

The Art of Listening: Fine-Tuning the Autonomous Mind

by Ching Ching Lin

Critical Thinking in the Context of the Common Core Classroom

Under the current Standards-based reform—The Common Core Standards (CCSS) (2010)—critical thinking is the ability to engage in academic discourse. In the Common Core classroom, students are expected to ask clarification questions, build on each other's ideas, and engage each other in evidence-based reasoning (Fletcher, 2010; Toppo, 2012). Critical thinking, understood as such, creates cognitive and linguistic demands for many students but more so for ELLs, who are subject to the same expectations while struggling to learn basic English (Hakuta, 2011). How do we support ELL students in the Standards-based classroom while engaging all students in critical thinking?

Based on the assumption that there is a correlation between students' critical thinking skills and their academic language proficiency, educators have paid explicit attention to instructional approaches that facilitate students' academic language development while engaging them in reasoned discourse (Benesch, 2001; Stupnisky, Renaud, Daniels, Haynes, & Perry, 2008). Instructional models that infuse language learning into discussion-based classes provide teachers with a blueprint for building students' critical thinking skills in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Through the process of give and take, language serves as a tool needed for abstract thinking (Gibbons, 2009).

It is not surprising, then, that Accountable Talk—an instructional approach that blends language development with content-area learning—is gaining popularity among educators. Accountable Talk posters have a ubiquitous presence in New York City public schools. To facilitate academic discussion and writing, Accountable Talk utilizes sentence/discussion stems such as:

“I agree/disagree with _____ because _____.”

“What's your evidence?”

“How does that support our work at _____?”

The use of Accountable Talk in the Common Core classroom typically involves the following procedure:

1. Teachers explain and model Accountable Talk.
2. Students are given opportunities to practice a target skill in small groups.
3. Teachers pose an open-ended question and guide students in an Accountable Talk discussion.
4. Teachers provide feedback and suggest areas to improve (Feldman & Kinsella, 2005; Michaels, O'Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2002).

The Potential Perils of the Current Critical Thinking Paradigm

The current critical thinking paradigm, while valuable, tends to fall into the pattern of teacher model, teacher question, and student response. By conceptualizing critical thinking as an individual cognitive skill that teachers transmit to students through drilling and coaching, it unwittingly fosters the passivity of the mind.

Beyond this response, however, the most serious fault with this mode of instruction is its failure to address students' motivation and interests on a more fundamental level—i.e.,

why should students care about the quality of their thinking other than being prompted by external rewards? How do we compel them to take an intrinsic interest in what others have to say? For English language learners who are too intimidated to participate in discussion, how do we induce them to take those risks?

When students are conditioned to look up to teachers as a primary source of knowledge, they may not trust themselves or each other to possess a wealth of knowledge, and most likely will not develop an intrinsic interest in improving their thinking. In order to teach critical thinking effectively, it is important to view classroom learning as a process of knowledge construction, collaborated among participants, that calls upon the participants to invest themselves.

Bakhtin's Dialogism: Fostering Active Listening

Bakhtin's literary theory and philosophy of language (1981) conceptualizes language as dialogic and signaling an instructional approach that views learning as a social practice concerned with the interaction among learners in the process of learning and with the power relationship within the classroom (Clark & Holquist, 1984).

A Russian literary critic and philosopher, Bakhtin used his theory to challenge the monologic discourse of Stalin's authoritarian regime. Propelled by a vision of inclusion and diversity, his theory asserts that any language use is essentially dialogic: the meaning of an utterance is derived from who is its intended addressee and how an individual positions himself or herself in accommodating the vantage points of others. An individual's voice is shaped by this activity of addressing—i.e., the individual's interaction with others, whether imaginary or real (Bakhtin, 1981; Clark and Holquist, 1984).

Bakhtin's dialogism has profound implications for how we teach critical thinking: A good thinker is simultaneously a good listener. Building on what he or she characterizes as the reciprocity of understanding and responses, we may add that the ability to anticipate future responses is what defines critical thinking (Bakhtin, 1981); the act of making a conscious effort to listen to others' viewpoints is a component of being a critical thinker.

Cultivating the Art of Listening

In order to cultivate critical thinking, it is important for teachers to focus on classroom practices that promote the coexistence of multiple perspectives and let the mutual shaping of responses and understanding guide classroom instruction. Instructional strategies that value student voice (e.g., asking higher order questions that admit open interpretation), direct students' attention toward each other (e.g., student-centered discussions), and utilize students' prior knowledge and cultural backgrounds (e.g., choice-based, multimodal projects) should be prioritized. By cultivating active listening, students will improve their ability to understand, analyze, critique, persuade, and negotiate. ELLs are more inclined to take risks in participating in discussions if they believe others are interested in their thoughts.

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