. Malaysia's Vision 2020 steers the nation towards achieving the status of a fully developed and industrialised country. All efforts are channeled towards becoming a fully united nation; a democratic society that is strong in religious and spiritual values; a society that is liberal and tolerant; scientific and progressive, innovative and forward looking.

In Malaysia's drive to move vigorously ahead, the development of human resources, the talents, skills and creativity of the people is the ultimate goal. This goal is reflected in the mission of the Ministry of Education, that is "To develop a world class quality education which will realise the full potential of the individual and fulfill the aspiration of the Malaysian nation" (Education, Planning and Research Division, 1996). In response to this, the 6th element of Vision 2020 calls for the existence of a society that is scientific and progressive in nature as well as one that is innovative and looks far ahead into the future, a society that is not only the users of the present state-of-the art technologies but also a contributor if not creators of new and advanced technological inventions. Due to this, the present educational system in Malaysia no longer put emphasis on the 3Rs but rather stressed critical thinking skills, scientific skills as well as technological skills in the schools' curriculum. Critical thinking skills one component of the present additional subject or locally known as KBKK (Creative and Critical Thinking Skills) will be made the bases or tool for the mastery of knowledge and skills. This new components which aimed at preparing teachers to be more creative and critical in their approaches to teaching was introduced into the education syllabus of Teacher's Training Colleges in late 1991.

Definitions

There exist many definitions to describe this cognitive activity. Edward De Bono associates thinking skill with lateral thinking which involves problem solving as well as thinking to see something on different perspectives. Some refer to this process as reasoning (Glasman, Koff and Spierrs, 1984; Shulman and Carey, 1984), higher order of thinking (Doyle, 1983; Sykes, 1985), intelligent behaviour (Costa,n.d), creative thinking (Keating, 1980) and thinking (Arendt, 1977), each with its own meaning.

“Thinking is any mental activity that helps formulate or solve a problem, make a decision, or fulfill a desire to understand. It is a searching for answers, a reaching for meaning.”
Vincent Ruggiero (1984)

“...I define thinking as a search for meaning and understanding that can involve the adventurous generation of options, the attempt to arrive at logical, reasonable judgements, and reflection on the process.” John Barell (1991)

“...it includes all thought process beyond the memory category...a teacher who offers his students appropriate experiences in translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation can be assured he is providing instruction in every intellectual aspects of critical thinking.”
Norris Sanders

In line with the National Philosophy of Education and Vision 2020, this study looked upon thinking as :

“... a mental process in search for meaning and understanding through exploring possibilities ,and making reasonable judgements as well as reflecting on the process experienced.”

Thinking skills here will include the four elements included in the Model of Thinking Skills as developed by the Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education (Figure 1). The term critical thinking skills or thinking skills will be used interchangeably in this paper. Each of these terms encompasses elements of creative and thinking, decision making as well as problem solving.

Research Questions

This study will address :

- i. teachers' knowledge of thinking skills
- ii. the effect of thinking skills in their teaching and learning process (P&P)
- iii. the effect of TS activities/lessons in motivating the pupils

The Choice of Methodology

The main method of data collection proposed was case study. It was chosen as such as it provides an in-depth exploration and opportunity of the teacher's stories. Some traditional research tend to silence the voices of their subjects where they are primarily spoken about and made reference to, but rarely speak for themselves (Britzman, 1991).

Sampling and Data Collection

Due to the constraint of time, the study will focus on four case studies. Researchers steeped in naturalistic inquiry would say it does not matter much which particular settings are chosen, since all cases will have idiosyncratic features, generalisable features and universalised features.

Data for this study were collected in these 3 forms:

- (i) questionnaire
- (ii) interviews
 - teachers
 - pupils
- (iii) classroom observations

Data were analysed using a compare-contrast strategy

Research Findings

Teachers' knowledge of **'thinking skills'**.

Summary of 4 teachers' conception of critical thinking skills

Each teacher has his or her own conception of critical thinking skills. However all of them seem to look at this innovation positively as they appear to give positive definition to it though unsure of what it really meant. Each give definition based on the advantages it will give as given below.

Teacher 1

"Critical thinking skills are related to the questions posed".

Teacher 1 associates thinking as a product to the questions posed. It is a skill that is obviously needed by students in order to answer questions posed by teachers. From the questionnaire, this teacher admitted that he was not familiar with the concept but was

able to give his conception of thinking skills in the interview session. Further on from the questionnaire(Q2 and Q3), this teacher stated that though a teacher may not be familiar with the concept, the teacher is still able to teach 'thinking' irrelevant to the amount of knowledge the teacher has.

From the observations carried out on Teacher 1, this teacher was able to carry out lessons that are fun-filled and stimulating and are pupils-centred. Though the emphasis was put on some thinking skills (not all) the lessons were interesting and pupils were seen to be enjoying themselves in the classroom.

Teacher 2

“Critical thinking produced active students through questioning”

Teacher 2 looked upon it as a skill that will produce better people in terms of pupils' responses to questions posed. Like Teacher 1 she also admitted that she was not familiar with the concept but again was able to give a definition to the concept during the interview. From the information gained in the questionnaire, Teacher 2 gave pedagogy knowledge more importance than content knowledge. To know how to teach is more important than what to teach.

From her classroom practices, Teacher 2 was seen to carry out 'thinking' lessons in her classes and pupils were seen to be more active in the classroom and seemed to enjoy themselves in the classroom.

Teacher 3

“Critical thinking is what you do with your mind with guidance”

Teacher 3 sees it as something you do with your mind. Here the teacher means creativity. However pupils need teachers' guidance initially to become more creative. In her questionnaire, Teacher 3 is familiar with the concept 'critical thinking' and this is supported by the interview conducted later on. However, in response to Q2 and Q3 of the questionnaire, she does not think that teachers in general have adequate knowledge to teach this new 'innovation'.

The classroom observations carried out seemed to contradict what Teacher 3 stated in the questionnaire. Though she stated that teachers do not have adequate knowledge to carry out 'thinking' lessons, she herself was able to do so with much success though claimed was not exposed to it.

Teacher 4

“Critical thinking is associated with the way of life”

Teacher 4 defines critical thinking as a way of life. How the teacher organizes her work life in particular and her daily life in general is looked at. From the questionnaire filled by Teacher 4, she agrees that she is familiar with this new concept and she was able to give her definition during the interview.

In response to Q2 and Q3, she is confident that teachers in general have adequate knowledge in carrying out this new innovation in the classroom.

From the classroom observations, this teacher was seen to be struggling with this new 'innovation'. Though she admitted that she is familiar with the concept and has had exposure to this new teaching 'innovation' she was unable to prove so in her practice. However in the classroom practice, her pupils seemed to be confused on what to do and this resulted in a noisy class as they lose their concentration on matters at hand. This maybe due to the fact that she is weak in her pedagogy knowledge and was not able to teach effectively.

Summary of findings

'Thinking' lessons are carried out in the classroom and the focus here is more on the teaching strategy or techniques rather than the content. Teachers are found to favour 'classroom' questions and their questioning techniques is found to be the main context in carrying out a 'thinking' lesson. The 'thinking' activities observed in the classroom were found to be outcome of the questions asked by teachers.

Recommendations

From the findings of this study, some common problems were found among these teachers and below are some recommendations made in response to them.

- There exist a need to expose ALL teachers to any new innovation in general and 'thinking skills' specifically as well as how to incorporate them in the lessons (through videos, workshops, talks, etc)
- Continuous development must be carried out from time to time as 'refresher' course for the teachers
- Teachers need to aware of the importance of 'thinking skills' so that it will be carried out in the classroom
- Since the questions asked in the classrooms will determine the 'thinking' that the pupils are doing, there exist a need to expose teachers to questions and questioning technique that will elicit thinking

THE LEARNING PROCESS

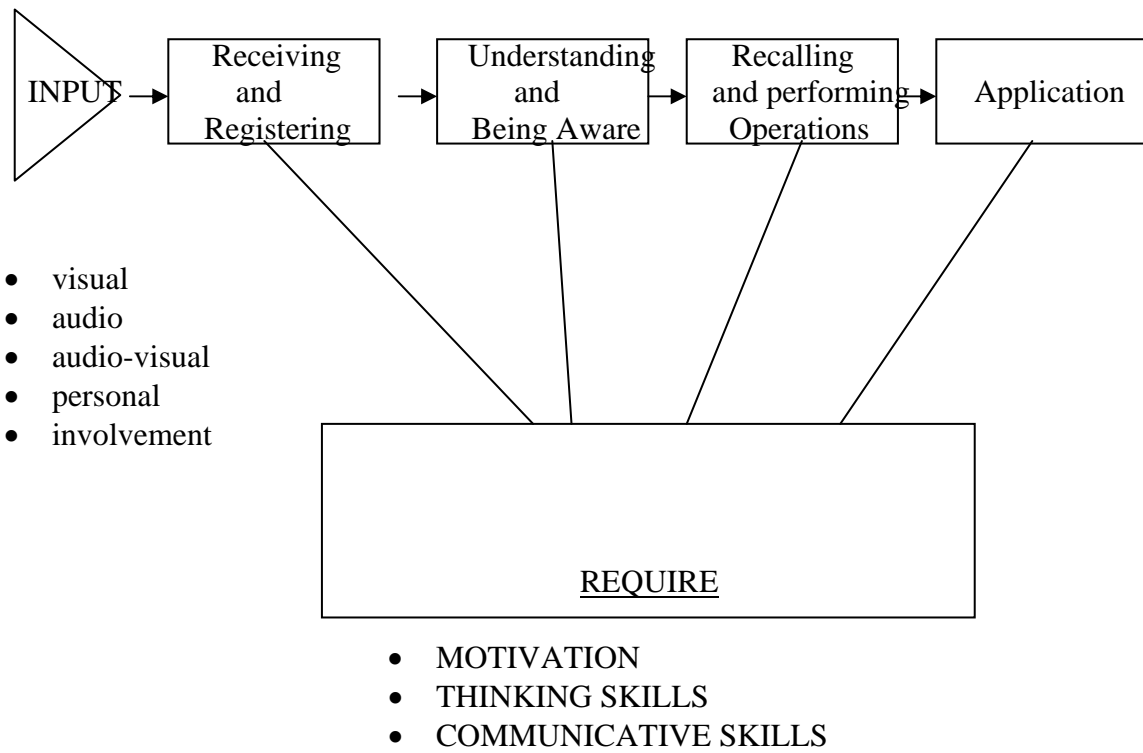
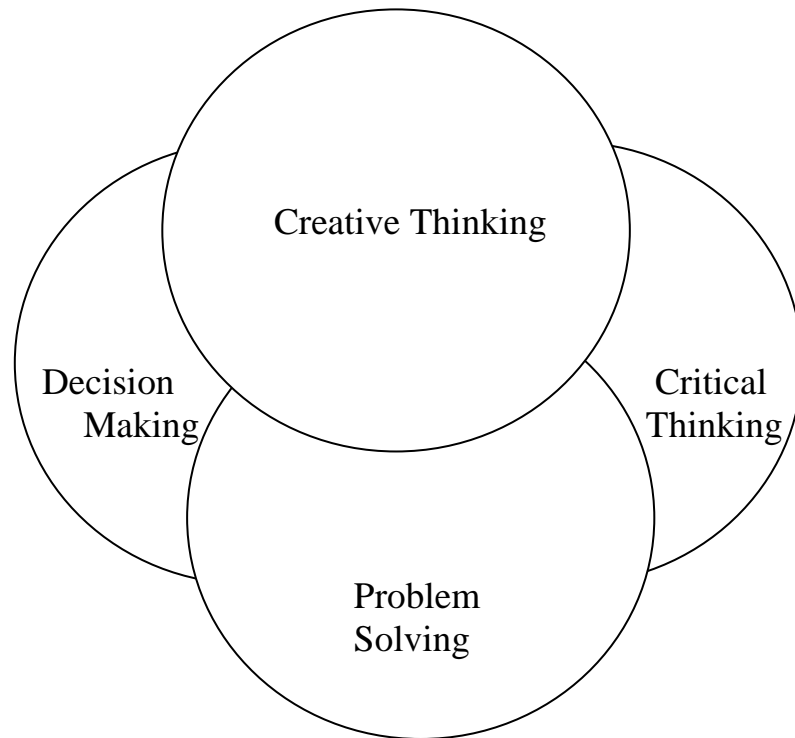


Figure 1: A Model of Thinking Skills developed by Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education, Malaysia.



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