CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND MEANING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: Many ELT experts believe that the inclusion of critical thinking skills in English classes is necessary to improve students' English competence. Students' critical thinking skills will be optimally increased if meaning is prioritized in English lessons. Those two inter-related elements can be implemented when teachers do collaborative activities stimulating students' thinking process and meaning negotiation. Yet, the realization might be counter-productive if they are applied without careful consideration of task purposes and of students' roles. Based on the consideration, this paper is focused on presenting how critical thinking skills and meaning should be properly incorporated in an English lesson.

Key words: critical thinking, critical thinking skills, meaning, collaborative activities

Critical thinking has been a well-established subject and a debatable research field across disciplines for a very long time. It was first introduced by Greek philosophers and has been used since the Greek Empire era up to now, obtaining a significant, influential status during its extensive travel all over history. Many historians believe that the roots of critical thinking can be traced from Socrates' teaching practice and vision 2,500 years ago. He brilliantly revealed a probing questioning method that individuals could not logically justify their assertive claims to knowledge. Socrates' view of critical thinking, supported by

Plato, was then applied by Descartes and was a theme in essays written by Montesquieu and John Locke (Rfaner, 2006).

Critical thinking is the intelligently self-controlled process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. It is based on universal intellectual values that excel subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness (Scriven & Richard, 1987). In short, critical thinking is that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them (The Critical Thinking Community, 2002).

At university level, critical thinking skills are essential abilities in using intellectual tools by which one appropriately assesses thinking. In this case, by utilizing critical thinking skills, students can use the intellectual tools that critical thinking offers – concepts and principles that enable them to analyze, assess, and improve thinking. They will be able to work diligently to develop the intellectual virtues of intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual civility, intellectual empathy, intellectual sense of justice and confidence in reason. To put it briefly, critical thinking skills are self-improvement in thinking through intellectual tools that assess thinking (The Critical Thinking Community, 2009).

Critical thinking skills play significant roles not only in learners' academic achievements but also in their dynamic life of workforce after graduation. Hirose (1992) claims that numerous large corporations all over the globe deal with the lack of basic thinking skills performed by recent college graduates in their companies. He says that, "Many of today's youth lack the basic skills to function effectively when they enter the workforce. A common complaint is that entry-level employees lack the reasoning and critical thinking abilities needed to process and refine information" (Hirose, 1992:1).

In the context of higher education in Indonesia, especially in English Department, the limited use of critical thinking skills and the lack of meaningful activities are assumed to be the reasons why students in Indonesian universities are often ineffective in exchanging ideas and writing in English critically. They tend to accept opinions, especially on the current news of politics, corruption, and education, without evaluating them appropriately. This is probably because

most of them previously studied at primary and secondary schools which typically applied too teacher-centered approach. Therefore, expressing ideas in English both communicatively and critically is not always easy for English Department students.

Based on what have been stated above, this paper will focus on presenting how critical thinking skills and meaning should be implemented in English Language Teaching. To begin with, the writer will first discuss English Language Teaching in Indonesia in general perspectives and then clarify the reasons why critical thinking skills and meaning should be prioritized in English classes. From this point on, the writer will suggest practical teaching stages incorporating critical thinking skills and meaning in an English lesson.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDONESIA

English has been taught at secondary schools in Indonesia since the era of Dutch colonialism. The persistent, similar fact is that English has never been positioned as an official language, as in Singapore, Malaysia, India, or other nations where English has an important, influential status as a second language. A possible reason is that the effect of British colonialism in Indonesia is practically invisible and United States had not been diplomatically close with the Indonesian government at that time (Dardjowidjojo, 1996).

Dardjowidjojo further states that the effort to establish English as a second language in 1950's was also unsuccessful for at least two reasons. First, although *Bahasa Indonesia* is the national language, it is the second language for most people since most Indonesians speak a vernacular before they learn the national language. Second, triggered by the spirit of nationalism, Indonesian leaders and people were not willing to consider English as a second language. For these fundamental reasons, English remains as a foreign language in Indonesia.

The English language status gives significant impacts in all education levels. Even though English is a compulsory subject for students from Year 3 to the first year in tertiary level, the time allotment for English subject is not sufficient considering basic communicative competence should be achieved by the learners. At secondary schools, for instance, students only learn English for twice a week, 45 minutes each time. English is not prioritized and treated in the same way as other general subjects.

The condition is not even better at Indonesian universities. English in non-English departments is only taught once or twice a week, each meeting is 100 minutes during the first two semesters. In few cases, English is even not taught at all because it is not a part of core courses. This academic fact is disadvantageous for the students since a number of compulsory textbooks used by their lecturers are in English.

In English Departments, students usually endure a number of adjustments when they speak in English. Attending their first English class, most of them face a perplexing fact that they have to be able to communicate in English. This adjustment could be full of twists and turns because English is not a language used by Indonesian people in daily life. The majority of the students have limited use of English in their societies and consequently, communicating in English is often challenging for them.

In the most recent development, however, some Indonesian universities have started making a progressive step by giving more priority in English, such as using English as a medium of instruction in international classes, asking students to regularly translate English materials in Indonesian, supporting the establishment of English clubs, having students speak in English for presenting their theses, and so forth. Nevertheless, such a constructive effort has not been widely received and conducted by other universities. This determination tends to be successful only in state and 'elite' private institutions in which the enrolled students bring quite good language proficiency from their previous education levels (Sukono, 2004). It is, therefore, an appropriate approach should be immensely applied in English Language Teaching in Indonesia.

Communicative Approach was then expected to alter the English Language Teaching in Indonesia as it was chosen as an instructional approach in the 1994 English curriculum. With *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT) in the curriculum, there seemed to be a crucial change in English teaching, lessening grammatical and vocabulary emphases and moving to the new era in which students' ability to converse in English communicatively will receive priority. Yet, due to the misinterpretation with oral-based language instructions and controversies among educators, the same approach was redefined and changed into '*Meaningfulness Approach*' in the 1999 Curriculum (Huda, 1999). Furthermore, Musthafa (2001, pp. 3-4) summarizes the coverage of the approach as follows:

- Development of communicative competence—the ability to use English for communicative purposes—which covers all four macro skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing; efforts should be made to strike a good balance among the four-macro skills.
- Mastery of linguistic aspects is to be used to support communicative abilities in both oral and written forms.
- The English syllabus represents an amalgam of various forms of syllabi: functional, situational, skill-based, and structural; given the nature of the syllabus, the basis for the organization of the materials is not linguistic aspects but topical themes and functional skills.
- Assessment is integrated (covering more than one language components) and communicative (not exclusively on linguistic elements).
- Not all instructional objectives are measurable using a paper-and-pencil test (e.g., reading for enjoyment).

The fundamental points of communicative approach above are then elaborated in the four basic qualities should be achieved by the students when learning English. More specifically, students who are communicatively competent are those whose qualities as described below.

- When *speaking*, the students are able to find what is appropriate to say, how it should be said, and when, in different social situation in which they find themselves.
- When *listening*, the students can use all contextual clues to get the meaning of what is being said and how the message is being conveyed.
- When *reading*, the students are able to construct the meaning based on the messages provided by the text and in transaction with genres and their own reading purposes.
- When *writing*, the students are able to formulate their ideas into acceptable written English language in accordance with the writing situation and their own writing purposes.

(Musthafa, 2001, pp. 3-4).

Following the current trend of English language teaching in the world, the curriculum designers in Indonesia decided to adopt the Contextual Teaching Learning Approach in the 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum. The similar communicative approach was then modified in the updated 2006 School-Based

Curriculum. It has been implemented in primary and secondary school levels up to now. Furthermore, Renandya (2004) argues that the purpose of English Language Teaching in Indonesian education system is actually to provide learners with advanced reading skills that enable them to read and comprehend science-related texts in English. Although other language skills are not ignored, reading ability has always been the primary objective of English Language Teaching in Indonesia.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT INDONESIAN UNIVERSITIES

In tertiary level, the English curriculum coverage above is still relevant and in fact, is still implied in the latest Competency-Based Curriculum. It should be noted that the competency-based learning of English at Indonesian universities actually has similar characteristics with communicative language teaching. The current approach demands flexible and independent learning. The ability to state one's preference or intention, for instance, in competency-based learning is closely similar to that in communicative language teaching. Furthermore, in both approaches, learning results are clearly determined, formed, and evaluated as discrete elements of measurement within specific contexts and situations (Marcellino, 2008).

The problems of English language teaching in tertiary level are abundant in Indonesia. One of the main problems is the absence of visible social uses of English outside the classroom. It is often challenging to get students motivated when they do not experience direct necessity of English outside the class. Learning how to communicate in English fluently is an elusive concept for most students because they factually do not use the language in their daily interactions.

Another problem is that Indonesian lecturers do not have enough opportunities to conduct research or even catch up with regularly updated information of English language teaching. As a result, their instructional skills are not optimal and might misinterpret the practice of communicative language teaching or competency-based learning. To make it worse, Indonesian lecturers often have to teach productive skills, i.e., speaking and writing, in large classes full of students with different language competence.

The next is cultural problem. One of the main features of communicative approach in competency-based learning is learner centeredness. In this case,

there should be a determination covering learning objectives, contents and progress, methods and techniques and evaluation which supports learners' autonomy (Dardjowidjojo, 1997). Similar to the perspective, Richards and Rodgers (2002) state that language teaching in a communicative approach–based class should be learner-centered and responsive to the students' needs and interests. This method is potentially fruitful in western countries in which people highly regard egalitarianism and democracy. Yet, the idea is almost impracticable in Indonesia, particularly because teacher-student relations are much influenced by local wisdom and cultural values.

Indonesian students, especially those from rural areas, are not accustomed to the idea that learning activities are student-centered. The features of communicative competence discussed above seem to challenge the values and beliefs in the dominant culture of this nation, which is heavily influenced by the Javanese tradition. For example, two famous Javanese philosophies such as *manut lan piturut* (to obey and to follow) and *ewuh-pakewuh* (feeling uncomfortable and uneasy) still dominantly exist in Indonesian people's way of thinking. The impact of these cultural principles in English classes is that good students are generally those who follow their teacher's ideas without necessarily analyzing or evaluating them. Even, if they oppose the teacher's opinions, they tend to be silent and seem to accept what the teacher says. Consequently, it is not easy to expect the students to communicate and interact openly and critically with their teachers. They might feel uncomfortable and uneasy to say something directly to their teachers, to talk about controversial matters, and to disagree with them (Setiono, 2004).

At last, generally English lecturers in Indonesia are not well-paid. Due the low salary, many of them do side jobs to get extra income. This condition creates serious implications. With more and more energy being used for side jobs, the lecturers are less motivated to do their main teaching job. They are not interested in conducting classroom research or pursue professional development because there is no direct financial income from those kinds of academic endeavors.

To sum up, the emphases that are put in the latest curriculum clearly indicate the understanding of the current approach of English Language Teaching and how the approach views the language teaching in foreign language contexts. Nevertheless, such a good theoretical notion is not well translated into practice, particularly in the classrooms. This is because certain supportive conditions – such as, the existence or good language models, a great deal of expo-

sure to the language in real-life situations, and the involvement of critical thinking in meaningful tasks – are not clearly visible in English Language Teaching in Indonesia (Dardjowidjojo, 1997; Marcellino, 2008; Musthafa, 2001; Sukono, 2004). Instead of changing the teaching approach or method, Indonesian government and educators should find creative ways to solve the problems or to create conducive atmospheres for the more ideal practice of communicative approach in English language teaching.

WHY CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND MEANING

In today's higher education in Indonesia, many lecturers complain that Indonesian university students do not use their critical thinking skills sufficiently when they are doing both oral and written assignments. Based on his teaching experiences at English Department, the writer often finds students unenthusiastic to exchange ideas critically and tend to accept experts' ideas without analyzing them properly. Again, this is probably because some of them previously studied at secondary schools which typically did not apply learner-centered approach and did not develop students' critical thinking skills optimally. Concerning on a similar problem, Cromwell (1992) argues that the main purpose of advanced education is the enhancement of student thinking. This is in line with today's concern that most graduates at all education levels do not perform higher level of thinking abilities.

In the national scope, the Indonesian government has nationally implemented the Competency-Based Curriculum in university level throughout Indonesia. This curriculum has been welcomed enthusiastically, in particular by English teachers, as it is claimed that this new curriculum will be more effective in improving students' academic, life, and thinking skills. Although the curriculum has been changed, English teachers' ways of teaching have not changed significantly. English teaching is still teacher-centered and deals mainly with complex grammar, long reading passages, and other activities that are far from the real purpose of the latest curriculum. Consequently, students are not given adequate opportunities to do meaningful collaborative tasks in which they should discuss, share, and challenge ideas communicatively and critically (Sukono, 2004; Masduqi, 2008).

The facts above show that there is an inconsistency between the principles of the curriculum and the actual implementation in classrooms which is still dominated by teacher-centeredness. No wonder Indonesian university students

still have difficulties in revealing ideas in English communicatively and critically. Students' critical thinking skills will be optimally enhanced if meaning is treated as the first priority in English classes. Those two inter-related elements can be more optimally implemented when teachers do collaborative activities (pair work and group work) which stimulate students' thinking process and meaning negotiation in their classroom discussions.

THE REALIZATION OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND MEANING

In order to activate students' critical thinking skills, English teachers need to present alternatives, different ways of interpreting texts and different conceptions of the world. The importance of thinking in today's education requires the main concept of critical thinking in which there is always more than one way to see things and that it is always up to the individual to judge just where the truth lies on any given issue (Mason and Washington, 1992).

Regarding the flexible nature of critical thinking, the writer proposes a teaching practice that can be modified in different ways. This is because the implementation of critical thinking skills and meaning in language teaching is not new and an absolute format has not been recommended so far. The underlying principle is that language learning is improved through increased motivation and naturally seen in meaningful contexts. When learners are interested in a topic and are given chances to negotiate meaning, they will be motivated to discuss things critically and at the same time, acquire language to communicate (Darn, 2006; Rfaner, 2006).

As stated in the introduction, both critical thinking skills and meaning can be incorporated when teachers do collaborative activities, i.e., pair work and group work. Therefore, the writer would illustrate teaching stages of an English lesson that essentially integrate critical thinking skills and meaning. For practical reasons, the writer would apply a series of teaching stages in a reading lesson (adapted from CELTT 1 Handbook, 2008). The teaching of Reading is chosen as an example since it provides ample opportunities to exploit students' skills in English learning arise through reading texts. In this case, the proposed reading lesson draws on the lexical approach, encouraging learners to notice language while reading followed by activities involving meaning discovery and critical thinking skills. Accordingly, teachers can flexibly diversify methods and forms of classroom teaching and learning, improve learners' overall and

specific language competence, introduce learners' to the wider cultural context, and increase learners' motivation (Darn, 2006; Lewis, 1997; Thornbury, 2006). More specifically, the teaching stages of the reading lesson are in the following:

(1) Eliciting ideas
- Give students one or two pictures which can be interpreted in various ways (see some alternative pictures and activities in Doff, 1998).
- Ask students what the pictures are about (Let the students speak freely in this stage).
- Dictate key words from the reading text.

The objective of this stage is to introduce the topic of the story to students and to give them an opportunity to express their ideas openly. This is expected to be an initial chance for the students to activate their thinking process and encourage them to exchange ideas critically. In doing so, the teacher needs be tolerant with any ideas or interpretations proposed by them as an adage says, "*A picture is worth a thousand words*". Then, by dictating the key words, the teacher is indirectly fostering the learners to relate more easily to the characters and actions in the text later.

(2) Highlighting lexis and their meanings/vocabulary
- Check the words dictated (ask them to exchange their work with their partners first).
- Check meaning of any words that may cause difficulty.

The purpose of this stage is to focus attention on meaning of key words in order to prepare students for the next prediction task. In this stage, the teacher should use *guided discovery* and *contextual guesswork* to discover meaning of the dictated words. Guided discovery involves asking questions or offering examples that guide students to guess meanings correctly. In this way, the learners are engaged in a semantic process that helps vocabulary learning and retention. Then, contextual guesswork means using the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning, or in some cases, guess from the word itself, as in words originated from Latin or Greek (Moras, 2001; Thornbury, 2006).

(3) Giving the title of the story

- Give students the title of the story they are going to read (Prompt them to the title).

This is an extra stage which is also aimed at assisting the students to do the following prediction task. The teacher can simply write the title on the white board without giving any information about the text. It is expected that the students will be curious and triggered to predict the text topic by relating the title and the dictated key words. In this way, the teacher prepares the students' mind gradually before dealing with the whole text. Metaphorically, it is like a motor cyclist warming up his motor cycle before riding it on streets.

(4) Predicting text

- Put students into small groups and ask them to predict the story based on the title and key words given.
- Ask few students representing their groups to tell the class their predictions.
- Encourage other groups to ask questions, share ideas and even criticize each other if necessary.

The goal of this stage is to prepare students mentally to read the text by creating a version of the text first in their minds and give the second chance to exchange ideas critically. In this stage, it is important that the teacher should not judge whether they are right or wrong as the judgment might hinder the students to speak up and reveal their opinions openly. Let them freely predict what the text is about and discuss it in groups. Furthermore, discussing their predictions in class is also a good chance for them to communicate and challenge other people's ideas. This collective interaction is necessary to stimulate their critical thinking skills for the more challenging tasks later.

(5) Ordering jumbled paragraphs/Skimming

- Hand out cut up version of the text (the students are still in groups)
- Ask students to skim the story and order the paragraphs
- Ask them what they looked for to help them decide on the order of the paragraphs.

The objectives of this stage are to apply group work in order to negotiate meaning and to do skimming. Working in groups help fostering learning independence, and especially in ordering jumbled paragraphs, the students can exchange information and negotiate meaning when discussing new vocabulary items and ambiguous sentences. It is also expected that group work will be a motivating element, as students skim the text together, share ideas, and argue with each other constructively. This is a crucial stage of polishing up students' critical thinking skills in which the teacher should only monitor and not interfere much in their classroom discussions.

(6) Listening for the right order

- Play a cassette telling the right order of the story.
- Ask students whether or not their prediction is correct.

This stage is aimed to provide the correct order and a reason for gist reading. While students are listening to the cassette and matching their paragraphs order, they are indirectly reading the whole text and paying attention on pronunciation and grammatical forms in the text. This introduces the pupils to correct pronunciation and grammatical constructions without making them a conscious focus. This kind of 'inductive learning' is more interesting, meaningful, and natural than 'deductive learning, in which learners are presented with rules with which they then go on to apply'. It 'pays dividend in terms of the long-term memory of these rules' (Thornbury, 2006:102).

(7) Reading comprehension

- Ask some short questions based on the story

The purpose of this stage is to focus on overall meaning and main ideas in the text. This is a usual teaching stage in which the teacher commonly uses *Wh-questions* to check whether or not the students are able to find out and understand main ideas and specific information in the text. In other words, *Wh-questions* are utilized to make sure that the students grasp the overall meaning of the text. It is advisable for the teacher to ask short questions that make students find the answers in and beyond the text. The teacher should not spend

much time on this task since the final task is also aimed at measuring students' comprehension.

(8) Acting out the story/Speaking
- Put students into groups of 3, one person for each character in the story.
- Ask them to act out the story or do a mini drama.

The objective of this stage is to measure students' comprehension in a fun, non-verbal way. In this final productive stage, the teacher can ask the learners to discuss the most practical 'scenario' before acting out the story. This extra oral practice potentially strengthens the previous collaborative activities in a relaxed, enjoyable way. This is in line with Lightbown and Spada's ideas (2003) that the more the students are provided with extra oral practice in a target language, the more they will be able to speak it communicatively.

By applying the eight teaching stages above, the writer expects English teachers to consider that the realization of critical thinking skills and meaning is feasible when teachers apply pair work and group work in which students think actively and negotiate meaning. The stages of pair-work and group work are also useful the students' communicative competence. In the productive stages, the students have more opportunities to get more language exposure and practice (Moon, 2005). It would engage the learners talking to one another to exchange information communicatively and critically. They talk in order to communicate, activate thinking process, and exchange arguments, not just to practice the language (Spratt et al., 2005).

CONCLUSION

The realization of critical thinking skills and meaning in English Language Teaching is worth doing to improve students' English competence. Those two important elements can be incorporated in English lessons as long as teachers do collaborative activities providing students sufficient exposure to thinking process and meaning negotiation. The variety of classroom activities does not only cater students' communicative competence, but also create lively learning atmosphere. Indeed, this is not an easy task because the teachers have to make sure that the English lesson, involving both critical thinking skills and meaning, is reasonably inter-related and suitable to the level and needs of their students.

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