Anarchy in EFL: Introducing Simple Activities to Develop Critical Thinking Skills in Discussion Classes

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ABSTRACT
The teaching of critical thinking skills in the EFL context is a controversial issue. Many instructors oppose the idea on the grounds that such skills are not necessary in foreign or second language classrooms. Others disagree, arguing that critical thinking is an integral part of communication and learning. A source of consternation is the frequency with which university students in freshman English discussion classes fail to critically engage with the topics and content of the lessons. Drawing on theories of critical pedagogy and guided by principles of meaningful learning and learner autonomy, I explore simple activities that show promise in remedying the above and can be performed within the limitations of a unified curriculum. I detail the logic, structure and adaptability of these activities after discussing teaching principles and situating my study within the relevant literature and existing research on the development of critical thinking skills in the EFL field.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Brown (2007) explains that teaching principles are the elements comprising one’s approach to language teaching. Of the 12 potential principles he outlines, the principles of strategic investment, meaningful learning and learner autonomy have the greatest influence on my own approach. However, Brown’s definitions of the latter two principles are somewhat limiting; to Brown, meaningful learning simply entails learners making associations between their existing knowledge and experiences and new material. Another interpretation might see meaningful learning going beyond this; challenging students to reflect critically on their knowledge and experiences, as well as the new material. Similarly, the principle of autonomy, described as learners being able to take charge of their own learning, could be viewed as one which both necessitates and facilitates the development of critical thinking skills. This understanding is found in the writings of Kumaravadivelu (2001), who suggests that an aspect of autonomy is the shaping of learners into critical thinkers. Terming this “liberatory autonomy”, he calls, perhaps idealistically and not uncontroversially, for language teachers “to help learners recognise sociopolitical impediments to realisation of their full human potential” and provide them with “the intellectual tools necessary to overcome those impediments” (p.547). Kumaravadivelu defines the sociopolitical impediments as not only overt political oppression (such as draconian governments), but also subtler forms of discrimination based on race, religion, class, gender or sexual orientation.

Brown’s principles of meaningful learning and learner autonomy mirror two maxims outlined by Richards (1996); those of encouraging learning, and learner empowerment. Richards notes that teachers’ beliefs and goals concerning lesson content and teaching processes, as well as their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within these systems,

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2 Brown’s 12 principles comprise the Cognitive principles of Automaticity, Meaningful Learning, The Anticipation of Reward, Intrinsic Motivation, Strategic Investment, and Autonomy; the Socioaffective principles of Language Ego, Willingness to Communicate, and the Language-Culture Connection; and the Linguistic principles of The Native Language Effect, Interlanguage, and Communicative Competence.
shape the decisions that they make in the classroom. Informed by critical pedagogy\(^3\), and a proponent of transformative education\(^4\), which sees learning taking place through classroom dialogue about real, relevant issues to inspire positive change (Crookes and Lehner, 1998), it is my opinion that the development of critical thinking skills is required across disciplines. Kumaravadivelu writes of the capacity of teachers to transform sociocultural realities, and a need for deeper awareness of both these realities and teachers’ potential as agents of change (2001). Crookes and Lehner (1998) note that the ESL/EFL field largely concerns itself with language only, with teachers shying away from sociopolitical issues and seeing themselves as doing their bit for society simply by helping people to communicate with others. Nowhere in the literature is there a call to drag soapboxes into the classrooms, turning them into arenas for propaganda and political rallies. What critical pedagogy in ESL/EFL does call for is “the simultaneous development of English communicative abilities and the ability to apply them to developing a critical awareness of the world and the ability to act on it to improve matters” (Crookes and Lehner, 1998, p.320). In critical pedagogy, the teacher neither dictates, nor defers to, the views of students, but challenges their opinions, reflecting student-generated issues back to them as problems to consider (Crookes and Lehner, 1998). Critical pedagogy is a broad theory with multiple facets; the fostering of critical thinking skills being just one – but one key – part of it.

Echoing Kumaravadivelu (2001), Crookes and Lehner (1998) and many other scholars, Birjandi and Bagherkazemi (2010) too highlight the potential of teachers to be agents of change in a world rife with problems.\(^5\) They argue that critical thinking, in their understanding of which the identification and challenging of assumptions is integral, is essential for students to perform well both at school and in future workplaces, as well as in other social and interpersonal contexts. They (Birjandi and Bagherkazemi, 2010, p. 137) list nine traits which they see as characteristic of a critical thinker. These are: having a strong intention to recognise the importance of good thinking; being able to identify problems and focus on relevant topics and issues; distinguishing valid and invalid references; suspending judgment where evidence is lacking; understanding the difference between logical reasoning and rationalisation; awareness that one’s understanding is limited and that there are degrees of belief; differentiating between facts, opinions and assumptions; and watching out for authoritarian influences and specious arguments.

Atkinson’s paper (1997) on the teaching of critical thinking skills in ESL/EFL is one of the most widely referenced pieces of literature on the subject. It is also one of the most criticised. Atkinson, reflecting the above-mentioned trend of distancing ESL/EFL from global issues, sees critical thinking as a culturally-based social practice that is slippery to define and consequently difficult, if not impossible, to teach; and also expresses concern that it is not clear whether such skills are transferable. He suggests that the practice of critical thinking is an individualistic, white, middle-class, masculine practice that is not only absent in many other “cultures”, but may in fact be disempowering, especially for oppressed groups; advocating caution in attempting to

\(^3\) Crookes and Lehner (1998) offer a basic description of critical pedagogy as an approach to teaching that is informed by critical social theory, and one that has the goal of rethinking and improving both schooling and wider society.

\(^4\) In contrast to “banking education”, which is a teacher-centred transferral of knowledge model of education (Crookes and Lehner, 1998).

\(^5\) In a study in Iran, they found a strong correlation between the critical thinking abilities of EFL teachers themselves and their professional success, as evaluated by EFL learners. This suggests that learners value critical thinking ability.
teach such skills in the ESL/EFL context. In response, Davidson (1998) agrees that instructors should have a clear concept of critical thinking in mind if they want to teach it, but disagrees that it is difficult to define and does not consider it a social practice. Showing the overlap of various existing definitions, he explains that critical thinking boils down to rational judgement, with critical thinkers being skeptical and able to provide solid reasons for their ideas (p.121). He argues that critical thinking is of relevance to all, and present at least to some extent in societies the world over. He concludes with evidence that critical thinking can indeed be taught to ESL/EFL students, referencing a study he did using the Ennis-Weir essay test with Japanese college students (Davidson and Dunham, 1997).

Benesch (1999) also makes a strong argument against the anti-critical thinking sentiment evident in Atkinson (1997) and other similar papers from the same period, pointing out that such an attitude is an obstacle to students reflecting on their ideas and behaviour and challenging the status quo. She expresses concern at Atkinson’s condescending response to comments on his 1997 paper, in which he claims that humans becoming aware of how they think would lead to “disastrous consequences” and that “mundane life can proceed only when its vast tacit machinery remains by and large under wraps” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 133). Benesch (1999) positions herself as an educator “committed to fighting injustice and inequality in society and the classroom” (p.577), reflecting my own stance, and proposes that dialogic critical thinking, which includes a consideration of various viewpoints on a topic, can be used to uncover hidden assumptions, prejudices and fallacies in arguments. She argues that through expanding learners’ understanding, tolerance and social justice can be promoted; while choosing not to teach critical thinking is in itself a political decision that may have the consequences of “unquestioning acceptance of prevailing conditions, limiting possibilities for dissent and change” (p.579). Benesch also reminds us that students are not passive receptors of culture, but have agency and actively shape their realities. Related to this concept of agency is Kubota’s (1999) criticism of the essentialist, deterministic, dichotomous West-Other representations of Japanese culture and learners she says can be found in, amongst others, the Atkinson text referenced above. She warns against constructing Japanese EFL learners as a fixed group who do not possess and will struggle, or not be able, to develop, critical thinking skills. To Kubota, who advocates a critical multiculturalism approach to language education, with social transformation as a goal, a good teacher must “set high standards, (and) challenge all learners by pushing them to think” (1999, p.29).

Davidson and Dunham’s (1996) study, using the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test, found that Japanese college students who received training in critical thinking in addition to content-based English instruction outperformed a control group who only received the latter instruction. The results indicate that critical thinking skills can be both taught as part of academic ESL/EFL classes, and beneficial. The pressing question is what other ways there might be to facilitate the development and practice of critical thinking skills in the classroom. While not concrete research, Benesch (1999, p.577-578) describes a discussion she facilitated as part of an English for Academic Purposes class, offering a useful model for developing critical thinking skills. She had the students talk about the then recent hate crime in which an openly gay university student was murdered in Laramie, America. Benesch played the role of both conversation facilitator and, where necessary, intervener – asking the students to question the

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6 This understanding of critical thinking, in combination with the above nine traits identified by Birjandi and Bagherkazemi (2010), will be used as a broad definition for the purpose of this paper.

7 The title of this paper is a response to the quote from Atkinson (1998) above.
assumption of which many of their contributions to the discussion seemed to be based, and
challenging them to consider the social origins of their fears as well as alternatives to violent
ways of dealing with such fears. Here we see the use of strategic questions to encourage students
to reconsider their assumptions.

Halvorsen (2005) notes that discussion questions in ESL/EFL classes are often simply
used as tools, or even seen as hurdles that teachers and students need to overcome in order to get
to the next chapter or pass the course. He (Halvorsen, 2005, para.9 )writes:

“It is much easier of course, if the questions just pass by with the students simply
regurgitating some information from a reading … but think about the long-term
message this sends to our students. We are telling them, in effect, that the content is not
really of any importance.”

He then suggests three classroom techniques to improve interaction with the texts and
subsequent discussions: debate, media analysis and problem solving. Elements of each can be
applied to English discussion classes. Halvorsen encourages teachers to consider bias and
different viewpoints, and this can be done in class through the use of well-timed questions and
harnessing function phrases. The function phrases included in the set textbook (Doe, Hurling,
Kamada, Livingston, Moroi & Takayama, 2014) for English Discussion Class at Rikkyo
University lend themselves to this well, helping students to delineate their opinions, provide
supporting reasons and examples and consider various sides to situations. The question forms of
these functions, as well as the inclusion of follow-up questions as a graded communication skill
in the course, can also promote critical thinking, if used correctly and effectively. Further, the
strategic use of Socratic questioning (Paul and Elder, 2006) can also help learners to
investigate assumptions and consider alternative viewpoints. Kabilan (2000) urges teachers to
pose questions to students while strongly encouraging them to ask questions of their own. He
cautions against underestimating the capabilities of one’s students. At the same time, when
planning activities it is important to keep in mind the English language proficiency of the
learners. Zainuddin (2003) reminds teachers interested in fostering critical thinking skills in their
ESL/EFL classes of the need to use language that is manageable for their students, or they may
not be able to focus on abstract concepts and higher levels of reasoning. Zainuddin also
emphasises that students must be reminded that disagreement does not equate to a personal
attack.

Function phrases, questions and disagreement have great potential as tools for critical
thinking and meaningful discussions, but they are often misused by students; tossed around
almost randomly, with little regard for the content that follows the tag phrases. Davidson and
Dunham (1996, p. 14) caution that students who have a basic understanding of rhetorical modes
such as definition, illustration and argumentation may accept ideas that are lacking in strength
and logic simply because they are presented in a proper, learned format. Weak, unsubstantiated
opinions may seem to be the opposite purely because of correct use of the functions. This is
where the supplementation of argument mapping can be useful. Van Gelder (2005) explains how
cognitive science demonstrates that students’ critical thinking skills improve quicker with the
use of argument mapping; put very simply, it is an activity where reasons for opinions are laid
out diagrammatically. Argument mapping is something that can be done quickly on the board,
verbally or on paper. It comprises one of the activities I have employed to bolster critical
thinking skills in discussion classes; I detail how below.
ACTIVITIES: OVERVIEW AND PROCEDURE

After considering the above literature, research and ideas, I devised a simple three-pronged approach for developing critical thinking skills in discussion classes. Each aspect is outlined below.

Distinguishing Discussion from Conversation

The first “prong” needs to be done once at the beginning of the course (in the first lesson) and possibly 1-2 more times towards the middle and end sections of the course (to remind students). It is a short talk about the major differences between a conversation and discussion (formality, depth, structure); this can be phrased as a question and completed as a pair activity, or a teacher-fronted approach can be taken. Alternatively, students can compare a pre-recorded or printed conversation and discussion to identify the differences. The goal is to ensure students understand that discussion class requires better use of logic and more formal, structured presentation of ideas than a mere chat in English with friends.

Argument Mapping

The second “prong” is the use of the aforementioned argument mapping to guide students to comprehension of structural and logical flaws in their arguments. This is most easily done in a teacher-centred way, as post-discussion feedback, with the instructor either verbally or visually quickly going through the students’ main opinion(s), supporting reasons and examples, drawing attention to problematic elements. Misuse of set function phrases can be addressed while going through the argument map. However, in keeping with principles of learner autonomy, rather than explaining directly, issues of logic should be reflected back to the students for consideration through pair talk. Visually, a simple argument map might look something like this:

![Argument Map](image)

Figure 1.1. Standard argument map.

Using a hypothetical example to illustrate the use of argument mapping in feedback, after a discussion on the topic, “Is Japan eco-friendly?” one of the students’ common ideas or threads from the discussion could be summarised verbally or written on the board, like this:

![Argument Map Example](image)

Figure 1.2. Standard argument map with specific examples.

The instructor could begin by pointing out missing function phrases (for example an opinion marker, a second reason marker). They could then pose one or two questions to the students: “Why is “Cool Biz” eco friendly?” Or perhaps “Is Cool Biz really eco friendly?” to consider whether the dress code might merely be an example of ineffective greenwashing. Another possible question could be, “Are there any environmental problems with using PET bottles?” or for more advanced learners, “Do the benefits of recycling PET bottle caps outweigh the negative impact of using PET bottles?” The questions can be simplified and tailored to the level of each class. Students could discuss the questions with partners for 2-3 minutes, with the instructor
acknowledging their ideas when the time is up, and then guiding the class on to the next activity. The argument mapping activity can also be done by the students themselves (with the instructor taking a hands-off approach), as post-discussion feedback or even as a preparation activity, where they would use a print-out like the above to structure their opinions, reasons and examples. Students can be asked to critically reflect on their discussions by looking at the maps and talking in pairs about the strengths of their arguments.

**Strategic Questions**

Challenging the students with provocative questions outside of the argument mapping activity is the third “prong”. The instructor themselves can ask and promote the asking of short, powerful questions like “Why?” and, drawing on Kabilan’s (2000) suggestions, “How did you decide your opinion?” and “How do you know that is/you are correct?” “Why?” is a simple question that students of all proficiency levels can ask, and is undeniably one of the core questions in critical thinking. The other questions need to be adjusted according to the level of each class, but can be used, in basic forms, to prompt students to continue talking if they announce that their discussion is “finished”. These questions can also be printed out as posters and stuck up in the classroom, allowing the instructor to remind the students in a non-invasive way, simply by pointing at the papers.

The activities in the three-pronged approach do not generally require the preparation of any specific materials; it is sufficient if instructors preview the texts provided to students for discussion preparation and highlight areas where logical fallacies look like they can be anticipated. Used regularly and efficiently, the activities can help to develop critical thinking skills in classes, making for more meaningful and engaging discussions. I describe my experiences below.

**DISCUSSION**

I used the three-pronged approach over the course of the university’s second semester in 2014. To begin with, as part of the course introduction in the first lesson, I provided a 3-4 minute teacher-fronted explanation of the key differences between a conversation and discussion to all classes. I pointed out that conversation is typically more casual and less structured than discussion, and the topics tend to be less serious; discussion, on the other hand, is more formal, structured and serious, requiring clear reasoning and explanation thereof. For classes with lower level comprehension skills, I restricted my focus to the casual versus formal distinction; while simplistic, it did seem to get the point across.

I reminded several classes once or twice during the course when discussions deteriorated into casual chats that did not answer the set questions. I always did this as teacher-fronted post-discussion feedback. When reminded, students nodded and laughed, indicating that they understood and were aware that they had not been meeting expectations. In the final lesson students were allowed to select their own topics for one of the discussions; while they were writing their ideas down I reminded them once again that what they were about to do was a discussion and not a casual conversation and urged them to choose appropriate topics. Students who had expressed interest in talking about such generic, broad topics as hobbies, food and university clubs quickly changed their choices to things like weighing up whether it is better to join a university club or circle, by considering the respective advantages and disadvantages of each; others suggested pertinent, complex topics such as whether it is okay to continue eating tuna and eel (the marine stocks of both of which are in danger of collapse), the proposed increase of Japan’s consumption tax to 10 percent, the Japanese education system, the future of
North Korea, and whether or not God exists. Although the students generally lacked the vocabulary to sustain such discussions, their topic selection and concerted efforts to talk about them indicates that they had a good understanding of what constitutes a discussion, and that the first prong had been effective.

I used the second prong, argument mapping, as and when the opportunity to do so arose (and time allowed for it). I introduced it in the third lesson, the theme of which was studying abroad, not as post-discussion feedback but as feedback on the preparation activity for the second discussion. The students were asked to express whether they agreed or disagreed with four opinions on studying abroad from the textbook: one of these opinions opposed studying abroad on the grounds that there was no time to relax. All of the students unquestioningly and unfailingly agreed with this. I did a quick verbal map of their argument (which was exactly the same as the textbook’s) and asked them to consider whether studying abroad literally meant studying every minute of the day for the entire duration of the stay. They spoke about it for a minute, some of them changing their stance. In the following lessons I used argument mapping as post-discussion feedback 1-3 times per class (of students), minimising my use thereof for the lowest level classes, where increased effort in ensuring topic comprehension meant tighter time constraints. I found that the latter topics of the course – specifically the death penalty and gender equality - lent themselves better to the argument mapping feedback activity. In a discussion on an appropriate punishment for a fictitious elderly woman who had repeatedly shoplifted food from a supermarket, the majority of students elected to send her to prison, because she would have access to food and shelter there. After the discussions, I asked them to talk in pairs about whether using this logic meant that all poor people ought to be imprisoned. They could not answer in the affirmative. In discussions on gender equality, many male students took issue with the fact that some train lines set aside a carriage for female commuters during rush hours, repeatedly citing this as an example of inequality and discrimination against men in Japan. I asked them to discuss the advantages and disadvantages (prescribed functions) of this system, as well as the reasons behind its existence, in pairs and they soon admitted that not only was it necessary, but a reaction to more serious problems and threats facing women in day to day life.

For the third prong, I focused on the question, “Why?” taking every opportunity to prompt students to ask their partners (and sometimes intervening and asking it directly myself in the case of prolonged silences) during preparation activities for the discussions. At first, many students would seem to perplexed and say that they had no reason for their idea (despite the asking for and giving of reasons being a major focus of the first semester course). However, some students soon picked up on my endless repetition of the question and declarations that there was always a reason; these students would then imitate me and insist on reasons from their partners. As the semester progressed, I found myself needing to prompt or intervene less and less frequently.

Reflecting on the students’ progress over the course of the second semester, it would appear that the three-pronged critical thinking activity had a positive impact, albeit a small one, on the performance of the students in the discussion classes. However, their improvements in reasoning and discussion could be attributed to their other courses and the general expected intellectual growth of the students as they progress through their university education. Further observation and research is needed to make any sort of conclusive statements about the efficacy of the activities.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have presented arguments for the fostering of critical thinking skills in EFL
classes, outlining the limited literature that exists on the topic, as well as various language practitioners’ suggestions for classroom activities. I have detailed a three-faceted activity plan to promote critical thinking skills and meaningful engagement and exchanges in English discussion classes. The activities have proven to be successful where I used them over a 14-week freshman English discussion course. Based on my own informal observations, they had a positive impact on the depth, logic and meaningfulness of student discussions. However, it is difficult to objectively evaluate the success of the critical thinking activities. In order to strengthen this study, it will be necessary to employ more formal, accurate means of measurement. To this end, students could be asked to complete a survey in English and/or Japanese at the end of certain lessons or at the course, sharing their impressions on the critical thinking activities and the impact thereof on their thinking. Another option could be to use the critical thinking activities in all of the classes (of students) but one or two, creating a control group of sorts. Ideally, though somewhat of a gargantuan task, discussions before and after the activities could be recorded for each class (including the control groups), and analysed with the help of colleagues. Such assessments may be undertaken in future semesters.

REFERENCES
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