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Critical Thinking in ESL and the Power of Observation, Deduction, and Inference

Dan Manolescu
ESL Instructor and Award-Winning Author, USA
Email: Dan.manolescu@att

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Abstract

The present article is a plea for developing a scientific mindset in the educational process of critical thinking in general, and its unique relevance in studying languages in general and teaching ESL in particular. Researchers argue that belief and pre-existing knowledge are touted as necessary ingredients in creating the skills of a model thinker who can tackle and accomplish challenging issues, organize logical disputes, and avoid fallacies of judgment. If we all agree that critical thinking is a skill, then this acquired ability also requires habits of mind, inquisitiveness, and an acumen for details. The obvious scope of this approach will draw the reader's attention to the power of observation, deduction, and inference – the basic tools in learning focused on asking the right questions, promoting free thinking, balancing confidence with humility, and encouraging learners resort to what they already know, to tap into their own culture to find raw wisdom, and finally attain their personal goals. A quick review of research in this respect is compounded by relevant examples of ideas coming not only from linguists and researchers, but also from several well-seasoned ESL instructors. When we refer to language learning, we find that the power of observation, deduction, and inference can lead to a mindset of habit formation, and consequently turn language acquisition into language development.

Keywords: Observation, Attention, Deduction, Inference, Communication

1. Introduction

As we go into the 21st century, we find ourselves trying to find out what our ESL students can do better and what they need first and foremost. Is it vocabulary, or is it the ability to read and comprehend written passages? Or maybe the correct pronunciation, intonation and stress to make the exchange of ideas possible? How about the listening skills so important in getting the right message? And what kind of writing abilities would be necessary to express opinions, argue, classify, plus any other technique available at our disposal?

All of the above may or may not be the focus of a fruitful discussion, but from the point of an ESL student and teacher, that developing critical thinking skills should definitely be the starting point. It is by personal belief, based on sound research, that all listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills should be developed on the solid grounds of this seemingly debatable concept.

2. Discussion

2.1. Eloquence, Inquisitiveness, and Discernment

Some linguists and researchers advocate the idea that eloquence, inquisitiveness, and discernment can create the proper conditions to develop, besides language mastery and competence, the much-needed critical thinking skills we have to acquire in the educational process these days.

According to John Dewey, "Critical thinking examines the beliefs and pre-existing knowledge that individuals use to assess situations and making decisions. If such beliefs and knowledge are faulty or unsupported, they will lead to faulty assessments and decision-making. In essence, Dewey advocated for a scientific mindset in approaching problem-solving." (D'Argenio, *Skills in the ESL Classroom*, December 22, 2022)

Therefore, pre-existing knowledge should be organized in such a way that easy retrieval can be accomplished, together with appropriate assessments and rightful decisions. Here we must consider Aristotle, the model thinker who provided useful examples of "systems for classifying information, methods for organizing logical arguments, types of reason errors (fallacies), and many other concepts" (Haber, 2020, p. 5).

Many educators and language learners alike, our decision-making abilities can only benefit from a thorough analysis of pre-existing knowledge that paves the way to eloquence, inquisitiveness, and discernment and therefore build critical thinking skills.

As far as language is concerned, Aristotle's work, called *Rhetoric*, "underlies how the words and phrases used to present ideas and arguments can be selected and structured to persuade." (ibid. p. 6) The choice of right vocabulary is obviously crucial if we want to reach our goal to make articulate assessments and conduct persuasive debates.

According to Foresman et al. (2017), "one of the most basic elements of critical thinking, especially when engaged with issues related to logic and science, is to discern whether claims are actually true and to distinguish them from claims that are not true" (p. 7). This can be attained in practice by resorting to our most fundamental tool, and that is language. As Foresman et al. continues: "Language allows us to articulate what we judge to be true or false, and it allows us to share and communicate those judgements to others." (ibid.)

Language, in this vein, can be the best venue if we need to tackle the issue of judgment, since choices can be overwhelming and persuasion works wonders when the proper verbiage is used. In order to produce well-articulated assessments, we should also be aware of the power of communication.

Teaching is the communication of knowledge, and that gives us endless chances to exchange ideas and, at the same time, teach and learn from our students. Our responsibility as educators would include a curriculum that can be easily accessed by students, a presentation of topics that are relevant to our students' lives, but definitely rigorous, meaning we should not oversimplify the material, therefore creating some kind of a balance between complicated explanations and oversimplified, incomplete presentations.

In the view of Rainbolt and Dwyer (2015), "critical thinking is a skill and, like all skills, it requires habits of mind in addition to content knowledge" (Preface, p. xxi). Specifically, a good critical thinker would have to be "inquisitive, being attentive to detail, and being bold" (ibid).

The authors posit that a good example would be Emile Zola (1840-1902), who "was the author of many works, including a twenty-volume set of novels about the life and troubles of five generations of two French families. These novels trace many problems caused by the Industrial Revolution, but the *J'accuse*! letter did more to ignite public argument about justice, religious prosecution, and their relation to the state than any of his novels. Zola was convicted of libel for the letter. […] Zola was pardoned (but not acquitted!). Many think that Zola's letter led to the French laws that separated church from state. […] Zola is a critical thinker because he showed one of the habits of a critical thinker, intellectual courage. He actively sought the truth and was unafraid of going against widely held views" (p. 18).

Such critical thinking skills may also be found in the works of other insightful writers, researchers, and of course, teachers, who may draw from the enormous knowledge tank that empowers students and language lovers, who can better understand a course syllabus if the latter is well organized, resourceful, and diverse.

Language learners make the first step in communicating in ESL by tapping into their own reservoir of skills, and that implies using basic knowledge to function in our society or in the classroom, by asking and answering questions, deciphering messages, describing things, comparing and contrasting, or cause and effect techniques, to mention a few. Drawing on their own life experience, speakers will follow the same rules they have in their own language and culture, expecting the communication process to be a replica of what they already know. One major component in this respect is the necessary attitude to think along the same lines as the native speakers of English. The best examples may come from movies, from music and entertainment sources, or from social media, where ESL students will find real samples of the correct verbiage, the right idioms, and the useful collocations in various lifelike situations, to mention just a few.

2.2. Ways to Empower and Inspire Students to Resort to Their Own Critical Thinking Skills

Teachers can do a lot to inspire and empower students to think critically and, in the process, guide them towards their goals.

Here are some practical examples I have collected from language instructors who were willing to share their advice. The first set takes into account the value of active reading, the beauty of silence that helps learners to think and process, balance confidence with humility, and at the same time, pay due attention to what students have to say:

"1) Teach your students to be active readers. We have a typical way to scaffold a reading lesson for your students: setting the context, reading for main ideas; reading for details and inference; etc. Since there won't be a teacher giving you a list of

questions out in the real world, you want your students to approach reading an article or other material by coming up with your own questions based on the title and maybe the first paragraph. *Wh-* and *How* questions are great, for ex., 'What approach is the writer suggesting to reduce inflation?'; 'What is expected to happen?" Who will be involved?' Not all of the questions may be answered in the text, but the student has a focus when reading the process will be much more satisfying!

2) This is an old one, but I still need to remind myself: appreciate the beauty of silence. Students need time to think and process. With my Business English students, I'm often pushing them to think critically, and sometimes all the students are waiting for someone else to answer. If my silence makes them a bit uncomfortable, that's ok! Let them think and speak when they're ready.

3) Be ready to deviate from your lesson plans. Sometimes students are not following what you're talking about and you need to go back to explain something (you needed more context or scaffolding). At other times you may realize in real time that the lesson should go in a different direction, and with experience I've gotten good at this without the students even noticing. Balance confidence with humility!

4) Really pay attention to what your students say about their lives, work, etc., or vocabulary or grammar questions they have. Take notes as needed. You can often make connections later in the week or the following weeks between something a student said or asked and a new topic that comes up. This helps the students' learning and demonstrates that you've really been listening." (Ralph Herdman, ESL Instructor)

In other words, teachers should be the ones to learn from their own classroom experience. Asking the right questions, letting students think and speak when they are ready, balancing confidence with humility, paying attention to the learners' private life and culture may be stepping stones towards relevant learning outcomes.

In order to accomplish their goals, students learn from their parents, from their teachers, from books, from mass media, but the best comes from their own experience. At the end of each day, or week, or semester, you can see and you can feel how your students grow. "Time is counted, not by hours, but by heartbeats," said Robert Browning. In other words, our time in the classroom might be assessed by the results, by the outcomes measured by the heartbeats of the language learners who leave the school building with a feeling of accomplishment. "Today I learned something useful," they might say. Thinking critically is just one very important ingredient of the learning process.

Here is another point of view, along the same lines, with a focus on critically evaluating information, encouraging input from our students, and empowering students to experiment with language that promotes creativity.

"Critical thinking seems to me such a higher-level thinking skill that we all should develop. Considering the fact that most of our students get their information from digital sources that can be rife with bias, critical thinking is especially relevant in their studies. this is a little bit of a tangent, but I do think there is something to removing emotional connections to ideas as a means of critically evaluating information as it relates to thesis statements and/or a person's position on a topic.

Teaching students to be active readers is very meaningful in my opinion. While many students struggle to read, I have always thought that reading, discussion and debate challenge students to participate and engage with the content being taught. Encouraging input from all the students is essential as I believe it shows the students that everyone's perspective is valued. Furthermore, the students don't want to be lectured to in my opinion (I know I don't). Our brains want to engage in a topic without the fear of embarrassment. I believe, at every level it is essential to promote an atmosphere of experimentation and discovery rather than fear and self-consciousness.

Lastly, one point I want to add is related to our skills as problem solvers... We solve problems throughout the day. How do I avoid a traffic jam? What is the most efficient use of my time in the morning before school/work? How do I approach someone with an issue tactfully? Building on this, I believe our students work well when they are able to express their creativity in solving a problem where there isn't one right answer. To me, this idea lends itself to developing speaking and writing skills because I believe when teachers give students time to experiment with language it establishes the conditions that promote expression with all its flaws. We can then help shape their language in terms of accuracy and fluency. In my opinion, correct or incorrect answers can easily lead to negative thoughts. A student may think I am good or bad at something rather than the thought that I am moving forward and becoming a more skilled user of the language (focus on process). I used to show the students that I make mistakes in English just as they do. It is normal." (Peter Campisi, ESL Instructor)

What we learn from this set of reminders is that creativity is essential, that mistakes are the best teachers, and that we must recognize the value of a good rapport between instructors and langue learners, with its central core of knowledge - the acquisition of critical thinking skills.

Another original contribution delves into the same subject and makes the following self-assessment:

> Critical thinking is an essential component of ESL in various aspects and is strongly interconnected with pre-existing knowledge.
>
> When I first attended an English class in spoken English, there was a fear that I might be the only one unable to grasp the teacher's instructions. My pre-existing knowledge enabled me to compare and contrast the input from the teacher, assisting me in sorting, storing and eventually producing language. This process soon became a mental habit. Meanwhile, another significant aspect of my English journey emerged: the occurrence of being corrected. Whenever I made mistakes—whether in pronunciation, vocabulary usage, or grammar— I experienced golden moments of correction from my teacher. Drawing from my experiences as an ESL student, I have integrated critical thinking and leveraging of pre-existing knowledge into my teaching methodologies as an ESL teacher. My journey of language acquisition—characterized by an initial fear of misunderstanding and subsequent breakthroughs in

> comprehension and expression—has significantly affected my teaching approach. By focusing on the sounds of English and their meanings, I recognized how my teacher's guidance subtly steered me towards using my critical faculties, intertwined with my existing knowledge. In other words, thinking critically has inspired and empowered me to resort to my reservoir of previous knowledge in order to build accuracy and to polish all language skills necessary for better communication.
>
> Furthermore, the 'golden moments' of correction, pivotal in my own development, have taken a central role in my instructional strategies. Immediate, constructive feedback not only helps students improve their language skills but also builds resilience and a growth mindset. By framing these moments as opportunities for learning and growth, I strive to create a classroom culture where mistakes are seen as natural steps on the path to proficiency.
>
> To sum up, my experiences as an ESL student have profoundly shaped my pedagogy. I have witnessed firsthand the benefits of incorporating critical thinking and the use of pre-existing knowledge into ESL instruction. These elements have enabled both my students and me to embark on a path of continual improvement and deeper linguistic and cultural understanding. (Thomas Seo, ESL Instructor)

As we can see, time spent in teaching and learning can only bring us benefits. Moreover, we should not forget that teaching is the only profession that teaches all other professions and thinking critically may be the best card we can play, and in doing so, share our knowledge, experience, and expertise with students of all ages, cultural backgrounds, social strata, or academic or trade inclinations.

2.3. A Quick Analysis of the Process of Thinking

There are several ideas we need to take into account before we tackle the value of a critical approach in the process of thinking.

1. The goal of each activity must be analyzed before tackling the problem. If we need to inquire and get information about getting directions, for example, do we know how to use the appropriate vocabulary? If we are asked to express an opinion about a specific subject, do we know how to argue?

2. There are cases when pre-existing knowledge can help us gather information so the discussion can be beneficial to both parties, those who request and those who provide answers.

3. Before making important decisions, reflection and observation might be useful tools in finding the best solutions.

Practically, such conduits may well benefit from a quick look at the way to pay attention. According to William James, this ability can be supported and nourished if we are aware of its relevance. "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items I notice shape my mind." (Quoted in Dunlop, 2022, p. 105) Attention, therefore, becomes crucial in discerning what needs to be done not only in case of emergency, but also in our daily routine, from crossing the street safely to performing surgery or sending the right message to somebody in distress.

There is an old story attributed to a Native American elder which epitomizes this basic but also extremely powerful ability. A grandfather is teaching a lesson to his grandson and he tells him, "I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, fearful, envious, resentful, deceitful. The other wolf is loving, compassionate, generous, truthful, and serene." The grandson asks which wolf will win the fight. The grandfather answers, "The one I feed." In other words, we are the ones who will eventually need to choose what to do, if we pay due attention to the matter at hand.

Careful attention leads to concentration, which deals with distractions and then restores our attention and focuses on what is important information, efficient, and reliable. Making the right decisions segues to relying on informed choices and coming to the much-needed conclusion. Transitioning from attention to concentration, we are now ready to survey the concepts of observation and deduction.

2.4. The Power of Observation and Deduction

In a quick analysis of the knowledge acquired by the use and practice of mental skills, we should begin with a general overview of how we can train our language learners to develop a habit of noticing and afterwards deducing essential information from their classroom experience. Basic methods may vary from person to person, but mental techniques will stay the same.

As early as 1957 Claude Bernard asserted the power of inventiveness when we use our natural abilities:

> Good methods can teach us to develop and use to better purpose the faculties with which nature has endowed us, while poor methods may prevent us from turning them to good account. Thus the genius of inventiveness, so precious in the sciences, may be diminished or even smothered by a poor method, while a good method may increase and develop it. (Bernard, 1957, p. 35) (Quoted in Beveridge, *The Art of Scientific Investigation*, 2017)

Observation is an example of such a method that means taking notes of something meaningful, or better yet, the kind of observation that registers a 'wow' moment followed by an 'aha' realization. In a world of distractions, this type of observation may not be an easy task, but we have several techniques available at our disposal, including taking notes, looking for special clues, or skimming and scanning exercises we encounter every time we read a passage, analyze a newspaper article, or check our email or text messages.

How this is done practically can only be garnered from practical examples:

> In Oakland, California, four ninth graders wielding screwdrivers sit around a table and take apart a doorknob. Using their hands and their eyes, they explore the doorknob's intricacies and interconnected parts. On the table in front of them is a large sheet of paper on which they make notes and sketches, documenting their discoveries as they go along.

> In Central Asia, a journalist is traveling by foot along the route of an ancient Silk Road. A practitioner of slow journalism, he is listening for stories that don't make headlines news. In a suburb outside of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, he stops to visit a traditional papermaker. He watches a waterwheel power wooden mallets that pound tree bark into a fibrous pulp. He writes that when the paper is dried and polished, it feels as soft as silk" (Shari Tishman, *Slow Looking. The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation,* 2018).

To these practical examples from other fields of study, we can add similar mental exercises that can inspire our students to use their power of observation and deduction:

1. It is always a good idea to teach language and culture together. To make students feel comfortable and give them a chance to use the knowledge of their own culture, I provided them with a list of dueling proverbs. Then I asked them to choose one of the two proverbs and defend their choice with examples from their own culture:

Birds of a feather flock together.	vs.	Opposites attract.
Too many cooks spoil the broth.	vs.	Two heads are better than one.
Variety is the spice of life.	vs.	Don't change horses in midstream.

Using their observation skills, students can see how beliefs and traditions can be handed down from generation to generation, and in the end, make deductions as to the values of such proverbs or sayings.

2. There are many cases when instructors can entice their students to make a mental effort and notice new concepts and make their own deductions.

Let the students discover what these words have in common and then provide their own word in an original sentence.

For example:

Prefix	(before)
Presume	
Precede	
Prepare	
Prescribe (your word in a sentence)	*My doctor prescribes aspirin for cold.*
Con**sent**	(to feel)
Sensation	
Sensible	
Sensitive	
_____ (your word in a sentence)	_____

Good observation skills can give our students a chance to see what words have in common, deduce meaning from context or by comparison with similar words, and then practice their language skills in real life situations. The next step would also be to use this valuable information gathered through a well-coordinated act of observation, and make the logical deduction. Here is an example coming from a personal acknowledgement from another very experienced and seasoned teacher:

> Sometimes there is serendipity.
> This semester I had a class on Greek Literature. We did the myth of Sisyphus, who as punishment had to roll a large rock up to the top of a hill, but whenever he got the rock close to the top, the rock rolled back down so he had to start again. I explained that today we use the phrase *Sisyphean task* to mean one that is so difficult it can never be completed. Some students didn't get the meaning right; they just used it as a synonym for "hard or difficult", without the impossibility part. Soon after that class, a newspaper wrote an article about the Sisyphean task of trying to make all houses hurricane proof, and the students got it. (John Egan, Lecturer)

2.4. Inference

Besides observation and deduction, linguists and language instructors also focused on the students' ability to use their skills in speaking, writing, reading, and listening in order to make their learning process more efficient:

> To learn to think more clearly, to speak and write more effectively, and to listen and read with greater understanding – these have been the goals of language study from the medieval trivium to the present-day English class (Hayakawa, 1990, p. vii).

That was written in the previous century and was addressed to students in English. We know ESL is only an offspring of English, but the instructors should have the ammunition and the general knowledge of the English language so the classroom instruction can be delivered with a feeling of unbiased and unabated confidence.

This very important ability, to learn to think more clearly, is developed by incorporating the concept of inference in everyday studies. When we look at the way our students approach this issue, they are faced with words, phrases, or even collocations that might have a literal or explicit and an inferable or implicit meaning. We usually encourage the use of all kinds of dictionaries, but we should also guide our students to distinguish between the two possible meanings. What dictionaries provide is a literal meaning, but context and careful preparation would also lead our language learners to what the words can imply.

Inference, therefore, becomes an important part of reading comprehension. For the ESL teacher, this useful skill is necessary if we want to understand the minutiae and the semantic implications regarding connotation. We process information every day, and if we go into the classroom, we can identify simple words and discuss them with our students in a way that they, in their turn, see the difference between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (implied meaning). One good example would be the word *cheap*. A basic explanation in a dictionary gives us this definition: "low in price," or "inexpensive." But if we look carefully, we might be able to detect the underlying negative connotation: "of inferior quality or worth." If the students see the

difference, they should be asked to analyze and discuss the difference between *terrible* and *terrific.* The teacher can also find similar examples in a quick conversation, or may recommend an article in a daily newspaper.

For ESL students, anything that goes beyond the literal meaning may create problems because language comprehension and vocabulary development are intertwined notions that define the understanding of language learning and use. Furthermore, the acquisition of new words and phrases should go hand in hand with the correct comprehension, and attention should be paid to a particular word and its intended meaning in a given context. This makes lexical referencing a useful tool in vocabulary development both in reading and in listening (Wesche, M. B., Paribakht, T., 2009*).*

There may be several ways of explaining in plain English what inference is all about, but here is one that combines definition with exemplification:

> An inference, as we shall use the term, is a statement about the unknown based on the known. In short, inferences are extremely important. We may infer from the material and cut of a woman's clothes the nature of her wealth or social position; we may infer from the character of the ruins the origin of the fire that destroyed the building; [...] we may infer from the shape of land the path of a prehistoric glacier; we may infer from a halo on an unexposed photographic plate that it has been in the vicinity of radioactive materials. (Hayakawa, 25)

Several definitions will definitely elucidate the inherent quality of such essential skills, but the general idea is that inference is a process of using observation and background knowledge to reach a conclusion that is logical and makes sense. Here are some definitions of inference:

"The act or process of forming an opinion from what you already know." www.oxfordlearnersdictionary.com

"A conclusion that you draw about something by using information that you already have about it." www.collinsdictionary.com

"A conclusion from facts or premises." www.merriam-webster.com

Definitions can vary, and several sources of information online can provide similar points of view:

> An inference is an idea or conclusion that's drawn from evidence and reasoning. An inference is an educated guess. We learn about some things by experiencing them first-hand, but we gain other knowledge by inference – the process of inferring things based on what is already known. When you make an inference, you're reading between the lines or just looking carefully at the facts and coming to conclusions. You can also make faulty inferences. If you hear a person's weight is 250 pounds, you might make the inference that they're overweight. But what if they're seven feet tall? (www.vocabulary.com)

Mystery stories require readers to note important facts and draw inferences based on these elements. To solve mysteries, you must become a detective, drawing inferences from the clues provided by the writer. The best examples may come from famous authors like Agatha Christie, P D. James, or Conan Doyle. Contemporary authors may also fit the bill with names like Harper Lee, Truman Capote, Tom Clancy or Scott Turow. The beauty of the language is combined with character analysis and numerous situations which would lead the reader to the same logical conclusion that the writer displays at the end of the book.

If we apply the concepts of observation and inference in reading, we can also empower and inspire our students to develop the ability to draw inference as a vital part of understanding language. Books will give us a wealth of information that will help us exemplify subtleties, innuendos, emotions, and thereby make deductions based on the given facts which comprise world knowledge and reasoning. The only things we need to do is find the right texts, passages, or any printed material that will provide samples of reading between the lines. What is left to do is encourage students to pay close attention to both spoken and written language, and then use their skills to decipher even the most complicated and sophisticated symbolic language available to them.

Observation and inference "are both nouns, but making an inference is a process and making an observation is not. An observation is something you notice, witness, or see. An inference is something you conclude by putting together different pieces of evidence" (Meleen, 2021).

In the same vein, we might re-evaluate these learning steps by asserting the benefits and the practicality of a thorough observation combined with an equally powerful skill of assembling pieces of information into a logical conclusion, i.e. inferential evidence. If language learning is considered to be the same as any other skill, this can be achieved as a result of habit formation. Language acquisition can lead to language development through reinforcement of thought processes, and inference is just one example of such effective techniques.

If students become skilled readers, in time they will be able to make coherent inferences based on a wide array of practical examples stored in semantic memory that can be retrieved in some listening or reading contexts. Studies show that exposure to a variety of passages or texts providing general knowledge, which if trained properly, can grow to a level of mastery that associates word meaning with observation and inferencing.

3. Conclusion

In a nutshell, teaching is a challenging but rewarding profession, but if we know how to advise and empower our students, the whole picture changes the perspective and leaves us, students and teachers, with a feeling that education is the best thing that can happen to us. If we analyze the fruitful conversation about what makes teaching and learning a worthwhile experience, we may easily conclude that a major element would be critical think skills developed through a systematic use of observation,

deduction, and inference. That may be the best way to turn language acquisition into language development. For many of us, this should be not only habit formation, but also a virtue.

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