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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING COMPETENCE IN FUTURE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

To‘ychiboyeva Adiba Farhodjon qizi
E-mail: nabijonova1908@gmail.com
Tel.: +998932646210

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Abstract. This article substantiates the theoretical foundations of developing critical thinking competence in future English language teachers. The study proceeds from the double position such teachers occupy, since they must both think critically and develop the same capacity in pupils through a subject whose medium is a language the pupils do not yet fully command. The author identifies four foundations of the process — philosophical-logical, psychological, linguodidactic and professional-pedagogical — and elaborates a five-component structure of the competence in which a linguistic-discursive component is distinguished as specific to this profession. Particular attention is given to the linguistic ceiling, according to which a learner may reason critically in the first language yet be unable to express that reasoning in English, so that linguistic limitation is mistaken for cognitive limitation. The polemic between J. McPeck and R. Ennis concerning the subject specificity of critical thinking is subjected to critical examination, and the infusion approach is substantiated as the resolution appropriate to foreign language teacher education.

Keywords: critical thinking competence, future English language teachers, subject specificity, linguistic ceiling, infusion approach, dispositions, metacognition, argumentation, source evaluation, questioning, foreign language education, teacher preparation.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking occupies a central position among the competences contemporary education undertakes to form, and its significance has been intensified by conditions in which claims circulate without attribution, information is selected by invisible algorithms and text indistinguishable from human writing can be generated on demand. For the teacher it carries a double weight: he requires it for his own work, in evaluating materials and judging the claims of competing methodological fashions, and he must develop it in those he teaches, which is a task of a different order, since a capacity one possesses is not thereby a capacity one can form in another.

The notion requires delimitation, since in ordinary usage it is confused with attitudes it does not entail: it is not fault-finding, nor generalised scepticism withholding assent from every claim, nor the rejection of authority as such. It is reasoned reflective judgement directed towards deciding what to believe and what to do, comprising identifiable operations — interpreting a claim, analysing the reasoning advanced for it, evaluating the credibility of sources, drawing and testing inferences, constructing justified argument and regulating one’s own thinking — together with dispositions without which the operations remain unused: open-mindedness, intellectual humility, readiness to revise a conclusion, and the preference for truth over victory.

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The position of the future English language teacher within this field is distinctive in a way that has not been adequately theorised. On the one hand the foreign language classroom is an unusually favourable site for critical thinking: it deals constantly with texts that must be interpreted rather than decoded, it juxtaposes cultural perspectives and so makes the familiar visible as one possibility among several, and its communicative tasks generate the discussion and justification in which reasoning is exercised. On the other hand the classroom is subject to a constraint absent elsewhere, which may be termed the linguistic ceiling: the complexity of thought a learner can express is bounded by the linguistic resources he commands, so that a pupil capable of a subtle argument in his own language may produce in English only a simple assertion.

The consequences of this constraint are considerable and frequently overlooked. A teacher who does not distinguish the two sources of limitation will read the simplicity of the English utterance as simplicity of thought and will set tasks below the pupil's cognitive capacity, teaching him that the English classroom is a place where one is not expected to think; conversely, a teacher who requires reasoning for which the pupil has no linguistic means produces silence. The resolution of this difficulty belongs to the foundations of the competence rather than to its practical implementation.

A further specificity has emerged with generative language technologies. The English teacher works more than most with authentic materials drawn from the internet, so that establishing who produced a text, for what purpose and with what reliability is now an operation performed upon the very materials from which language is learned, and the teacher is placed by the nature of the subject in the position of teaching source evaluation.

In Uzbekistan these questions arise within a system undergoing substantial change: the learning of English is a national priority, the content of foreign language education is being reoriented towards international frameworks, and standards formulate results in terms of capacities rather than retained knowledge. Analysis of practice nevertheless shows that tasks accompanying texts remain oriented towards comprehension, that teachers' questions are largely display questions, and that the dispositional component is not purposefully formed.

The scholarly problem of the study arises from the absence of a systematised theoretical foundation for this work. Critical thinking is named in standards and curricula, but the foundations upon which its development in future English teachers should rest — philosophical, psychological, linguodidactic and professional — have not been brought into a single framework, and the question of transfer, that is, whether and under what conditions the capacity formed in one domain operates in another, remains unresolved. The aim of the article is to substantiate the theoretical foundations of developing critical thinking competence in future English language teachers. The tasks were: to delimit the concept and establish its component structure for this profession; to identify the foundations of the process; to substantiate the principle of the linguistic ceiling and its didactic consequences; and to determine the levels and criteria of the competence.

The novelty consists in identifying four foundations of the process, in a five-component structure including a linguistic-discursive component specific to the profession, in substantiating the linguistic ceiling as a principle requiring separate assessment of reasoning and language, and in deriving the infusion approach as the appropriate resolution. The results may be drawn upon in designing methodology and practical English courses, in constructing task systems and in the professional development of teacher educators.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Within Uzbek scholarship the linguodidactic foundation of the present study is supplied by the work of J.J. Jalolov on the methodology of teaching foreign languages. His treatment of the relation between the linguistic material, the speech activity in which it is appropriated and the thinking that activity presupposes establishes that speech in a foreign language is not the translation of a completed thought but a process in which thought is formed under the constraints of the available linguistic means. This position supplies the theoretical ground for the principle of the linguistic ceiling advanced below and for the conclusion that the development of reasoning in English requires the deliberate provision of the linguistic means by which reasoning is expressed.

The second pillar is provided by the work of M.H. Usmonboyeva on interactive methods of instruction, in which the forms of organising learner interaction are analysed according to the mental operations they require rather than according to their outward activity. Her distinction between methods that generate discussion and those that merely generate movement furnishes a criterion for selecting the task types through which critical thinking may actually be developed. The value dimension of the problem is illuminated by contemporary research on education and worldview: S. Ergashbaev demonstrates that stable orientations are formed through sustained processes of continuous education rather than isolated influences, which bears directly upon the dispositional component of the competence, and in a further study identifies independent critical reflection as a central educational outcome, while M.M. Mirzaolimjon og‘li and E. Shohbozbek disclose the institutional context within which future teachers are prepared.

Within international scholarship the field has been shaped by a sustained controversy and by several systematising contributions. J. McPeck argued that critical thinking is always thinking about something and that the knowledge and criteria required differ so markedly between domains that a general capacity cannot be taught. R. Ennis replied by distinguishing general from subject-specific elements and by classifying the possible approaches to instruction as general, infusion, immersion and mixed. The expert consensus assembled by P. Facione established an agreed inventory of cognitive skills and of the dispositions that accompany them. R. Paul and L. Elder elaborated the elements of thought and the intellectual standards by which reasoning may be assessed. L.S. Vygotsky established the mediating function of language in the formation of thought, which is indispensable for understanding what occurs when reasoning is attempted in a language imperfectly commanded. The gap addressed by the present article is the absence of a framework that unites these foundations for the specific case of the future teacher of a foreign language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological foundation of the study is constituted by the systemic approach, which made it possible to treat critical thinking competence not as a set of discrete skills but as an integral formation whose components stand in relations of mutual conditioning, so that the underdevelopment of the dispositional component renders the cognitive operations inert however well they have been trained; within this framework the competence approach performed the leading function, requiring results to be expressed as demonstrable reasoning rather than knowledge about reasoning, while the activity approach established that such reasoning is formed only in tasks that demand it. The theoretical analysis of philosophical, psychological and linguodidactic literature served to reconstruct the development of the concept of critical thinking and to delimit it from criticism, scepticism and

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general intelligence. Conceptual analysis distinguished the components of the competence and the relations between them, while the comparative method juxtaposed the approaches adopted in different educational traditions and determined their applicability to foreign language teacher education. Content analysis of curricula, standards and the task apparatus of widely used English materials established the proportion of tasks requiring interpretation, evaluation and argument as against comprehension. Pedagogical observation of lessons, with attention to the types of question asked and the time allowed for response, established the prevailing patterns of classroom discourse, while questioning of students and interviews with teachers determined their conceptions of critical thinking and their readiness to develop it. The analysis of the products of student activity, including written arguments and evaluations of sources, was employed in order to distinguish limitations of reasoning from limitations of linguistic means, which constitutes the empirical basis of the principle of the linguistic ceiling. Pedagogical modelling yielded the structure of the competence, its levels and the criteria of assessment, which expert assessment verified. General scientific procedures of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, abstraction and generalisation were applied at every stage and secured the coherence of the conclusions.

RESULTS

The study identified four foundations on which the development of this competence must rest. The philosophical-logical foundation establishes critical thinking as reasoned reflective judgement governed by criteria, supplies the standards by which reasoning is assessed — clarity, accuracy, relevance, sufficiency and consistency — and furnishes the inventory of fallacies by which defective reasoning is recognised. The psychological foundation establishes that reasoning is subject to biases operating below awareness, that metacognitive regulation is therefore constitutive, and that transfer between domains requires the deliberate abstraction of the principle from the case in which it was learned. The linguodidactic foundation establishes the relation between language and reasoning in a language imperfectly commanded and yields the linguistic ceiling. The professional-pedagogical foundation establishes the requirements of the double position and locates the decisive instruments of formation in the teacher's questioning behaviour, the time allowed for response and the manner in which disagreement is received. On these foundations a five-component structure was built. The cognitive-operational component comprises interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation and argument construction; the epistemological, knowledge of criteria and standards and the evaluation of sources; the dispositional-value, open-mindedness, intellectual humility and the preference for truth over victory; the metacognitive-regulative, the monitoring of one's own reasoning. The linguistic-discursive component, specific to this profession, comprises command of the English means by which reasoning is expressed and contested: the language of claim and support, hedging and qualification, concession and refutation. A further result consists in the didactic consequences of the linguistic ceiling: reasoning must be assessed separately from language, so that an argument is not judged defective because its expression is simple; the means of argument must be taught explicitly rather than assumed; and at the stage of generating ideas the first language may be admitted in defined task types, the English formulation being required at expression. Finally, four levels were distinguished — comprehension-reproductive, analytical, evaluative-argumentative and reflexive-autonomous, the last including the capacity to design tasks developing critical thinking in pupils — with criteria of assessment corresponding to each component.

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DISCUSSION

The results require to be situated within the foundational controversy of the field, namely the dispute between J. McPeck and R. Ennis concerning the subject specificity of critical thinking. In Critical Thinking and Education, McPeck advanced the specifist position: thinking is always thinking about something, and the capacity to think well about history is constituted by knowledge of history and of the criteria by which historical claims are judged, which differ from those operative in physics or literature. It follows that a general course in critical thinking is incoherent, since it must either be about nothing in particular, teaching nothing usable, or about something in particular, in which case it is a course in that subject; critical thinking is accordingly to be developed within the disciplines and nowhere else.

R. Ennis replied that this position conflates distinct claims. Some elements of critical thinking are domain-dependent, in particular the background knowledge required to judge plausibility; but others — the identification of fallacies, the distinction between a claim and the evidence adduced for it, the assessment of a source — recur across domains and may be taught so as to support their recognition elsewhere. He distinguished four approaches: the general, which teaches principles separately from content; the infusion approach, which teaches explicit principles within subject instruction; the immersion approach, which engages learners in demanding subject work without making principles explicit; and the mixed approach. The empirical question, in his formulation, is not whether critical thinking is specific but which approach produces the greater transfer.

The disagreement concerns the unit in which the capacity resides and hence the possibility of transfer. Two further positions clarify its application here. The expert consensus assembled by P. Facione supports Ennis in identifying a stable inventory of operations recognised across domains, yet supports McPeck in insisting that these are exercised upon content and that the accompanying dispositions are formed through participation rather than instruction. The Vygotskian account of the mediating role of language implies that reasoning conducted in a second language is not the same psychological operation as reasoning in the first, so that critical thinking in English is not reducible to critical thinking plus translation.

The position advanced in this article is that the case of the foreign language teacher partially vindicates each party and that the resolution lies in the infusion approach. McPeck is vindicated by the linguistic ceiling, which shows that critical thinking in English has a genuinely subject-specific condition: the learner cannot exercise operations he is linguistically unable to perform, and removing that obstacle is a linguodidactic rather than a logical task. Ennis is vindicated by the dispositional and epistemological components, which belong to no single domain and which, if left to immersion, are not formed at all, since what is never made explicit is rarely abstracted from the case. The appropriate methodology therefore makes the principles of reasoning explicit, as infusion requires, while teaching them upon English material together with the linguistic means of their expression. For the future teacher the conclusion has a double application, since the approach forming his own competence is the one he will employ with his pupils.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that developing critical thinking competence in future English language teachers requires a theoretical foundation accounting for the double position they occupy and for the

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conditions under which reasoning is exercised in a language not yet fully commanded — conditions constitutive of the task rather than incidental to it.

Four foundations were identified: the philosophical-logical, supplying the nature of critical thinking and the standards by which reasoning is judged; the psychological, establishing the operation of bias and the non-automatic character of transfer; the linguodidactic, yielding the principle of the linguistic ceiling; and the professional-pedagogical, locating the instruments of formation in questioning behaviour, response time and the treatment of disagreement.

On these foundations a five-component structure was substantiated — the cognitive-operational, epistemological, dispositional-value, metacognitive-regulative and linguistic-discursive components — the last being specific to this profession and comprising command of the English means by which reasoning is expressed and contested. The linguistic ceiling yields three didactic consequences: reasoning must be assessed separately from language, the means of argument must be taught explicitly rather than assumed, and the first language may be admitted at the stage of generating ideas in defined task types.

The analysis of the controversy over subject specificity established that the case of the foreign language teacher vindicates each party in part and that infusion is the appropriate resolution: the principles of reasoning are made explicit, as generality requires, yet taught upon English material together with the linguistic means of their expression, as specificity requires. Further research might address diagnostic instruments distinguishing limitations of reasoning from limitations of linguistic means in learner production.

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