TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS BY CRITICAL THINKING

Sirdarya region Khavas district
Professional school No. 2 English teacher
Begbotayeva Sadokat Shavkat kizi
Yangiyer branch of the Tashkent Institute of Chemical Technology
Teacher of the Department of General Sciences and Physical Education
Rustamov Alijon Amonkulovich

Abstract: This paper argues for the teaching of thinking to young learners particularly in English language lessons. It begins by examining the need for the teaching of thinking skills in preparation of young learners as 21st century learners before identifying the spectrum of thinking skills for young learners. Using the theoretical construct of constructivism, the paper will demonstrate how thinking skills should be contextualised in authentic children's literature as a means of modelling good thinking and thinking frames.

Keywords: thinking skills, young learners, literature, demonstrate, teaching.

Critical thinking is one of the most important skills in life. It can help you better understand yourself. It can help you make better decisions. And it is vital for academic success. Yet in many schools, curriculums prioritise a culture of uncritical thinking.

In English classes for example, students are taught to repeat what the teacher says and memorise language from coursebooks. Students get praised for giving correct answers and criticised for mistakes. In school exams, they need to regurgitate memorised information instead of thinking for themselves. Regardless of where you teach, you can integrate critical thinking in classes, even at low levels using simple activities. In this post, we are going to

- consider what critical thinking is
- discuss why language teachers should encourage critical thinking in their classes, and look at activities that teachers can use to encourage critical thinking with young learners. Speak to teachers of young learners and they will tell you that young learners are not only creative as thinkers but undoubtedly critical as well. It is not uncommon to hear both teachers and parents regaling moments of young learners displaying a remarkable degree of either inventive or insightful thinking. And, as teachers, we seek to further develop these cognitive resources as best we can. Research breakthroughs since the 1980s in the teaching of thinking as learnable intelligences offer us some ways to do so. It is now acknowledged that young learners are a distinct group of learners. Extending from Clay's work (1991) and others (Durkin, 1966; Holdaway, 1979; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1987) which revealed that children do not

enter school tabula rasa, young learners are identified as "elementary school-age students ranging from 7- 12 years old" (Kang, 2014, p. 551) and are differentiated from very young learners who are under 7 years old.

As a group of learners, they make sense of themselves and the world in ways that are far more visibly constructivist than older learners. Teale & Sulzby (1989) offer us a portrait of young learners as literacy learners in terms of four important characteristics: first, they begin to read and write very early in life; second, they do so by observing and participating in authentic real-life settings; third, their abilities to read and write develop concurrently and in interconnected ways and finally, they construct understanding and learning by actively engaging with learning materials. It is primarily because of these characteristics that researchers who work with young learners have described this stage of development as "emergent literacy" (Clay, 1967) and advocate that instruction with this group of learners should needfully be characterised by three distinct features which are - enthusiasm, engagement and extension (Puchta, 2013). Understanding young learners as "active constructors of knowledge" (Piaget, 1969) situates them as key to the instruction-learning loop in the classroom. Through this lens, teachers become acutely aware of how to position instruction in terms of how supportive it will be for schema activation and development (Piaget, 1969) by learners, how instruction will allow for a steady path of sense-making (Vygotsky, 1986) ensuring that learners are motivated through task engagement (Bandura, 1997). It is also against this theoretical cocktail of constructivism, interactionism and critical literacy that we understand the role that creative and critical thinking play when teaching young learners. In many ways, this lays to rest a concern that some teachers have about the suitability of teaching either creative or critical thinking to young learners for it is clear that against the backdrop of the young learner as an active learner that the teaching of thinking skills as a means of learning is appreciated. Thinking Skills as a Means of Learning a. The imperative As creative and critical thinking are significant 21 st century competences, they cannot be ignored and serve as an important imperative for us as teachers to ensure that learners, and even young learners, are prepared for the changing demands of the world. This compels us as teachers then to consider how we too can engage our learners successfully for learning through their use. In addition, when we understand that young learners are already active to the process of learning before they enter school, the use of creative and critical thinking skills as part of instruction for learning becomes essential. An early remark from Teale (1995) to encourage "students to think with and through reading and writing" foreshadows this. b. The spectrum of thinking skills for young learners "Critical thinking" is largely understood as logical skills that can be "tacked onto other learning" (Paul, 1989, p. 3). Norris (1989, p. 23), citing Blair (1983); Ennis, (1981); Hitchcock, (1983), explains critical thinking as "rationally deciding what to do or believe". A

useful and comprehensive taxonomy of critical thinking skills is found in Appendix A from Project Intelligence (Brandt, 1989; p. 71). As a spectrum of skills, this list is a useful reference for teachers. However, many teachers remain comfortable and still use Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) which also provides a useful but less comprehensive list of skills to work with. Significantly, if we were to refer to the list outlined by Project Intelligence, it is apparent that many of the skills listed as "Foundations of Reasoning" can be utilised for young learners. In addition, these skills can also be infused (Swartz & Parks, 1994) quite successfully into instruction for young learners. Constructivist approaches to teaching young learners creative and critical thinking are also in agreement with this approach to teaching thinking. One example is from Langrehr (1999) who proposes that the teaching thinking for young learners should begin with thinking skills to improve mental organisation. The skills he proposes (see Table 2 below) is a nod in agreement in the direction of the first category of thinking skills identified by Project Intelligence: As literature plays an important role in the instruction of young learners, thinking skills are best taught contextualised in good literature. Instruction that is anchored in a selection of good stories and non-fiction books provide teachers with many affordances for instruction, including the teaching of thinking. Temple, Martinez & Yokoda (2006) explain that there are three defining qualities that characterise children's literature as a body of work and they are: 1. The main character or protagonist is usually the age of the intended audience 2. The plot or storyline is straightforward and 3. The language used is concrete and vivid. Tompkins (2003, p. 120), however, points out that there are specialised categories of children's literature that are designed for the development of specific sets of foundational literacy skills. One example is a distinctive category of books used for the teaching of shared reading called predictable books. These books, she explains, have "repeated words and sentences, rhyme, or other patterns." Extending from that view, children's literature used primarily for the teaching of thinking can be supported with books that either demonstrate the use of specific thinking skills through events or characters or require learners to explicitly use particular skills. For example, cumulative stories of which "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" by Laura Joffe Numeroff (1985) is an excellent example where because of the plot structure, it allows for the thinking skill of sequencing to be learnt quite easily and in an authentic manner. Similarly, fables as a category of children's literature offer opportunities for learners to abstract a key lesson from the story in the form of a moral. More complex stories such as "Voices in the Park" by Anthony Browne (1998), which is premised on the thinking skill of points of view or perspectives, serve as a good model for the teaching of thinking skill of points of view itself. Finally, William Steig's "Dr De Soto" (1982) is an excellent example of creative problem-solving.

The teaching of thinking is a crucial set of skills that learners, and in particular young learners, must acquire in order to become effective learners. Constructivist, student-centred paradigms to learning situate the teaching of thinking deeply into instruction requiring teachers to effect learning as young learners experience it. The use of thinking skills at the input stage of lessons ensures that learners are provided with the best possible ways of "noticing" the input to be learnt. Framing tasks according to cognitive and content goals ensure that learners are mentally engaged in tasks. Introducing tasks that extend student thinking allows learners to see the relevance of what they are learning and how their learning can be used. Lastly, creating classrooms that signal the importance of being thinking and ethical trains them up to meet a much more complex world ahead.

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