

# Cultivating Critical Thinking through the English Class

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## BACKGROUND

Difficulty in English communication for Japanese students is not always caused by language ability. Often, such difficulty is a result of an attitude difference between Japanese and native speakers of English, especially Americans. It is said that Japanese students do not question things nor express their own views clearly in the classroom, while American students always do so. The classroom is considered a semi-formal situation by Japanese students, and they often adopt a reserved attitude. English teachers may ask questions such as "What do you think about ...?" and end up receiving no voluntarily uttered opinions. In such cases, some teachers may tell students that it is important to say verbally what they think, and try to say "yes" or "no" clearly, for example. Other teachers may judge that the students' English ability is not good enough to say what they think.

What about students on these occasions? How do they think and feel? It appears that students often feel embarrassed because they think they have to say something but they simply cannot say it. Many students seem to think that they cannot say what they think because their English is not good enough. Some may also think that they just don't know what to say or they don't have any specific opinion to tell others.

From my personal observations, students are not accustomed to clarifying what they think clearly enough to explain it to others. One reason for this, I assume, is because they are not used to thinking critically. Of course, among friends and for the matters they are personally interested in, they will be more willing to express directly what they think "Let's go to see *Titanic*." "No, I don't like such a fad movie." "I don't like it either because ....". Thus, students often have their own opinions on casual topics which they are interested in, and they do not hesitate to express those views as long as they think it will not affect the human relationship with their friends. In the classroom, however, they behave differently.

In class, students hesitate or stop saying what they think. They tend to be passive, directing their efforts at receiving important information and trying to understand it as it is. In front of the enormous amount of knowledge they should know, they seem not to have any great energy for thinking themselves whether the comments they heard from teachers are right or wrong, fair or unfair, and so on. They may well believe that the content of classroom interaction is just what they receive from their teachers, but not what they should think about or consider critically.

Being silent in classroom may be based on another psychological reason. Owing to the perceived formality of the classroom, if students want to speak up about what they think, they may believe that they have to speak well in a logical or objective way. They are then overcome by the difficulty they face, and they end up being silent in the classroom. Regardless of the reasons, such a reserved attitude of Japanese students in the classroom does influence their ways of conversing with others. This is particularly true with people unfamiliar or socially superior to the students, or with people students encounter in formal or semi-formal situations.

If we could teach students to adopt a different attitude in the English class, that might also help students to create a different attitude toward speaking in general. Instead of asking "What do you think?" repeatedly in vein, I believe that teachers should show the way for students to think and speak up in a more casual manner. In my own case, I made a one-term plan that focuses on cultivating critical thinking in classroom, and here I report on classroom research that I conducted over that term

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to analyze a one-term course of communication in English taught by myself and to examine the possibilities of cultivating critical thinking through English communication. In this paper, I will review the course, examine the method and report on the results of short questionnaires given to students, before I discuss the effect of teaching critical thinking in English.

### **Method**

I planned two projects for cultivating critical thinking in the one-term course. (Usually teachers take the same class group for one year over three terms for a particular English course. Sometimes, however, the teaching of one class groups is split because of a teacher's sudden schedule change. That's how I ended up with this one-term English communication course.) The first project is *speech with Internet search*: Each student finds the topic, thinks, collects information through the Internet, and reports his/her opinion to others. The second project is *Impact issues discussion*: Students read four issues from Impact Issues (Lingual House) and choose one of the topics, before discussing and expressing what they think about their chosen topic.

## **THE EXPERIMENTAL COURSE**

### **Description of the week by week procedure**

The class met once a week for 75 minutes for 10 weeks with about 50 students in the group. Most of the students belonged to *shakai-kougaku-sisutemu-gakurui* (Social Engineering). The class group was placed as the B-level English class for that particular faculty.

### **Class schedule and week by week approach toward critical thinking**

We actually had 8 classes in which to meet; since 2 classes were cancelled due to entrance exam preparation and the instructor's temporary poor health. The brief schedule was as follows:

Week 1 Introduction: aim of this class, the idea of critical thinking

Week 2 Topic selection and discussion

Week 3 Internet information gathering and discussion

Week 4 Preparation of a short speech

Week 5 Speech

Week 6 Speech Introduction to the second project

Week 7 Impact Issues: discussion

Week 8 Impact Issues: paper preparation

The following is a more detailed report of the course classes. A short homework was given each week and the exchange of ideas with partners was actively encouraged in class.

#### **Week 1**

On the first day of the classes, I clearly stated my message to the students as follows:

1. This is an English conversation class, but we will focus on our attitude in speaking
2. We need to say what we think: Do you think often? Do you accept things as they are without thinking?
3. We need to choose our own topics: Do you notice various things around you? Are you good at observing things? Are you curious? Are you sensitive? Do you take things for granted without feeling any doubt?
4. In order to think about something, we need information:
5. We should know facts, and we should know the pros and cons.
6. Based on such information, we should form our own view.
7. In order to tell what we think to others, we have to find out what we think. Clarify what you think and specify your reasons for thinking so.
8. This attitude of "critical thinking" is crucial to being a good speaker of English.

The students looked puzzled. I then showed some examples of critical thinking in daily life:

#### **Example 1:**

We have some stop lights which make a noise to tell blind people that it's safe to cross the street. One scientist thought "Is that enough?" when he saw a blind person cross the street in a non-straight line. "What happens if we change the noise on two sides of the street?" He created a crossing with two noises; imitating a cuckoo's voice with "cu" on one side and "ckoo" on the other side of the road. Now blind people can tell not only when to cross, but also in which direction, by hearing the separated "cuckoo" voice at the crossing. (From a TV report on *Zoom-in!! Asa!*)

With this example, I explained the importance of thinking, "Is it enough?" and suggested that the students think critically about the things which they normally take for granted.

**Example 2:**

We have big shampoo bottles with a pump-up nozzle. I thought such bottles were very convenient. One day I broke my elbow. I could not use my right hand at all. I took a bath, and took a shower. Everything was all right except for the shampoo. I needed one hand to push the pump, and one hand to catch the shampoo liquid. With only one hand, it was really difficult to use that shampoo bottle. I had to find something which could press the pump; I used my knee and chin to press the pump and finally caught the liquid in my left hand.

With the second example, I explained the difficulty of thinking about various possibilities in different situations (de Bono, 1992). One's experience is limited, and if we rely only on our own experience, our thinking will be limited. I suggested that one answer lay in collecting data from various points of view and in asking other people what they thought.

**Example 3:**

A post office in Nishinari, Osaka, started Momo-no-mi Tyokin (Peach Saving) two years ago. The people who registered for Momo-no-mi Tyokin come to the post office every day to save 100 yen and people collect stamps in return. For the busy people, to go to the post office everyday would be an outrageously crazy thing to do and a way to waste time. But it is very good for old people there. They try to walk to the post office every day. Now they have an aim in their everyday life. They try to be healthy enough to walk to the post office, meet other people and enjoy conversation there. The post office clerks now know the old people well, too. If somebody stops coming, they worry about that person and check if s/he is sick or not. The role of the post office in that small town is not only as a mailing/saving center. It has also become a community and health center.

With the third example, I explained the importance of being free from stereotypes in thinking and acting. Life is interesting because it's alive, and we should be ready to accept new phases generously, because this will lead us to more critical and creative thinking. Indeed, with all of the above examples, I encouraged the students to think critically and to think for themselves.

After explaining the idea of critical thinking, I asked the students to fill in a simple questionnaire as a simple way to compare their position between the beginning and the end of the course. (See Appendix 1). The homework for the next week was for each student to find at least two topics for their own project.

**Week 2**

A worksheet was handed out in class. It contained the following questions for the students to write down:

**Part 1 (before discussion)**

- The topic(s) you found:
- Why did you choose that topic?
- What do you need to know about it?
- Possible sources for further information on the topic:

**Part 2 (after the discussion with your partner on your topics)**

- Your friend's comments on your topic:
- The topic you finally decided:
- Your own homework by the next week:
- Your comment and evaluation of today's class:

As homework for the second week, students thought or wrote about their topics for their project. In Part 1, they wrote down their topics and the reasons why they chose them. I asked them for the necessary information to talk about the topic, and they wrote down what they needed to know. I also asked where they may be able to get that information, and they noted possible sources of information. After filling in Part 1, students made pairs and explained their topic to their partner in English. After some exchange of ideas, students went back to the worksheet and worked on Part 2. With their friends' comments, they chose a revised topic and decided what they would do as homework by the following week.

Students majoring in Social Engineering are familiar with how to use the Internet. I suggested students use the Internet and English websites to find information on their topics. They liked this idea very much. So as homework, many students decided to go for an Internet search on their topic.

I showed some sample printouts from *Infoseek* search results on the topic of Left Handers, and a homepage on Politically Correct Terms. Students were familiar with those printouts, and most of the students knew how to use search engines in English.

I walked around and had short discussions with many students. Some students had a hard time deciding their own topic. Some students had decided their own topic, but did not know what to discuss in connection with it. They had information, but they hadn't really thought things further through. I thus asked various questions to elicit their own thoughts.

I repeatedly explained the necessity of having their own ideas or thoughts and acting on necessity for information as a basis for critical thinking.

**Week 3**

A worksheet handed out in the third week contained the following activities:

## Part 1

### TODAY'S ACTIVITIES:

- You tell your partner your topic and what you know about it briefly.
- Your partner will ask questions. Go for another search to find more information.

### CONVERSATION CLUES:

- Introduce your topic: "Have you thought about ...?"
- Give new information: "In ... I found that ...."

## Part 2

- Your partner's question:
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- What you need to know more on your topic:
- The Internet site you found informative:
- Your comment/evaluation for today's class:

Students prepared well. They seemed to be happy because they could work on what they themselves had chosen. They found some difficulty in telling what they knew to their friends. Some students were very good at pointing out the missing points in their friend's explanation. After exchanging questions on their friend's topics, they went to the multimedia lab to use the Internet. They were highly skilled in using the Internet, and I didn't have to explain how to use it to them at all. I looked at students' displays one by one, and suggested other possible searches, and so on.

Some students hesitated to ask questions to their partners. I repeatedly explained how helpful the partner's questions were, especially unexpected questions or questions from a different point of view, for thinking more and for thinking critically.

## Week 4

Students prepared their own speech individually. A speech was for 3 to 5 minutes on the topic each student had chosen. I gave cue-sentences for making the speech as follows, and suggested that they could follow this guided speech pattern if they wanted to:

- Have you thought about
- I thought
- (the fact you found) According to
- (the fact you found) In
- I think

## **Weeks 5 and 6**

We listened to students' speech. Each student had written a one or two page speech. I asked each student to stand in front of the other students and give their speech. I then summarized each speech, pointed out the message there, and commented in Japanese. In addition, I sometimes explained the content of the speech for other students, when the speaker used technical terms. With some speeches, I had to ask the meaning of the technical terms because the speech was on 'peculiar' topics such as new types of eco engines for cars, for example. In such a speech, the speaker really knew the content, and I could ask extra questions, too. All of us enjoyed listening to more than 20 speeches each week for two weeks.

At the end of the fifth week, I summarized what we had done so far in the classroom, and commented that I thought critical thinking had been cultivated through the students' work and efforts.

For the second project, I handed out four articles taken from Impact Issues (Day & Yamanaka, 1998), and I asked students to prepare for discussion. Each student would choose one article out of the 4 and prepare by clarifying their own ideas. The articles I chose from Impact Issues were "Finders keepers", "To tell or not to tell", "Why don't you accept us?", and "A mother's story". Impact Issues is a textbook with "30 key issues to help you express yourself in English", as the blurb on the cover proclaims. Each issue has controversial points such as whether it is all right for a person to keep money which he picked up at a car accident site where a truck with bills smashed into another truck and the bills were floating all over ("Finders Keepers"). The story is short, written on the left page, and some sample opinions and exercise are written on the facing page. Students can easily read through the material and start thinking what they themselves think about it.

## **Week 7**

A worksheet was handed out for the students to write down their ideas. The worksheet included the following questions:

- Which topic did you choose?
- What is a 'big' question in the topic you chose?
- Was it easy for you to answer it?
- Tell me your answer/opinion and reasons/examples for it. Explain it in detail so that I can understand what you are thinking.

Students first filled their worksheet in and then exchanged their ideas with other students in English.

Lastly, a second questionnaire sheet was handed out as homework. This questionnaire contained the same questions as the first questionnaire, with additional questions related to the students' evaluation of the class. The second questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2.

### **Week 8**

Students prepared their own paper on their opinions for one of the topics in Impact Issues. As for the second project, a short paper, instead of a speech, was assigned. This was because some students had had difficulty in speaking in front of other people, even though they had prepared well and had a good English ability. In order to evaluate such students, I decided that written papers would be both fair and helpful.

### **STUDENTS' REACTION TO THIS KIND OF CLASSWORK**

#### **Is this type of class useful?**

Many students considered this type of class useful. The average class evaluation was 3.79 on A 5 point scale from 5 (yes) to 1 (no). In answer to free response questions such as "How did this type of class help you develop your speaking skills?" and "Any other comments?", students wrote various positive comments. These are categorized and summarized

#### **<fun>**

Students enjoyed the class as a whole. They enjoyed pursuing their own topics and listening to other people's ideas. Students liked the evaluation through daily class work and speech, not exam.

#### **<motivation>**

Because students chose their own topic, they were very much motivated to work for the class. Students liked finding their own topics, but they also found difficulty in doing so. Students liked this style of learning English, because it was not based on a passive way such as memorization, grammar. Rather, the course positively appealed to their own interests and activity.

#### **<skills>**

The students reported that they had learned how to express their own ideas. They found it difficult, but they also found it very important. Other skills they reported learning were:

- 1) reacting quickly in expressing their own ideas and in rapid speaking;
- 2) presenting in different ways;
- 3) improving delivery and pronunciation;



- 4) finding easy English to express themselves and to make other people understand what they think and feel (not difficult English in translation);
- 5) speaking English knowing what they want to say;
- 6) finding ways to talk round things,
- 7) practising their daily conversation and improving their overall English ability through trying to make their own speeches.

It should be noted that some students claimed that there was no change in grammatical ability, although they had learned how to communicate in easy English.

#### **<attitude>**

The students reported that they had become 1) brave in speaking English, 2) less hesitant in expressing their own ideas, and 3) more positive in speaking English.

#### **<thinking>**

The class members explained that they had learned how to construct a speech logically and how to organize their thought in order to make a presentation. They had really thought about what they think.

#### **Did they change in their attitudes?**

Students did not find so much change in themselves in terms of the amount of critical thinking, but among six kinds of changes targeted in the questionnaire, "critical thinking" and "seeing many sides to one issue" got a slightly higher rating than the other four. On the other hand, students reported that they would expect much more change if they had this type of class for an entire year (3.83 on a 5-point scale). More specifically, they expected that they would change in their seeing many sides of one issue (76% answered "yes"), critical thinking (67%), and reducing hesitation in expression opinions in English (62%). They did not expect changes in Japanese either in hesitation in expressing opinions (19%) or in suggesting topics (29%).

#### **CONCLUSION**

Students enjoyed classes and got accustomed to using their English as a mean of expressing ideas, but they did not feel apparent changes in their thinking attitudes. Though I myself could not see a clear effect for certain, I believe that the experience of trying to think critically and trying to express their own ideas to other people in a rather formal setting such as giving a speech showed students what they need to develop further in terms of their thinking and speaking attitudes. The tasks in class were simple: Find a topic, think about it, collect data, and express

your own ideas. Students should be able to apply this process from daily behavior to writing research papers. Through the English class, we can show examples of cultivating ways of critical thinking that educated adult speakers are expected to have.

Overall, a careful plan is crucial for conducting this type of course successfully. To know students' interests is the first step. Students were very motivated to use Internet searches, partly because they were familiar with computers. This contributed a great deal to the success of the class. The weekly worksheet helped to guide students toward the goal of classroom activities, and pair work made students realize that the focus was communication and critical thinking by using English. We need to know the types of students, too. For example, speech presentation has its good and bad points for different students. It was a good stimulus for most of the students, and was voluntarily prepared, but it was very stressful for some shy students. Discussion with partners and a well-prepared written speech can help such students to challenge themselves, although we still have to consider fair ways of evaluating students' improvement and efforts in class, such as checking each week's worksheet and including a written version of the speech and paper for evaluation.

I focussed on cultivating critical thinking skills for this particular class communication class. My own key reflection for this class is that I should have created more materials for developing language skills effectively by including examples of speech styles and various useful expressions.

Critical thinking can be considered as a basis for academic thinking; it is also a basic attitude for students to develop as responsible adult citizens in a society more open toward the world. Thus, critical thinking may well be considered one of the core aims of English education at the college level.

## **Reference**

- de Bono, E. (1992). *Teach your child how to think*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Day, R. & Yamanaka, Y. (1998). *Impact issues*. Tokyo: Lingual House.

**Appendix 1: Questionnaire 1 and results**

(\*the number in parenthesis at the right of each question is the average of 47 students' responses)

Q1 Do you practice "critical thinking"?

very often				no	
5	4	3	2	1	(3.09)

Q2 If you practice "critical thinking", what are the things you think strange or peculiar? What do you notice?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Q3 Do you hesitate to express your own opinion?

no hesitation				yes	
5	4	3	2	1	(2.97)

Q4 Are you a type of person who can see many sides to one issue?

I can				I cannot	
5	4	3	2	1	(3.28)

Q5 In a conversation do you suggest a topic yourself?

yes				no	
5	4	3	2	1	(3.21)

**Appendix 2: Questionnaire 2 and results**

(\*the number in parenthesis at the right of each question is the average of 47 students' responses)

Q1 Do you practice "critical thinking"?

very often				no	
5	4	3	2	1	(3.29)

Q2 Do you hesitate to express your own opinion? (in daily life, in Japanese)

no hesitation				yes	
5	4	3	2	1	(3.15)

Q2' Do you hesitate to express your own opinion? (in English)

no hesitation				yes	
5	4	3	2	1	(2.2)

Q3 Are you a type of person who can see many sides to one issue?

I can				I cannot	
5	4	3	2	1	(3.5)

Q4 In a conversation do you suggest a topic yourself?

yes				no	
5	4	3	2	1	(2.29)

**We did not have many classes, but after taking this class have you found any change in you?**

Q5 Are you more proficient at critical thinking?

yes				no change	
5	4	3	2	1	(2.9)

Q6 Do you have less hesitation to express your own opinion (in daily life, in Japanese)?

yes					no change	
5	4	3	2	1		(2.29)

Q6' Do you have less hesitation to express your own opinion (in English)?

yes					no change	
5	4	3	2	1		(2.38)

Q7 Have you become able to see many sides to one issue?

yes					no change	
5	4	3	2	1		(2.88)

Q8 In a conversation have you become comfortable with suggesting topics (in daily life, in Japanese)

yes					no change	
5	4	3	2	1		(2.24)

Q8' In a conversation have you become comfortable with suggesting topics (in English)

yes					no change	
5	4	3	2	1		(2.19)

**Class evaluation**

Was this class useful to you?

useful					almost useless	
5	4	3	2	1		(3.79)

If you had this type of class for an entire year, do you think you would experience changes such as those described above in Q5-8?

yes					no	
5	4	3	2	1		(3.83)

In which area do you think you would change? (Check as many as areas you want to.)

- critical thinking (yes=67%)
- hesitation in expressing opinions (in daily Japanese) (yes=19%)
- hesitation in expressing opinions (in English) (yes=62%)
- seeing many sides of one issue (yes=76%)
- suggesting topics (in daily Japanese) (yes=29%)
- suggesting topics (in English) (yes=52%)
- other area ( )

How would this type of class help you develop your speaking skills?  
(e.g. no change in grammar, learn some tricks in conversation and presentation)

Any other comments?

**Thank you. The content of this questionnaire has no relation to your grade.**

Student #

Name