

Developing Critical Thinking and Political Awareness in EFL

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Introduction

Students today need to be both critical thinkers and global citizens; as such, their English education should reflect these goals. This article describes the process of curriculum development and materials writing for a one-semester English course on *Understanding World Politics* taught at an international studies university in Japan. Students in the program take content courses in an English-only environment. The article explores the concept of critical thinking and discusses ways of promoting its development in the classroom, while providing justification for the use of international relations as the medium for developing such skills.

The article will show how the inclusion of complex or abstract subject matter in EFL curricula can pique students' curiosity, challenge them to expand their perspectives and develop their awareness of the complexities of the political world. If done effectively, the end result is more engaged students, who may even be moved to political involvement or action on a deeper level. From a linguistic perspective, students' English vocabulary knowledge can be greatly increased as well as their fluency in expressing complex ideas.

What is critical thinking?

The term critical thinking is very much in vogue right now. While many textbooks claim to include critical thinking elements, writing assignments or questions, very few contain clear explanations of how they are grounded. Simply including the words *critical thinking* in the material does not guarantee its promotion.

Atkinson (1997) suggests that critical thinking is a "culturally-based concept" or "social practice" that is well-entrenched in Western culture and thought, but that this ability is not valued or taught in certain cultures. He argues that in some Asian cultures, critical thinking is explicitly discouraged. Whether one agrees on a personal level with this definition or not, the case can be made that those who teach English as a second or foreign language (L2) which values critical thinking as part of its social and cultural practices should be teaching it, at the very least, to help students understand this element. Teaching critical thinking in the L2 classroom is a lesson in socio-cultural literacy.

Less controversially, Halvorsen (2005) says that "to think critically about an issue is to consider that issue from various perspectives, to look at

and challenge any possible assumptions that may underlie the issue and to explore its possible alternatives." Critical thinking forces us to "consider our own relationship to [an issue] and how we personally fit into the context of the issue," (Brookfield, cited in Halvorsen, 2005).

This sort of behavior can easily be worked into a language classroom and also achieves many general goals that teachers may have for their classes. Debates or role plays which "enable students to retain more information and gain a better understanding of abstract concepts than lectures and note-taking" (Raymond & Sorensen, 2008) are good activities for promoting the development of critical thinking. Teachers can also use media analysis, or problem solving, as suggested by Halvorsen (2005) or discussions which promote thoughtful reflection. Forcing students to be specific and go beyond a simple "I agree" or "I don't think so" turns an undeveloped answer into a deeper understanding of an issue which may lead the student to further study and greater learning.

Making students think critically may create interest in the subject matter, leading to greater participation or, in some cases improved classroom attendance (Halvorsen, 2005, Raymond & Sorensen, 2008). The first term this course was taught had nearly perfect attendance, despite the challenging subject material, which suggests that critical engagement with the content may result in active participation. A high level of interaction and participation that develops critical thinking also helps to create a more cohesive, meaningful learning environment where students can feel comfortable taking risks and sharing opinions on sensitive subjects.

Why teach politics and international relations?

"The school and teaching culture should allow democracy to be learnt, by pupils practicing, experiencing, and understanding the meaning of politics and democracy through their own experiences and activity at school, so as to then be able to develop this experience in democracy into political responsibility and skills in democracy," (Henkenborg, 2005, p. 265- 66). For students living in a democracy, the classroom presents a perfect opportunity to see their system in action. It can also raise students' awareness about what it might be like to live elsewhere in a different political system or among differing beliefs. By learning how to understand

themselves, students become open to the idea of understanding others.

Topics covered in this *Understanding World Politics* course are complex and require a deeper awareness of details to truly see how current situations came to be. This understanding has the potential to promote peace through tolerance, but also possibly inspire students to take action if they discover an issue that motivates them. Even without action, awareness of other cultural or political beliefs and systems is a step in the right direction for students to be better global citizens.

Course Design

The course is divided into four units:

- *UNIT I: Getting Started*
- *UNIT II: International Relations Theory*
- *UNIT III: Regions and Issues: Part 1*
- *UNIT IV: Regions and Issues: Part 2*

The first two units focus on a variety of smaller topics scaffolded so that students are aware of both concrete and abstract ideas that will help them develop informed opinions and ideas about the subsequent regions and issues.

Unit I Getting Started

In Unit 1, students begin by thinking about the concept of internationalization. In the activity “International You,” they track their purchases of products from other countries, then participate in a class discussion aimed at developing more thoughtful opinions. The goal is to raise their awareness about globalization and determine whether they consider Japan “internationalized.” From here, the focus shifts to vocabulary, to the United Nations Human Development Index and to a crash course in world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Unit II International Relations Theory

Unit Two transitions the course into abstract content: international relations theory and political ideologies. These are complicated subjects in any language. However, the challenges are outweighed by the opportunities for greater political understanding and for the development of critical thinking. International relations (IR) theory aims to describe why the world currently appears as it does. This lesson utilizes the classic *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, as well as activities that require students to study an international event and identify which description of it reflects *realism*, *idealism* or *constructivism* (the three primary IR theories introduced). This is followed by a reflective writing activity asking

students to identify which IR theory best explains the world as they see it.

Ideology, in contrast to IR theory, is concerned with the way the world ought to be. This lesson explains the ideological left and right, with students discussing what issues are of the greatest importance to them and, ultimately, placing themselves somewhere on the ideological spectrum. The final activity compares the American, European and Japanese ideological left and right, focusing on their positions regarding domestic and international issues. By the end of this unit, students are equipped with the tools to read about global political events and understand the motivations behind the actions of governments.

Unit III Regions and Issues: Part 1

The final two units return to practical knowledge about world regions and issues. The order and choice of regions intentionally moves from those with which students are most familiar (Asia, U.S.) to those more likely to be unknown (Africa, Middle East). Students have some autonomy in determining what they study and I make materials in response to their requests. Often the news headlines of the day determine the outcome. Popular topics for Asia have been *development*, *the population explosion*, *militarization* and *territorial disputes*. The United States, while not a region in and of itself, deserves mention because one cannot truly make sense of the current state of affairs without recognizing its influence in shaping recent history. Students chose to explore the *illegal immigration* debate in the US for this unit.

Unit IV Regions and Issues: Part 2

Unit Four covers Africa, the Middle East and ends with Europe. This order was chosen because Africa and the Middle East often get short shrift in non-history classrooms while Europe is often over-represented. Students had difficulty deciding on issues related to Africa, but through discussion, several topics emerged. In the first term, students chose the relationship between *peace*, *democracy* and *economic development*, while second term students explored the recent *referendum on an independent southern Sudan* and *Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden*. For the Middle East, students role play stakeholders in the Middle East peace process to gain a deeper insight into the challenge of pursuing an outcome favorable to all parties. Europe is only added if time allows, since students tend to study it elsewhere. Current political events have led students to explore *Greece’s financial meltdown* and *the rise of right-wing extremism*.

Role plays and mini-projects

One of the key elements in this course is small group activities. Routinely throughout the semester, students are required to do further research outside of class with the express purpose of either teaching what they learn to others or participating in roleplays. These are designed to give students more autonomy in exploring the topics while motivating them to become “experts” sharing knowledge that their group members do not possess.

Mini-projects include regional comparisons of United Nations Human Development Index scores, deconstructing religious conflict in Mindanao, and attempting to broker Middle East peace. In order to learn about the Middle East, students did two role plays. The first assigned arbitrary personal values to each student that intentionally conflicted with others. The task was to make rules that everyone would agree to follow. For the second role play, students repeated the task, but were each assigned a group with a stake in the Israeli/ Palestine conflict (*Kadima, Likud, Fatah, Hamas and Hezbollah*) They then had to research their group’s positions and deal-breakers before the next class. In small groups, they had to introduce their organizations before once again trying to create a set of rules allowing all parties to co-exist.

Additional Assignments

In this content-based English course, there are both writing and presentation demands placed on students as mandated by departmental requirements. After each unit, they are required to respond to a reflection question intended to encourage deeper exploration of issues discussed in class and to foster the development of continued curiosity (i.e., *Which do you think is more important to peace in Africa, democracy or economic progress?*) The final individual project involves researching a country of their choice and writing a 700+ word paper introducing its relationship with Japan and their opinion on its role in the 21st century. In addition, each student gives a 15-minute presentation about their project.

Conclusion

The design of this course shows how I have attempted to promote the use of critical thought in a foreign language classroom through the medium of world politics and issues. One of the first questions that I ask my students is: *What should Japan's role be in the world community?* Often they respond with timid answers, if any at all. By the end of the course, however, when asked again, students respond with suggestions far exceeding my expectations. Some see

Japan taking on a leadership role on nuclear power, restructuring its political system and becoming a stronger force in Asia. It is my hope that this course has led them to think more deeply and consider how they “fit into the context of the issue[s],” (Brookfield, cited in Halvorsen, 2005) that they explored in class.

References & Helpful Resources

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