ADJUSTING LANGUAGE TEACHING IN POLYTECHNIC TO REQUIREMENTS OF INDUSTRY

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Abstract: Based on the education philosophy in polytechnic, the education content is matched to industries requirement of qualified workers. Today’s professional context requires not only the traditional academic content mastery but also new skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. While recent development in language teaching puts a stronger importance on critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is a process that challenges an individual to use reflective, reasonable, rational thinking to gather, interpret and evaluate information in order to derive a judgment. Students who develop critical thinking skills are considered better academically and non-academically. This is an effort to combine language teaching and critical thinking training as there is a relation between language and thought. A brief training on critical thinking was given to a group of language learners. Together with reaching the English syllabus aims, teachers are required to make a list of activities in which the skills are required. The course should enable students to develop their language competency while developing critical thinking and shaping identity.

Keywords: critical thinking, language learning, shaping identity

The issue of character education has been developing years, not only in Indonesia but also in most parts of the world. It also becomes point of attention from Directorate Higher Education of Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia. It is an education of value, attitude, moral and personal characteristics. The objective of the character education is to develop learners so they can make decision in their life and preserve the good tradition. Then they can implement those good values in their life as well as spread them to their surroundings. The theme of character education is to develop new generation who are honest, smart, tough and care.

One of the objectives of character education is developing decision making skill. The ability to make decision follows a long process although our life is full of decision making. Some of them are routine, but on occasion it requires more thought. Decision making involves evaluating alternatives and making choices among them (Weiten, 1992). Those need ability to make critical reasoning before evaluating and choosing.

The necessity to have a critical thinking is demanding in the information era. In an era where information plays a very important role as a potential asset in many aspects of life such as in making decision, developing knowledge, raising economic growth, etc, a scholar should not only have the ability to take the content which presents itself in abundance but also have ability to select pieces of the information by critical reasoning to match with the purposes. The selection needs a lot of practices to make it effective. The practices, then, will develop a skill, the skill to think critically to select valuable information for specified purposes.

Critical thinking skill is one of the priorities in the development of foreign language learners in Indonesia. Developing critical thinking may face problems because of teacher-centered learning, rote learning which students expected to be passive recipient of knowledge and memory-based learning are still being practiced (Richmond, 2007). Students have less opportunity to practice analyzing critically which makes them unable to apply their knowledge in the real contexts. Furthermore, Egee and Kutieleh (2004) noted that Asian students are lack of critical attitude and less attention to principles of analysis and critique.

Critical thinking skill is also one of the agenda of education in polytechnic which is a career focused applied education. Education is delivered in an environment where students receive theories and hands-on training that enable them to more readily apply their skills. The graduates are expected to be able to fulfill requirements from industries which will employ them. There are several skills that become the requirement such as verbal communication, analyzing, making decision, etc. Those skills require ability of critical reasoning to perform them. So, critical thinking is important for studying in university as well as for working, a skill that is crucial not only for academic needs but also for professionals.

Considering those challenges, language teaching in polytechnic especially teaching English as a foreign language in Surabaya Shipbuilding State Polytechnic needs to be adjusted. The learning of English is not merely exploring language and developing verbal competency, but it should also give space to practice critical thinking. Unfortunately, developing critical thinking skill is not explicitly stated in the objectives of the language instruction. But the teachers are required to be “up-dated” towards the current condition which then they should
make appropriate anticipation and solution to answer the challenge. Meanwhile, they still face a classic problem of English learning in Indonesia. i.e. students’ low motivation.

Combining language learning and developing critical thinking is expected to give innovative solution in increasing students’ learning motivation, developing language skill and generating critical thinking. Since students’ motivation is influenced much by the teacher and classroom climate (Kikuchi, 2009), the teacher is required to develop a teaching and learning activities to accommodate language learning objectives as well as increasing motivation and developing critical thinking. The learning is designed to increase students’ participation which will replace teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. Students may take several advantages after following the session. In general, students who develop critical thinking skills are more able to achieve better comprehension which in turn they are able to achieve better marks too, become less dependent on teachers and textbooks, create knowledge and evaluate, challenge and change the structures in society. Thus, the learning activity provides students opportunity to express and exchange opinions which will improve students willingness to study and increase achievement.

The paper presents a proposal of a small-scale exploratory research on the implementation of critical thinking exercise for students of English as a foreign language. It describes how a conducive learning atmosphere is developed and how critical thinking is introduced. It also presents how critical thinking proceeds in their mind after they execute some learning tasks, and discusses the results.

There are three points of rationale behind the introduction of critical thinking. First of all, the skill encourages students to take on a more independent learning approach, where they decide on the learning goal, consider all the assumptions, plan the steps towards the goal and considering the consequences that may arise from the decision before taking the initiative to proceed on their own. Second, it is felt that with information flooding from all kinds of sources, students may face difficulty to select qualified and credible information to meet the purpose. This skill will equip students with ability to handle information by promoting and fostering student’s ways of reasoning. Third, the practice of developing critical thinking will require students’ active responses. This is expected to increase students’ learning motivation since they have opportunity to open discussion and accentuate uniqueness to increase creativity.

Definitions and Aims of Critical Thinking

Wood (2002) said that critical thinking is the process of using reasoning to discern what is true, and what is false. It is defined as examining ideas, evaluating them against what are already known and making decisions. The aim of critical thinking is to try to maintain an ‘objective’ position. When someone thinks critically, he weighs up all sides of an argument and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses. So, critical thinking skill covers actively seeking all sides of an argument. Since the aim when thinking critically is to respond objectively to what is being read or thought through, it needs to keep an open mind and be prepared to question the author’s claims. Supporting the previous definition, Paul and Elder (2006) put the spirit of improvement in the definition as they stated that critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it.

Paul and Elder (2001) mentioned several skills to make up critical thinking, namely: (1) interpretation: the ability to comprehend information; (2) Analysis: the ability to identify the main arguments presented; (3) Evaluation: the ability to judge whether this argument is credible and valid based on the logic and evidence given; (4) Inference: the ability to decide what to believe or do based on solid logic, and to understand the consequences of the decision; (5) Explanation: the ability to communicate the process of reasoning to others; and (6) Self-Regulation: the ability to monitor one’s own thinking and correct flaws in logic.

What Skills That Employers Want?

Cited from a site of Careers and Employability from University of Kent about the skills required by graduates, here are some important skills which are possibly related to language learning:
1. Verbal communication; that is a skill to be able to express ideas clearly and confidently in speech.
2. Analyzing & investigating; it is an ability to gather information systematically to establish facts & principles. Problem solving
3. Initiative/self motivation; it is the skill to act on initiative, identify opportunities & proactive in putting forward ideas & solutions
4. Written communication; that is an ability to express one-self clearly in writing.
5. Creativity; that is the skill to generate and to apply new ideas and solution.

Those skill develop what is called as employability skill. Employability skills are important skills for getting, keeping and being successful in a job. Those are the skills and attitudes that enable employees to get along with their colleagues, to make critical decisions, to solve problems, to develop respect and ultimately to
become strong ambassadors for the organization. The skills are frequently referenced in the media as lacking in school-leavers, graduates and those already in employment.

Teaching Critical Thinking
Modern education involves critical thinking; even it is regarded very important and vital. All educators are interested in teaching critical thinking to their students. The purpose of teaching critical thinking in the sciences or any other discipline is to improve the thinking skills of students that will lead them to succeed in the world.

Generally, all education consists of transmitting to student two different things: (1) the subject matter or discipline content of the course ("what to think"), and (2) the correct way to understand and evaluate this subject matter ("how to think"). It is considered much easier to transmit the content of academic disciplines than to teach students how to think effectively about this subject matter. This second ability is termed critical thinking (Schafersman, 1991).

Some of the employable skills which are close to language learning are interpersonal skill, communication skill and critical thinking skill. First, interpersonal skills are the skills to interact with other people. Well-honed interpersonal skills allow him to empathize and build rapport with colleagues and clients. Second, communication skill is the ability to communicate both verbally and in writing with a wide variety of people, maintain good eye contact, write clearly and succinctly, demonstrate a varied vocabulary and tailor your language to your audience are all essential skills that employers seek out. Third, critical thinking skills is the ability to solve problems and make decisions that can be a huge asset to the employer and these are therefore desirable skills to develop. So, critical thinking skill needs to be developed together with language learning because they are dependent to each other to develop skills related to employment.

Method
Teaching critical thinking in class involves certain activities which are designed to teach students one critical thinking skill at a time, while assignments are structured to allow students to practice each critical thinking skill in succession. There several basic suggestions to make teaching critical thinking easier as follows (Hofreiter, 2005):
#1: Develop a conducive situation. Teacher should be competent to remove student’s psychological barrier.
#2: Teach critical thinking explicitly. Students need explicit instruction on how to think critically.
#3: Critical thinking skills should be modeled by instructor. Modeling of these skills is a key factor in helping students learn critical thinking. Teacher gives an example to apply skills needed in critical thinking.
#4: Use real-world examples to teach critical thinking skills in context. As language educators, teaching in context is enabled by supported syllabus. The benefit of incorporating critical thinking into these courses is the opportunity for students to wrestle with real conditions and decide what they should do, or response using the logical tools they’ve learned.
#5: Begin with students’ core values, then move to information and logic. The easiest place to start is Self-Regulation, or the identification of a students’ own values, perspectives, and biases. Suggested questions to incorporate the skills, beginning with Self-Regulation, are given below:
  ✓ Self-regulation: What are your initial reactions and opinions about this issue? Where do those ideas come from?
  ✓ Interpretation: What do you know about this topic?
  ✓ Analysis: What are the arguments/controversies surrounding this issue?
  ✓ Evaluation: Now that you’ve had this experience, which point of view makes more sense?
  ✓ Inference: What could we do about this issue?
  ✓ Explanation: How can we communicate our conclusion and still address both sides? (Hofreiter, 2005)

Conclusion and Suggestion
The paper tries to explore the critical thinking that will be performed by a group of learners who is studying English 2 after they are given brief training on critical thinking and open-mindedness. The innovation of this proposal is on integrating critical thinking as one of professional skill to master into language learning. The objectives of the program are introducing critical thinking, giving allocated time to practice and evaluating it for improvement in the future. The teachers are required to modify the syllabus, learning material and teaching method and assessment to meet the purpose of the program.
References


