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Fostering Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article underscores the importance of critical thinking in English language learning. It examines various teaching methods and activities designed to cultivate critical thinking skills among students during their language acquisition. Key focus areas include analyzing and discussing authentic texts, engaging in English-language debates, solving problems, and writing reflective essays. The article is aimed at language educators and those interested in modern approaches to language teaching.

Keywords: Critical thinking, English language, teaching strategies, authentic texts, debates, reflective essays, problem-solving, language teaching.

Introduction

In today's world the significance of thinking, in education has grown due to increased intercultural interactions. Critical thinking, which involves analyzing information identifying aspects drawing logical conclusions and objectively evaluating sources has become a crucial component of modern education.

While critical thinking and learning languages may initially appear as areas of focus they are closely intertwined in practice. When learning a language students delve not into grammar and vocabulary but also into the culture, history and sociological aspects of the native country. This immersive process necessitates thinking; analyzing and comparing cultural realities grasping communication nuances and comprehending language structures within specific contexts.

Engaging in activities like analyzing texts listening to recordings or participating in English discussions prompts students to automatically apply critical thinking skills. They evaluate authors perspectives argumentation styles, cited facts relevance—all elements for developing their capacity for analysis and reflection—through real life contextual exercises.

Henceforth learning English not serves as a means for communication but also serves as a platform, for fostering the growth of critical thinking abilities. In this article we will explore approaches and instances of activities that aid in the growth and advancement of students, across age groups.

Methodology

Over the past decades, researchers have been actively studying the relationship between critical thinking and learning foreign languages. The work of Paul & Elder (2006) emphasizes that critical thinking is the process of actively and systematically conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information derived from experience, observation, reasoning, or communication. They believe that this approach to language teaching can be particularly useful because it requires students to analyze and interpret information in a foreign language, which contributes to a deep understanding of the material.

In turn, Davis (Davis, 2013) highlights that one of the main advantages of applying critical thinking in language teaching is the formation of students' skills for independent analysis and evaluation of information, which makes the learning process more autonomous and meaningful.

For the successful application of critical thinking in English language teaching, it is important to understand the key concepts and methodologies that will help students develop this skill. Lipman's work (2003) argues that teaching critical thinking should be systematic and structured. He proposes a problem-oriented approach in which students analyze specific problems or situations, allowing them to develop argumentation, reflection and analysis skills.

Many of the techniques used in learning English, such as text analysis, discussions on certain topics, problem solving, can be adapted to develop critical thinking. For example, Brown (2011) proposes a method of "critical reading", which includes analyzing the structure of the text, highlighting key ideas, evaluating the author's arguments and forming your own point of view on what you read.

Thus, literary sources confirm the close relationship between critical thinking and the study of foreign languages. The use of special techniques and tasks allows students to effectively develop this skill, making the learning process deeper and more meaningful.

Outcomes

Description of the main techniques that contribute to the formation of critical thinking in the study of English

1. Analysis and discussion of authentic texts

Objective: To develop the ability to critically analyze and interpret information presented in various sources.

Process:

- **Text selection:** The teacher selects authentic texts (articles, excerpts from books, reviews) on relevant topics that may arouse the interest of students.
- **Preparatory stage:** Students read the text, highlighting key ideas, new vocabulary and complex structures.
- **Analysis: Students discuss the main ideas of the text,** evaluate the author's point of view, his arguments and the sources used. You can also discuss the structure of the text, stylistic devices and other linguistic aspects.
- **Final stage:** Students express their point of view on what they read, using the acquired vocabulary and grammatical structures.

2. Debates in English on current topics

Purpose: To develop the skills of critical analysis, argumentation and defense of one's point of view.

Process:

- **Choosing a topic:** The teacher chooses a relevant and controversial topic. It is important that the topic is interesting for students and allows them to consider different points of view.
- **Preparatory stage:** Students are divided into groups ("for" and "against") and prepare arguments in support of their position. Additional materials or resources can be provided for preparation.
- **Debate:** Each group presents its arguments, after which the discussion begins. It is important to observe equal time for speaking and to give each student the opportunity to speak.
- **Final stage:** The teacher summarizes the debate by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each side's argument. A vote can also be held to determine which side was more persuasive.

These techniques will not only help students develop critical thinking, but will also improve their language skills such as vocabulary, grammar and the ability to build logical reasoning in English.

There are also the following techniques that contribute to the formation of critical thinking in learning English:

3. Problem solving and case studies

Objective: To stimulate critical thinking by analyzing and solving real or hypothetical situations.

Process:

- **Case Selection:** The instructor presents a situation or case study that may be based on real events or be fictional, but still reflect current problems or situations.
- **Case analysis:** Students analyze the material presented, identify the problem and possible ways to solve it.
- **Discussion:** Students express their opinions and propose solutions using argumentation and critical analysis.
- **Final stage:** The teacher discusses with students various approaches to solving the problem, identifying their advantages and disadvantages.

4. Reflective tasks and essays

Purpose: To develop the ability to comprehend and analyze one's experiences, thoughts and feelings, as well as to formulate and argue one's point of view.

Process:

- **Exercise:** The teacher suggests a topic for reflection, which may relate to the personal experience of students, current events or texts read.
- **Essay Writing:** Students write short essays in which they reflect on the proposed topic, analyze various aspects, and express their point of view.
- **Discussion:** In the classroom, students share their reflections, which allows them to deepen their understanding of the topic and identify different approaches to understanding it.
- **Final stage:** The teacher gives feedback on the written works, highlighting successful arguments and points that need to be improved.

Both of these techniques are aimed at developing critical thinking, as well as the skills of independent analysis, argumentation and reflection in students. Their use can greatly enrich the process of learning English and make it more motivating and interesting.

Examples of specific training tasks for each methodology:

1. Analysis and discussion of authentic texts:

➤ Task 1: Analysis of news articles.

- ✓ *Description:* Students are provided with an article from an English-language source on a relevant topic.
- ✓ *Purpose:* To determine the main idea of the article, to identify the author's arguments, to analyze the neutrality or bias of the source.
- ✓ *Execution:* Students read the paper, then discuss its content, structure, style, and the author's point of view.
- ✓ *Reflection:* Discussion in a group of how information from an article can be interpreted by different readers.

➤ Task 2: Comparative analysis of texts.

- ✓ *Description:* Choose two texts on the same topic, but from different perspectives or from different cultural contexts.
- ✓ *Purpose:* To compare and contrast the arguments, style, tonality of both texts.
- ✓ *Fulfillment:* Students work in pairs or small groups, discussing differences and similarities between texts.
- ✓ *Reflection:* A group discussion about how different cultural and social factors can influence the presentation of information.

2. Debates in English on current topics:

➤ Task 1: Debate on "Freedom of Speech vs. Censorship".

- ✓ *Description:* Students are encouraged to take a position "for" or "against" censorship on the Internet.
- ✓ *Purpose:* To argue your position by giving examples and facts.
- ✓ *Completion:* Students are divided into two teams, each representing one of the parties. They debate using arguments, examples, and counterarguments.
- ✓ *Reflection:* Discussion with the teacher and analysis of the most convincing points of the debate.

➤ Task 2: Debate on "Traditional Learning vs. Online Education".

- ✓ *Description:* Students discuss the advantages and disadvantages of online education compared to traditional education.
- ✓ *Objective:* To determine which teaching method is more effective in different situations.
- ✓ *Execution:* Students are divided into two teams and present arguments in favor of their point of view.
- ✓ *Reflection:* Discussion with the teacher about what aspects of each approach can be used in their own educational process.

3. Problem solving and case studies:

➤ Task 1: Case study "Work in an intercultural team".

- ✓ *Description:* Students are given a scenario where a team of specialists from different countries faces conflict due to cultural differences.
- ✓ *Objective:* To analyze the situation, identify the causes of the conflict and propose strategies for its resolution.

- ✓ *Execution*: Students work in groups, discuss the scenario, highlight problematic points, and develop conflict resolution strategies.
- ✓ *Reflection*: Presentation of the developed strategies in front of the class and discussion of their effectiveness.

➤ **Task 2: Case study "Ethical dilemmas in business".**

- ✓ *Description*: Students are provided with a description of a real-world situation where a business organization faces an ethical dilemma.
- ✓ *Purpose*: To analyze the situation from the point of view of ethics, to propose possible solutions.
- ✓ *Implementation*: Students in groups discuss the situation, consider the potential risks and benefits of each decision, and develop recommendations.
- ✓ *Reflection*: An exchange of views on how different decisions can affect a company's reputation and its long-term strategy.

4. **Reflective tasks and essays:**

➤ **Task 1: Essay on the topic "My experience of learning English and the development of critical thinking".**

- ✓ *Description*: Students are encouraged to write a reflective essay analyzing their experience of learning the language and how it helped develop critical thinking.
- ✓ *Purpose*: To share personal experience, to comprehend your learning path.
- ✓ *Completion*: Students write an essay that includes examples from their experiences, as well as reflections on how language learning and critical thinking are interconnected.
- ✓ *Reflection*: *Exchange essays* with classmates for mutual evaluation and discussion.

➤ **Task 2: Reflective diary.**

- ✓ *Description*: Keeping a diary throughout the semester, where students record their observations, thoughts and reflections on the material being studied.
- ✓ *Purpose*: To maintain a constant practice of reflection, to comprehend their successes and difficulties.
- ✓ *Completion*: Students take notes regularly, analyzing their learning process and responding to study materials.
- ✓ *Reflection*: At the end of the semester, students present their diaries to the teacher, discussing key points of their development.

These examples of assignments demonstrate a variety of methods and techniques that can be used to stimulate students' critical thinking when learning English. Each of the proposed methods touches on various aspects of critical thinking, such as analyzing information, reflecting on one's own experience, discussing and solving complex problems.

1. **The analysis of authentic texts** is aimed at developing the skills of critical analysis of information and the formation of the ability to identify key ideas.
2. **Debates** allow students to have an in-depth understanding of current issues, form and defend their point of view, and listen to and evaluate the arguments of others.
3. **Problem solving and case studies** teach students to apply their knowledge in practice, analyze real situations and look for optimal solutions.
4. **Reflective assignments and essays** encourage students to reflect on their own experiences, analyze their achievements and mistakes, and share their reflections with others.

The use of these techniques in combination can significantly enhance the development of critical thinking in students, making the process of learning English deeper, more meaningful and productive.

Discussion

The formation of critical thinking is a key element of modern education, and the English language, being one of the main tools of intercultural communication, provides unique opportunities for its development. In the process of learning English, students are faced not only with the need to master vocabulary and grammar, but also with the culture and ideology that stand behind the language. This requires them to have the ability to analyze, reflect and think critically.

The above methodologies and specific learning tasks show that it is important not only to transfer knowledge, but also to create conditions under which students could actively and critically work with information. This not only enhances the understanding of the language, but also builds the skills necessary for successful interaction in a globalized world.

However, it is worth noting that the successful application of these techniques requires certain skills and knowledge on the part of the teacher. Not every task or technique will be equally effective for all groups of students. So, debates can be challenging for entry-level students, and reflective essays can require additional writing skills. It is important to take into account the level of language proficiency of students, their cultural and social context, as well as their previous experience in learning languages.

Teachers should also remember that critical thinking is not something that can be "taught" in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, it is a set of skills and abilities that is formed gradually and requires constant practice.

Based on this, the key point in learning is not so much the transfer of knowledge as the creation of an environment in which students can regularly practice critical analysis, discussion, problem-solving and reflection.

It is also important to consider that critical thinking is not isolated from other skills. It is closely related to emotional intelligence, the ability to listen and understand others, flexibility of thinking and the ability to cooperate. All these skills can and should be developed in parallel in the process of learning English.

Most of the techniques mentioned earlier are aimed not only at the formation of critical thinking, but also at the development of communication skills, the ability to work in a team, as well as the assimilation of cultural characteristics of English-speaking countries. This makes the learning process more comprehensive and deep.

In conclusion, the development of critical thinking in the process of learning English is not just an additional "feature" or "bonus". This is a central aspect of modern language education, which contributes to the formation of educated, reflective and socially active citizens who are able to adapt and function successfully in a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations for practice

Teaching English with an emphasis on the formation of critical thinking requires a special approach. Based on the previously discussed methods and their effectiveness, a number of recommendations for teachers should be proposed:

1. **Integrating critical thinking into the curriculum.** First of all, critical thinking should become an integral part of the educational process, and not a separate module or additional course.
2. **Selection of authentic materials.** Use sources of information from different cultural and social contexts so that students can analyze different points of view and form their opinions based on them.

3. **Providing a safe environment for discussion.** Students should feel free to express their thoughts, ask questions, and challenge the opinions of others without fear of judgment.
4. **Stimulating discussion and debate.** Discussion of relevant topics will allow students not only to practice speaking, but also to develop the ability to argue their point of view.
5. **Encouraging reflection.** Writing reflective essays or keeping journals on a regular basis can help students become aware of their progress as well as reflect on their beliefs and values.
6. **Continuous training of teachers.** For the successful teaching of critical thinking, it is necessary that teachers regularly update their knowledge and methods by participating in professional courses and seminars.
7. **Individual approach to each student.** Given the differences in the level of training, cultural and social context, as well as the individual characteristics of each student, it is important to adapt tasks and methods to a specific group.

By applying these recommendations in practice, teachers will be able to form the critical thinking of their students as efficiently as possible in the process of learning English.

Conclusion

Critical thinking, despite its complex and multifaceted nature, is one of the key components of the modern educational process. In the context of globalization and the constant flow of information, the ability to analyze, compare, highlight the main thing and draw informed conclusions is becoming a vital skill for every person.

The study of foreign languages, and in particular English, provides a unique platform for the development of critical thinking. English, as the language of international communication, allows students to become familiar with different cultures, traditions and points of view, which stimulates their critical perception of the world.

In the course of our review, we looked at several techniques and tasks aimed at developing critical thinking. Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the introduction of such methods in the educational process requires a conscious approach, constant reflection and readiness for adaptation.

However, investments in the development of critical thinking of students will pay off with interest. Trained, flexible, critical thinking graduates will be more successful in adapting to a rapidly changing world, as well as contributing to the social and cultural development of society.

In conclusion, it is important not only to teach the language, but also to create conditions for the comprehensive development of the student's personality, where critical thinking becomes an integral part of education.

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