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Implementing tasks that stimulate critical thinking in EFL classrooms*

Implementación de tareas que estimulan el pensamiento crítico en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera

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* Este es un artículo de reflexión, producto de una práctica pedagógica con dos grupos de pregrado de inglés, de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia.

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Abstract

This article of reflection introduces the insights drawn from a didactic activity implemented in two EFL classrooms at the Uptc (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia) in Tunja, by two teachers belonging to the IIDI (Instituto Internacional de Idiomas). The activity was carried out with the objective to arise awareness about the need to strengthen the critical thinking skill in undergraduate students through music and, by using the English language. The article aims to invite teachers to use this type of tasks stimulating reflection, problem-posing, and problem solving regarding social concerns. The findings state that the implementation of Critical Thinking related-tasks can indeed become an effective strategy to foster criticality. The paper begins with the rationale. Afterwards, it presents the theoretical framework supporting the proposal, and shows the findings. Finally, the article ends with the conclusions, the appendix, and the references.

Key Words: self-reflection, critical thinking, critical thinking related-tasks, metacognition, and arise awareness.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta las reflexiones que surgieron de una actividad didáctica implementada en dos aulas en donde se enseña el inglés como lengua extranjera, en la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, Tunja, por dos docentes que pertenecen al Instituto Internacional de Idiomas. La actividad fue llevada a cabo con el fin de despertar conciencia sobre la necesidad de fortalecer la habilidad de pensamiento crítico en los estudiantes de pregrado, a través de la música y usando el idioma inglés. El artículo pretende invitar a los profesores a usar tareas que estimulen la reflexión, la identificación de problemas de índole social y la forma cómo solucionarlos. El artículo empieza con la justificación. Después, presenta el marco teórico que respalda la propuesta y muestra los hallazgos. Finalmente, termina con las conclusiones, el apéndice y las referencias.

Palabras clave: auto-reflexión, pensamiento crítico, tareas relacionadas con el pensamiento crítico, meta-cognición, despertar consciencia.

Introduction

Taking into account that the current educational system is in permanent change and improvement, and being aware that we, language teachers, are directly committed in the promotion of an integral education, this paper has the objective to make a reflection about how to foster students' critical thinking skills through some meta-cognitive processes and at the same time, promoting the English learning.

We propose a workshop to implement in EFL classrooms based on the development of some critical thinking related-tasks which aim at generating *awareness* in both, teachers and students. Through specific tasks, teachers will have the opportunity to strengthen not only students English learning experiences, but also to stimulate self-regulation processes and the permanent reflection on current concerns.

Thus, language teachers will be able to change the way most students usually look at the world in order to face daily life more critically, by stating their own viewpoints and supporting their personal position as active members of our society. These activities can be designed keeping in mind the model presented in this article. So, dear reader, we invite you to get immersed in this fascinating issue, let us see its importance.

Rationale

In the educational settings, the student we always want is the one who is able to analyze, reflect, self-assess, argue, propose, be autonomous, and evaluate during his/her learning; so that at the end of this process, the student's personal learning strategies have been enriched and have succeed professionally, ever since he or she has accomplished to improve the way of thinking and acting. Therefore, the student will be able to improve his/her life at a personal and academic level, too. However, this is not an easy task for the student or for the teacher.

Regarding this concern, we decided to publish this article in order to share the experiences we had when implementing a workshop based on critical thinking related tasks with EFL students, in our teaching setting at Uptc in Tunja. We prepared a very simple, but helpful activity based on some critical thinking tasks such as inquiring, questioning, and a special input about critical self-reflection with the objective to arise teachers' awareness about the importance of their attitude and the relevant role they play in the process of becoming critical and giving a hand to the students in this important process to achieve a more meaningful integral development. We carried out the workshop not only in two of our classrooms, but also in the 46th Annual Conference of ASOCOPI. The participants in this current session showed very receptive and interested. They suggested us to socialize this material with other teachers to promote reflection. To be familiar with the workshop we worked, see appendix A.

1. How and why to enhance the critical thinking skill in EFL classrooms?

This is a good question that all language teachers should wonder. However, how can we expect our students to be critical if we do not teach them how to achieve it? To what extent can we expect them to use their thinking skills if we do not implement activities that help them develop these processes? How can we pretend learners analyze, reflect, be aware, make decisions, propose, and solve problems if we do not promote the development of all these skills? This sounds reasonable and could be feasible if we take into account the following advice.

1.1 Let's learn to unlearn

According to Smith (1990), critical thinking encompasses the use of meta-cognitive processes; this is why in EFL classrooms teachers could help students develop skills in order for them to be aware of their perceptions, assumptions, prejudices, and values. At the same time, teachers can also help students break old habits of negative thinking and learn how to express their own view points by assuming their own position about reality and current issues.

1.2 Let's foster team work

Likely, teachers can sponsor the collaborative work in our English classrooms, in order to achieve common goals through didactic tasks and current didactic activities such as the development of didactic workshops and small classroom research projects. These tasks need a lot of reading and reflection; therefore, students can support their ideas and state their own position, agreeing and disagreeing with other partners' points of view.

1.3 Let's use our critical thinking skill in current concerns

We completely agree with Pineda (2003) as she asserts that becoming a critical thinker is a life-long task which is only developed and sharpened through time and learning experiences. We cannot intend our students become critical just with a reflection about the need of becoming aware of things; nevertheless, this reflection could become the first step, since being critical is a process needing time and practice. This is the reason why Mejia (2003) holds that critical thinking is a desirable process in education and we completely agree with him as well.

Furthermore, it is a fact that nobody can deny that a change in the present educational system is needed; a change in people's mentality, a significant change in teaching and learning processes and curricula if teachers really want to rebuild a more humanized society in which the full development of the individual is the basis for the full development of society in order to ensure a full and equal education and better opportunities for all. In this vein, all of us should take schooling to a transformative vision of the present and future and make sure learners are aware of this necessity, too.

2. Theoretical framework

In this section we will present the main constructs guiding this paper. On the one hand, critical thinking as the base to lay the foundation of pedagogical tasks; on the other hand, critical thinking related-tasks as didactic units aiming at developing and promoting critical thinking skills in students. Finally, meta-cognition, as the factor leading learners to self-regulation processes and the means to achieve autonomy and strengthen self-monitoring processes.

It is important to highlight that the innovation of this practicum resides in the combination of these three dynamic constructs which are crucial to encourage students to take part in class by stating their point of view, justifying their ideas or just showing personal positions. Likewise, it is significant to underline that grammar and vocabulary are paramount aspects which are present in the developing of this workshop. So, let us study these concepts in a more particular way.

2.1 Critical Thinking

There are multiple definitions and interpretations about this issue; yet, it is a good idea to start stating that critical thinking is a process through which people can develop different mental and meta-cognitive skills in order to be able to analyze, reflect, make

decisions and take intelligent actions which later will lead them to accomplish a desirable outcome.

Critical thinking, according to Beyer (1985) entails the ability to gather, evaluate, and use information effectively. It also involves thinking skills such as understanding, evaluation different points of views, judging, posing, and solving problems. Critical thinking also has to do with reflecting, arguing and proposing different alternatives of solution. (Smith,1990).

In our own words and based on our own academic life and teaching experiences, critical thinking implies not to swallow things whole, but to examine them, savor and chew them to be able to digest them. Being critical is looking further the obvious things, making connections, analyzing results and their implications. Critical thinking means no to take everything for granted, but open the eyes and develop skills to problematize and support own positions by activating our curiosity, motivation and mental skills.

Therefore, our tasks as teachers, is sensitizing our students and help them develop thinking skills and the ability to understand social, political, and cultural problems dealing with all human dimensions inside and outside classrooms. It is relevant to highlight that critical thinking is not simply a matter of teaching strategies. Critical thinking involves attitudinal and volitive changes, and of course conscious behavior. Consequently, critical thinking entails decision making and conscious action taking, as the self-aware process it is.

2.2 Critical thinking related-tasks

Critical thinking related- tasks are goal- oriented activities which involve students in their learning process achieving specific results. As Willis (1998) indicates «tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome» (p. 23).

Willis (1998) also suggests six types of tasks that are progressing from simple to complex not only in content but also in structure. They stimulate critical thinking and can be combined with some English themes in order to identify daily difficulties, analyze them, and give possible solutions. They are *creative, comparing, sharing personal experiences, ordering and sorting, problem solving and listing*. In the teaching- learning of a foreign language process tasks must be interesting, easy, innovative, fun, enjoyable, and cool in order to foster interaction and cooperative work to obtain the linguistic and intellectual challenges purposed by the English teacher.

Based on our teaching experience, we consider that critical thinking (CT) related-tasks are didactic units aiming at developing and promoting critical thinking skills in students. They are didactic classroom activities such as workshops or small –scale projects based on social issues related to injustice, inequality, discrimination, manipulation, coercion, oppression, and exclusion, among others. Through these activities participants have the opportunity to reflect, analyze, identify problems, and propose suitable solutions to a problem.

Many of the critical thinking related-tasks require interaction, discussion, reflection, and provide arguments. This is why they can help students in the development of their language competence. For instance, according to Pineda (2003) oral tasks involve open discussions, debates, round tables, and role plays; this fact can definitely foster classroom interaction and consequently students' communicative competence in the target language. Other tasks require to infer information from oral and written texts, compare and contrast ideas, identify advantages and disadvantages related to different issues, distinguish facts and opinions, write short compositions stating their point of view with supporting arguments, conduct surveys and analyze the information collected, examine contents of different types of readings, use logical thinking to solve fictitious cases, examine and discuss issues from diverse perspectives, analyze implications, judge events and people's views about them, reflect on social impact and consequences of various issues on our community, among others.

In short words, CT related- tasks are useful learning experiences where students can use widely their thinking processes to state their own position and support their viewpoints by putting in practice self-determination, decision making, and action taking. Next part will introduce the concept of our last construct. We mean metacognition.

2.3 Metacognition

Meta-cognition is considered “a reflective activity involving awareness and control about the global development of learning processes”. It requires permanent planning, assessment, and evaluation of the thinking processes (Mayor, 1993). As many authors agree meta-cognitive strategies include perception, critique, judgment, and decision making. All these skills allow students to control and self-regulate their own learning leading them to autonomy and learning to learn. Pineda (2003) holds that meta-cognitive strategies include perception, critique, judgment, and decision making. All these mental skills allow students to control and self-regulate their own learning leading them to autonomy, independence, and initiative.

According to Blackey and Spence (1990), the process of «thinking» entails the way people manage their thoughts and control their mind. Thus, students learn how to select and apply the strategies called «metacognitive» (Meta = further/beyond and cognitive= related to knowledge). This means that through the action of thinking, people reflect and control their decisions and consequently their lives; they can organize their ideas, categorize their thoughts and control their behavior and know when to select a particular strategy. Besides, people respond assertively to their actions by being capable of monitoring themselves.

In any field of knowledge, the ideal student is the one who is independent, has autonomy to make decisions by his/her own, and has control of his/her learning and life by monitoring him/herself. It is the learner who owns a high level of awareness, and thinks and acts critically. In other words, he/ she is capable of self-regulating his/her entire life. Here, we can conclude that meta-cognition is been reflected on one's own thinking and learning. Developing awareness of our meta-cognitive process helps students to bring control to their learning. Consequently, by being aware of their leaning process and preferences students are able to regulate their learning endeavors in order to accomplish their goals.

To finish, Chamot (1999) claims that teachers can help learners develop awareness by means of different learning strategies and critical thinking-related tasks since the ultimate educational goal is to help students become autonomous and independent through self-regulation; in other words, to be able to take charge of their own learning or self-direct their learning by developing their meta-cognitive processes and learning to learn in order to achieve a life-long learning. In classrooms, students should be encouraged to reflect on the learning strategies they use so that the transfer of those strategies to other contexts can be facilitated.

3. Findings

This activity was developed not exactly as a research project, but as a tool to foster criticality in our students in order to achieve the ideal student we all want. We also intended to stimulate the use of our students' meta-cognitive skills through simple activities and using music as a motivational strategy.

The results achieved were very interesting and showed how students can be encouraged to strengthen their critical thinking skills by reflecting, analyzing, stating problems and finding possible solutions to these problems, as well. We could evidence this by means of some of the answers in the workshop; for instance, some students were aware about the right that

all people have to be free, and rejected the slavery openly, “People should be free”, “people shouldn’t be discriminated, because it isn’t a good idea to be excluded”. The students manifested this when they worked the activities regarding the song “La Rebelión” by Joe Arroyo. At this respect, other students wrote, “It’s a good idea not to discriminate” and “there must be more equality for all the people”.

Concerning to the song “Sin miedo” by Raikon, some students consider that relationships must be respected and the couple should be truthful”, “people shouldn’t be unfaithful, they should respect their couples”, “do not forget the love between the couple, I think they should reflect”. Furthermore, most of the students are aware about the subliminal messages a song can contain. They consider that these messages are negative most of the time. About this, they stated, “It speaks and invites to have sex”, “this music incites to the consumption of psychoactive substances like *creepy* and others”.

In relation to the song “El condor pasa” by Simon and Garfunkel, other students wrote, “People shouldn’t escape of the problems”, “this song expresses peace, freedom, quietness and I feel desire to fly because we are slaves of the city”, “people need freedom”, “when listening to this song I feel relief”, “I relate this rhythm to culture”, “this music is relax and it’s peaceful”. Another student concluded the following, “the singer feels enclosed. He would like to go to the forest for him to be able to feel peace like the condor”.

Finally, with respect to the last song “Always” by Bon Jovi, the students stated things such as, “it is a good idea to forget the bad experiences when we are not loved”, “this song expresses sadness, a broken heart and frustration”, “it’s a good idea to forget past loves”, “I felt very depressed”, “he should look for another love, another couple”, “My friend provoked me a broken heart, too. I looked for my family and friends in order for them to help me”, “that’s a sickness”, “it’s a love not corresponded”, “this song inspires depression because the singer is in love, but he’s not loved”, “it’s a good idea for him to forget that impossible love”, “he should be happy, he should know more friends”. As we can evidence, some of the students extrapolated the problems extracted from the songs with their own reality.

In a nutshell, we realized that the participants in the workshop revealed their critical skill after analyzing the lyrics, expressing and arguing their own points of view. They made self-reflection and gave outstanding opinions which helped them to be aware as well as to improve their way of thinking and acting.

Conclusions

After a deep reflection on the theory introduced in the previous pages, and also taking into account the results accomplished during the implementation of the workshop proposed in this article, which aimed at finding out how the carrying out of critical tasks can stimulate critical thinking skills in EFL students, we have drawn the following conclusions:

Indeed, the implementation of Critical Thinking related-tasks in EFL classrooms can become an effective strategy to foster criticality. Through these activities participants will have the opportunity to stimulate their meta-cognitive processes as well as to exercise their mental skills such as analyzing, reflecting, self-assessing, arguing, proposing, posing and solving problems, and evaluating. Consequently, by means of these new methodological strategies learners are going to achieve a better level of comprehension of real life, make more intelligent decisions, and act in a more conscious way.

Teachers can combine the teaching of a foreign language with the practice of the Critical thinking-related tasks, in order for students to achieve a more meaningful learning experience and better learning outcomes. This is why, through workshops based on Critical Thinking related-tasks, participants can improve not only their communicative competence, but also they can enlarge their vocabulary. We consider that by means of this kind of activities, power relations in classrooms can be improved in a significant way and consequently, the learning environment, too.

Likewise, music can be a very useful and motivating didactic strategy that can give a hand to the English teacher in order to stimulate not only the English learning process, but also this can become a key approach to promote reflection and action taking. We could realize that through music the students were able to reflect on social concerns; they stated their own points of view, and then tried to find and propose some possible solutions.

Based on this wonderful experience, we can state that if language teachers want their learners to be critical, it is necessary to stimulate their thinking skills by means of critical thinking related-tasks based on metacognitive abilities such as self-regulation, self-assessment, and self-reflection.

To conclude, Critical thinking related tasks can be applied not only in EFL classrooms, but also it can be transferred to other disciplines such as Psychology, Social Science, Humanities, and Psycho-pedagogy, among others. This is why we want to invite all teachers to implement this type of tasks in their classrooms.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA Y TECNOLÓGICA DE COLOMBIA
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INSTITUTO INTERNACIONAL DE IDIOMAS
IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL TASKS THAT STIMULATE CRITICAL THINKING
IN EFL CLASSROOMS WORKSHOP
“Talking about music, feelings, and social issues”

LEVEL: A2

DATE: October 15th 2011

TIME: 35 Minutes

PROFESSORS: Patricia Kim Jiménez Niño and Aida Yolima Fuquen Martínez

Subject(s):

- **English:**

Grammar topics: advice and suggestions (*should, you need, don't forget to..., why don't...; it's a good idea to...*)

- **Music:**

Four rhythms: *Rock, Reggaeton, Salsa, and Andina music.*

- **Social problems:** Discrimination, exclusion, drug addiction, injustice, inequality, manipulation, oppression, abuse, slavery...

Introduction:

Music is a pedagogical strategy that can be used in classrooms in order to encourage students in the English learning process and to reinforce grammatical topics, too. In this workshop, music will be also used to explore **hidden messages and possible social issues** affecting the listener's character and likely his/her behavior in a positive or negative way. Music contains elements that produce different reactions on listeners because of sounds, sensations it stimulates, and the lyrics that are part of songs themselves. Songs and music in general, allow exploring both aesthetic aspects and cognitive ones. In relation to the latter, they can be used to foster learners' reflections and the identification and analysis of social issues, among other aspects. Furthermore, students can transfer or extrapolate situations that they have experienced themselves or have been experienced by others, and then communicate them in a critical way by using the English language.

Description

This workshop has been planned to be implemented with basic intermediate EFL students in order for them to develop and strengthen some thinking skills such as **reflection, analysis, problem posing, and problem solving**. The activity is divided into five tasks based on meta-cognitive abilities which should be developed by the participants in 90 minutes; sometimes individually, sometimes in small groups, and in pairs.

Main objective:

To foster criticality in students by working on meta-cognitive processes and at the same time to promote English learning.

Specific Objectives:

- To achieve participants express in English their emotions, feelings, and social insights experienced through music.
- To elicit from participants the personal perceptions and messages that music transmits them.
- To find out if music can affect some people's mood indeed.
- To pose problems and try to propose different alternatives of solution.
- To reinforce some contents dealing with advice and suggestions by using: *should, you need, don't forget to..., why don't..., it's a good idea to...*

Materials:

- Four different musical genres
- Handouts (workshop)
 - Lap-top
 - Video-beam
 - Chronometer

DEVELOPMENT

- I. Individual activity. Listen to the songs with close attention and classify them according to the genre (rhythm) by writing numbers from 1 to 4. Then, write the titles of the songs in the below table too.

Critical Thinking Skill: “Knowledge”: The Ss have the capacity to evoke prior knowledge about some musical genres in order to classify the songs they hear.

Tasks: listing: “Sorting task”

Strategy: “Classify and contextualize”

Time: 4': 21"

ROCK MUSIC Song title: _____ (1:01)	REGEATON MUSIC Song title: _____ (0:56")	SALSA Song title: _____ (1:09")	ANDINA MUSIC Song title: _____ (1:15")
N° _____	N° _____	N° _____	N° _____

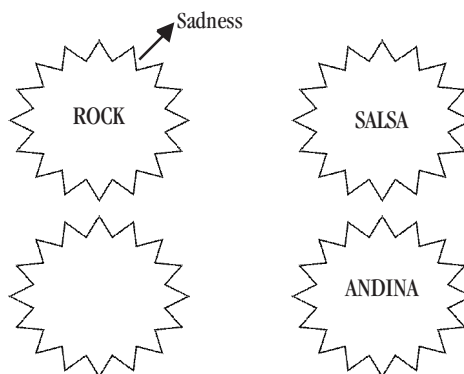
II. Individual activity. Listen to the songs once again. **What words can you think of when you listen to each rhythm regarding the message and the lyrics?** Write these words around the graphic, as in the example. You are going to spend *a minute* to write down the words that come to your mind.

Critical Thinking Skill: Interpretation: “Translation” The Ss use their own words to interpret the songs.

Tasks: Listing: “Brainstorming”. Key question: what is this song about?

Strategy: “Organizational planning”

TIME: 8:21 "



III. Group activity. Work in groups of four people. Based on the previous activity and according to your own point of view classify those words you wrote in each rhythm into positive or negative influences. Use the below table.

Critical Thinking Skill: “Self-regulation”: Autonomy to say our opinions based on our previous experiences, perception, critique, and judgments. It is also decision making to regulate our own learning. This is a reflective activity.

Tasks: “Problem solving”: Analyze real or hypothetical situations.

Strategies: “Social strategies”

Time: 8’

SONG	POSITIVE INFLUENCES	WHY	NEGATIVE INFLUENCES	WHY
“Always”				
“La Rebelión”				
“Sin Miedo”				
“If I Could”				

IV. In the same groups. Did you identify any social problem mentioned in any song? According to your knowledge, what would be the best solution? Use the next structures to give your opinions, ideas, suggestions or advice: **should, you need, don’t forget to..., why don’t..., it’s a good idea to...** Use the below table to complete this exercise.

Critical Thinking Skill: “Interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, evaluation and self-regulation”.

Tasks: “Problem-solving”

Strategies: “Affective and social strategies, rehearsal strategy”

Time: 8'

SONG	SOCIAL PROBLEMS	SOLUTION (suggestions/advice)

- V. Pair activity. **According to the lyrics** of the songs listened during this workshop, discuss with your nearest partner the answers of the following questions.

Critical Thinking Skill: *“Reflection, analysis, and interaction”*

Tasks: *“problem posing and problem-solving”*

Strategies: *“Social strategy”*

Time: 3'

1. What time (epoch or moment of the history) was evoked in the songs or in a particular one?
2. What happened during this time?
3. Have you experienced or felt discrimination, exclusion, unfaithfulness, suffering depression, sadness, begging, loneliness because of a broken heart, or any other negative feeling in your school (workplace)? Explain.
4. What did you do to solve that problem?
5. Have you had a close friend suffering consumption of psychoactive substances, or have you been offered drugs? Explain

SOCIALIZATION:

Time: 4'