Critical Thinking and the Language Factor:
The Case for the English Language Learner

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Abstract

Critical thinking is considered an essential ingredient for academic success; however, there is a tendency at times to equate the non-native speaking students' lack of language proficiency with a lack of cognitive ability and critical thinking skills. The goal of this paper is to make a case for NNS students and demonstrate that they are capable of critical thinking, reflection, and scientific skepticism, just like their NS counterparts. The paper argues that NNS students may not initially display critical thinking because their main objective is to gain linguistic accuracy and fluency. In this process, critical thinking takes the back seat temporarily. The paper also questions the proposition that critical thinking ought to be taught as a separate skill and argues that students must instead be exposed to sustained academic content in order to develop in-depth knowledge about the issues before they are able to evaluate them.

Keywords: critical thinking, second language learners, Bridge programs, ESL, EFL.

1. Introduction

Learners of English as a Second or foreign language are often criticized for their poor English skills, their tendency to memorize and plagiarize, and most importantly for their lack of critical thinking abilities that their native-English-speaking counterparts are sometimes assumed to have been born with and socialized into (Atkinson, 1997). Such perceptions might point to a long-standing assumption that Western-based education practices are far more superior to those found in other countries, although there is no convincing evidence that students from the Western hemisphere are of a better caliber than their foreign counterparts as a result of their environment or the type of learning practices to which they have been exposed (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004).

Such attitudes towards LL2 (second language learners) often neglect to take into account the language factor when referring to these learners as deficient in critical and analytical thinking skills. The fact that LL2 are required to not only think in a language that they are still struggling to learn but to also become critically and analytically competent in this language is at times unfortunately assumed to be a prerequisite for intelligent thought.

College educators view critical thinking as an essential skill for academic success, but is every college student in the Western hemisphere blessed with such skills? More importantly, do international students for whom English is a second or foreign language lack this gift simply by virtue of having grown up in cultures that apparently do not promote critical thinking? Is critical thinking an essentially Western aptitude or U.S. middle class social practice that learners from non-Western cultures are apparently incapable of (Atkinson, 1997)? More importantly, is critical thinking a set of skills that can easily be taught in the EAP, "Bridge" or first-year writing classroom or any classroom for that matter, or is attempting to teach these skills to LL2 in particular a futile undertaking? These are the core questions that this paper will attempt to address. In addition, this paper will also attempt to make the case that LL2 are capable of critical thinking, reflection, and scientific skepticism. It will argue that LL2 are not deficient in critical thinking skills, and by the same token native speakers of English students are not all endowed with these skills simply because they grew up in the West. A discussion of why LL2 do not show evidence of critical thinking skills while still learning the English language will follow. Finally, the paper will re-examine whether critical thinking can and / or ought to be taught and will consider some of the current classroom teaching practices that might be antithetical to promoting critical thinking in the college classroom.

2. The Language Factor:

Critical thinking has been used as a slogan and a buzzword by many educators who argue that it is at the core of Western education and a fundamental factor for academic success in American universities in particular (Atkinson, 1997; Benesch, 1999; Davidson, 1998; Pennycook, 2001). But what is exactly the type of critical thinking that many educators want to bring into the English language classroom? Is it appropriate or even possible to actually teach it to non-native English learners? In general, critical thinking-skills consist of one's ability to see more than one side of an issue, to reason from logic rather than from passion, provide substantive evidence in support of one's arguments without discounting new evidence that conflicts with one's ideas, as well as develop the ability to evaluate and synthesize information (Davidson, 1998; Pally, 1997; Willingham, 2007).

Existing definitions of critical thinking can be divided into two broad categories. The first category describes critical thinking as "the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not" (Ruggiero, 2004, p. 17). In other words, critical thinking consists of the major skills used to accomplish a variety of academic tasks, such as information processing, inquiry, reasoning, creative thinking, and evaluation skills□□all of which are crucial for academic success. According to this definition, to be a critical thinker is to engage in a critical discussion of "texts," which may include several genres and means of expression: news, web pages, movies, music, art, advertising, political speeches, etc. In academic literacy, a critical thinker also implies one's ability to display in-depth critical analysis and evaluation of texts by being able to not only decode meaning from texts, but more importantly to understand the impact of such texts on society. To possess this type of critical thinking is to have the ability to question and challenge these texts and their writers.

The second definition of critical thinking has a more political scope, for it defines critical thinking as the ability to question and challenge conventional knowledge and the status quo, a definition which is inspired by Marxist theories that encourage the examination of histories and social realities to uncover hidden forms of domination and exploitation (Freire, 1970; Tollefson 2002; Benesch; 1993b, 1999 & 2009). Along these lines, Benesch (1993b) defines critical thinking as the search for social, historical, and political roots of conventional knowledge and an orientation to transform learning and society.

The type of critical thinking this paper is concerned with, however, is not necessarily of the ideological type that Benesch and the others above advocate. This paper is primarily interested in the practical kind of critical thinking skills that are enhanced by English Language and Bridge Programs with the aim of preparing students for academic success at the university level. Additionally, the paper also questions the power relations in academia and argues that many traditional pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning are flawed and do not contribute to helping students develop their critical thinking skills. Granted, the political and apolitical types of critical thinking are sometimes hard to distinguish; still, the aim of this paper remains the examination of "academic" critical thinking with the goal of primarily questioning the assumption that LL2 might be incapable of critical thinking due to having grown up in environments that apparently do not promote critical thinking (Atkinson 1997). Additionally, the paper also explores and questions the validity of the notion that critical thinking ought to be taught in EAP classes in particular as a means of preparing LL2 for academic success at the university level.

3. The "Atkinson" Approach

The most controversial approach to critical thinking, as it applies to LL2, in the last two decades, remains one advanced by Dwight Atkinson (1997) in his article "A critical approach to critical thinking." In that article, Atkinson claims that critical thinking is a non-teachable social construct acquired only through an unconscious process of childhood socialization. Atkinson describes critical thinking as an essentially Western concept, or rather a U.S. middle class phenomenon, hence implicitly suggesting that learners from non-Western cultures may not be capable of critical thinking ways due to their cultural values that favor community consensus in place of individualism (Atkinson, 1997). Rather than directly alleging that LL2 are incapable of critical thinking, Atkinson's article indirectly makes the case that only those who grow up in Western societies and are socialized in critical thinking skills from an early age are capable of showing evidence of such skills later on. Therefore, according to this approach, non-native

speakers of English seems to be deterred by their cultural backgrounds from developing critical thinking skills, an argument reminiscent of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Sapir, 1921 & 1929; Whorf, 1956).   The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is suggestive here as it contends that cognitive activity is determined by language, and therefore non-Western-language speakers, and in particular non-English speakers, are prisoners of the languages they speak, which determines how they perceive and think about the world around them.

Following this theory, Atkinson goes on to argue that any attempt at teaching critical thinking to students who come from cultures that do not promote this cognitive skill is worthless. Atkinson calls into question the efficacy of teaching critical thinking because this skill is acquired only by a select few who happen to be born and raised in Western cultures where critical thinking is inherently promoted and encouraged. Atkinson's view generated a great deal of debate among professionals in the field of EAP especially, who countered with their own arguments against promoting uncritical teaching and learning in the classroom (Gieve, 1998; Raimes & Zamel 1997; Spack, 1997 as quoted in Benesch, 1999).

Although I agree with Atkinson on the inefficacy of teaching critical thinking in EAP contexts, I disagree with the premise of his claim.   Contrary to Atkinson's claim that international students may not be capable of critical thinking as it is defined above, based on personal experiences as a language learner and teacher in both ESL and EFL contexts, (and due to the evident dearth of research in this area), I would argue that international students in IEP / EAP programs may not yet have the opportunity to think critically or produce material that shows evidence of critical thinking because their main concern is primarily linguistic. In other words, LL2's primary goal is to develop their ability to communicate their thoughts and most importantly be understood by their counterparts. As such, tending to their L2 issues (including organization of ideas, form and grammar) in their papers in an effort to produce intelligible content takes precedence over critical and analytical thinking. As a result, deep insight and analysis, originality, sound argument, and skepticism become generally disguised by the main objective to master the language in order to communicate effectively. This is a matter of prioritizing, not an inability to use critical thinking; as a result, critical thinking takes a back seat in the learning process, at least temporarily.

Furthermore, the fact that critical thinking might be a social practice (Atkins, 1997) does not necessarily make it an exclusively Western aptitude. Willingham (2007) argues that "Virtually everyone is capable of critical thinking and uses it all the time… The difficulty lies not in thinking critically, but in recognizing when to do so, and in knowing enough to do so successfully" (p.18). In the same vein, Pally (1997) maintains that international "students, of course, come to the ESL classroom with a variety of critical thinking skills developed in their L1s and they gain L2 critical thinking skills outside formal study" (p. 299). Thus, critical thinking tends to be a *socially individual practice* rather than just *a social practice*. Individuals from the same social and cultural background can differ significantly in their critical and thinking skills; otherwise, the ongoing call to teach critical thinking would have ceased long ago. That might also be the reason why 80% of native English speakers in Atkinson and Ramanathan, 1995 study (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995) were not all found to be equally endowed with the gift of critical thinking.

The same can be said of individuals who come from non-Western cultures: some may tend to be more comfortable expressing critical thinking in their L1 than in other languages – some, for instance will have the tendency to question authority whether it is embodied by another individual (parent or teacher for example), by an institution (school or governments), or by a text

(a book or a film) more than others from the same community. Others may tend to be satisfied with the status quo and will grow up to be part of a shared community without ever questioning its values or principles, regardless of the culture where they were born and raised.

Oftentimes, there are generalizations put forth to describe certain groups, such as the "Asians being more reticent," (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004) which can be interpreted as the result of their being brought up in a system that does not tolerate criticism and therefore does not promote critical thinking. In the case of LL2, the language factor and the initial culture shock and the time it takes to acclimate to a new culture (silently) are hardly ever taken into account although they probably play a far more important role in this debate than often realized or acknowledged.

Being critical does not necessarily entail possessing critical thinking abilities. In the same way, being reticent and reserved when it comes to voicing opinions does not necessarily mean that one lacks the ability to think critically. In a Western context, children will challenge and criticize their parents and teachers, which might be construed as an opportunity to nurture critical thinking. In most non-Western cultures, on the other hand, challenging or criticizing one's parents or teachers is frowned upon and considered nothing more than a sign of disrespect and poor education on the part of parents and society at large. No wonder then that many students from non-Western cultures have harsh words for their Western counterparts for the total lack of respect they display towards their teachers, parents and the elderly (Kohls & Knight, 1994).

Secondly, coming from a teacher-fronted classroom where the teacher is generally viewed as the source of knowledge and the student as the passive recipient of this knowledge might initially play a role in some students' inability or unwillingness to display critical thinking. However, as soon as these students become proficient in their second language, acclimate to the classroom culture of their new environments and are afforded the opportunity to showcase their critical and analytical talents, most will not shy away especially from critiquing and questioning many of the assumptions that are taken to be established truths by many in the West.

Critical thinking in a second language requires proficiency in the L2 in addition to having accumulated enough information about the topic at hand. To gain proficiency in a second language usually takes a long time, and even once students have become competent enough in the L2, they still need "sustained study of a subject area" as a means to increase their knowledge base before they are able to use their critical and analytical thinking abilties to evaluate it (Pally 1997, p 294).

The argument that LL2 may be incapable of critical thinking due to the environments where they grew up is based on the distinction between the individual and the community and the role that each plays in producing individuals with critical thinking abilities. According to Atkinson, "a mainstream U.S. view of individualism seems to be inherent in notions of critical thinking" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 81). Hence, Western cultures are often viewed as individualist while eastern cultures are viewed as collective. Individuals from Western cultures are therefore viewed as independent and autonomous while those from the East are described as interdependent and communal. Atkinson uses this distinction to indirectly advance his argument that belonging to a community that values collectivism and interdependence may not be conducive to developing one's critical thinking skills.

Still, to equate individualism with critical thinking may be a bit short-sighted, if not indicative of the prejudiced attitudes and impulsive interpretations that continue to persist among many Western thinkers and educators who continue to assume a posture of cultural superiority

although they may be total outsiders to these non-Western cultures that they claim to know and understand (Said, 1978; Appleby 2011).   In today's world especially, the concept of individual versus community identities has become so fluid as a result of globalization and the ease of access to and transmission of new information that it is simply impossible to generalize by making blanket statements about any one social group or culture. Canagarajah (2004) comments on this fluidity by emphasizing the fact that in this day and age, we "have traveled far from the traditional assumption in language studies that identities are static, unitary, and given" (p. 117).

Advocates of the need to teach critical thinking, especially to LL2, will often juxtapose it to rote learning, a phenomenon often attributed to students from non-Western cultures. Dominant discourses seem to confer these static identities on the LL2 (a rote learner cannot possibly be a critical thinker), which further extend to "notions of deficiency, inferiority, and disadvantage" (Canagarajah 2004, p. 117), while any attempt at understanding why certain cultures promote rote learning is often glossed over. Here it is important to note that in many non-Western cultures, the oral tradition holds a special place as the only means to transmit knowledge and cultural values from generation to generation. Atkinson claims that "in both Japanese and Chinese schools, memorization and choral recitation are promoted as major learning strategies in the classroom, and writing instruction focuses centrally on the memorization of formulaic phrases" (p. 83) as if students from Japan and China were representative of students from every corner of the world. In my view, having (the ability) to memorize as a means to certain ends should not necessarily exclude one from being a critical thinker; otherwise, American students studying to be medical doctors would be in real trouble!

Morgan (2007) doubts that critical thinking is "a unique product of prior family and community experiences" (p. 87), nor can it be taught and developed as a skill, nor is it "cultural thinking… discoverable if not clearly self-evident only to those brought up in a cultural milieu in which it operates, however tacitly, as a socially valued norm" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 89). Likewise, it is hard to generalize that critical thinking is not a "socially valued norm" in non-Western cultures.   The fact that the authorities in certain parts of the world may not be keen on encouraging their subjects to question and critique does not necessarily mean that these cultures produce individuals who are deficient in critical thinking. How many people from the West have tried (or have been allowed to even try) to question and examine all sides of the 9/11 events? It seems that all the answers to these events were initially modeled to society, and questioning these answers for a long time was not tolerated and is still taboo in many circles. Again, this lack of criticism could be the outcome of censorship and lack of the flow of relevant knowledge and information, which in the end leads to lack of critical thinking, or rather the opportunity to utilize critical thinking.

Willingham (2007) draws a similar analogy: "a student who has learned to thoughtfully discuss the causes of the Amerian Revolution from both the British and American perspectives doesn't even think to question how the Germans viewed World War II" (p. 10). He goes on to explain that students might be able to use critical thinking in one situation and not in another because "[t]hought processes are intertwined with what is being thought about" (p. 10). To that explanation, one could also add that this could be the result of the students' having learned about the American Revolution from both the American and the Britsh perspectives but were never exposed to the German perspective when they studied WWII. Such decisions are usually top-down and are meant to be purposefully misleading.

It is true that culture and prior background knowledge can play an important role in one's interpretations and worldview, but not to the extent where these cultural differences render one

incapable of critical thinking simply by virtue of the fact that they were not born in the West. "Virtually everyone is capable of critical thinking and uses it all the time… The difficulty lies not in thinking critically, but in recognizing when to do so, and in knowing enough to do so successfully (Willingham, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, if one were to assume that everyone is capable of critical thinking, regardless of whether they were born in the West or the East, the next question would be: what does it take to actually be a good critical thinker and in what contexts?

Critical thinking requires background knowledge that can only be achieved through "sustained study of a subject" (Pally, 1997, p. 294). Without relevant knowledge about a certain subject, one would be incapable of using any of the skills required to be critical or analytical. According to Stapleton (2001), LL2 deficiency in critical thinking is a myth. Topic familiarity, more than culture, is what makes students able to activate critical thinking skills. Furthermore, being knowledgeable about a subject might be only the first step in the critical thinking process but is by no means the only one. One needs to be able to transfer those critical thinking skills to other contexts, which is not always possible, hence the inefficacy of teaching critical thinking (Willingham, 2007, p. 10).

4. To Teach or not to Teach Critical Thinking

Willington (2007) and Morgan (2001) both question whether it is even possible to teach critical thinking, but while Morgan warns language teacher education programs against putting too much focus on a type of critical thinking that might have no relevance to students' lives, Willington argues that critical thinking cannot be taught, especially when it is presented out of context and when students do not possess the necessary command of the subject matter:

> Can critical thinking be actually taught? Decades of cognitive research point to a disappointing answer: not really. People who have sought to teach critical thinking assumed that it is a skill, like riding a bicycle, and that, like other skills, once you learn it, you can apply it in any situation. Research from cognitive science shows that critical thinking is not that sort of skill. The processes of thinking are intertwined with the content of thought (that is, domain knowledge). Thus, if you remind a student to "look at an issue from multiple perspectives" often enough, he will learn that he ought to do so, but if he doesn't know much about an issue, he can't think about it from multiple perspectives. You can teach students maxims about how they ought to think, but without background knowledge and practice, they probably will not be able to implement the advice they memorize. (Willingham, 2007, p. 10)

Willingham argues that students in general need to have developed in-depth knowledge of an issue before they are able to evaluate, question, and examine it from different angles. In other words, without "domain knowledge," students would be unable to implement their critical skills effectively, whether they are native speakers (NS) or non-native speakers (NNS) of English. Members of the latter group, on the other hand, are not only required to develop this knowledge to be effective critical thinkers; they are also required to be proficient enough in their L2 before they are able showcase the expected critical thinking skills. Nonetheless, for these LL2, linguistic proficiency is a prerequisite for in-depth and critical analysis in the learning process. Without the proper linguistic tools, they are unable to communicate, let alone question and evaluate an issue.

Another problem with teaching critical skills is that students immersed in content in one subject might be able to use critical thinking skills effectively when dealing with that particular

subject as they have developed experience and background knowledge only relevant to this one subject, but these skills would not be transferrable to other subjects or contexts. In other words, the more exposure and practice students receive in one academic area, the better they are equipped to use their critical thinking skills effectively in that area alone without necessarily being able to transfer those skills to other areas (Willingham, 2007).

Therefore, while I agree with Atkinson that educators have no business teaching critical thinking skills to LL2, I disagree with the basis for such a claim. The goal should be placed on language instruction first and foremost. LL2 needs assessment of every language learning group shows that students' main goal from learning a new language is to be able to communicate, not to think critically (Richards, 2001). In other words, LL2's main objective is to learn how to function and survive linguistically and culturally in their new environment. This should be their "sustained study of a subject area" (Pally, 1997, p. 294) first and foremost. As such, the tendency to equate lack of language proficiency with lack of cognitive sophistication or knowledge seems to be a misguided proposition and a revealing lack of familiarity with the priorities of the LL2.

Contrary to Atkinson's position about the futility of trying to teach critical thinking to LL2, Benesch (1999) takes the middle ground by advocating

A dialogic approach to critical thinking [which] does not choose between immediate needs and the development of social awareness, believing that they can be taught simultaneously. A critical EAP teacher responds to the demands of content courses while encouraging students to question academic life and society. (p. 579)

But even if we were to adopt Benesch's proposition, it would still be an ineffective endeavor to try to teach critical thinking skills to students who are still learning the basics of their new L2. Once students are at an advanced level, such a proposition could make more sense, but only if taken from the LL2' perspective – that is by assuming that these students are critical thinkers in their L1 and might benefit from learning about some cultural peculiarities of their L2 culture that might eventually help them succeed academically in their new environment.

Benesch (1999) rightly suggests that "teaching critical thinking is neither an unguided free-for-all nor a didactic lecture but a balance between student contribution and gentle challenges by the teacher" (p. 578). Such an approach recognizes that teachers ought to challenge any previously unexamined assumptions that LL2 are not able to display or contribute to the critical thinking process and acknowledge that these learners, regardless of their cultural background, do indeed bring a great many L1 critical thinking skills to the learning process (Willingham, 2007).

What is disturbingly unfair in this debate is the apparently deterministic stance towards learners who come from non-Western cultures, which is often espoused by novice EAP teachers and many teaching assistants in charge of teaching first year writing classes (knowingly or unknowingly) who are usually the ones to become preoccupied with the necessity of teaching critical thinking. Because of their lack of familiarity with LL2 issues, these novice teachers tend to confuse lack of linguistic proficiency with lack of critical thinking abilities and as a result assume that non-native English speaking learners lack the critical and analytical abilities to be successful university learners and should therefore be explicitly taught this cognitive skill (Price, 1999). The assumption here might be that native speaking students are all proficient in these vital critical thinking skills simply by virtue of being able to communicate their thoughts with ease.

While NSS might be able to communicate their thoughts using a decent style and sentence structure, it is often not the case for the majority of NNS, whose first and foremost concern remains their struggle with form and mechanics. The major challenge to LL2 writers on college campuses is that their papers and reports are often satiated with grammar and sentence structure problems that can be very confusing to their college professors, especially those unfamiliar with LL2 issues. LL2's ability to respond to a question thoughtfully and analytically is hardly ever the issue for educators in science and technology: it is usually "grammar."

Furthermore, first year writing student samples have consistently shown that the major difference between L1 and L2 students in first year writing classes is linguistic performance, not in terms of their critical thinking abilities. Freshman writers in general find it very difficult to scratch the surface and provide in-depth analyses or make original contributions to ongoing conversations about any topic at hand (Silva and Matsuda 2001, Feldman 2008), which, in the eyes of first year writing instructors, justifies the need to teach critical thinking.

Still, critics of LL2's critical thinking abilities are often unaware of the language factor when dealing with this group of learners. The fact that LL2 have to struggle on two fronts in every class they take at the university level is often glossed over. What needs to be kept in mind is that LL2, regardless of whether they are still taking EAP classes or graduate classes, are, and will for a very long time remain, first and foremost learners of English who struggle to "make sense" both as language learners and as regular degree-seeking students.

In an environment where LL2 have to compete against native speakers of English, LL2 are forced to prioritize in the course of writing an essay, for instance, thus having to pay more attention to their grammar and word choice, which results in little attention to so-called critical thinking and in-depth analysis their writing instructors tend to value and appreciate more than anything else. LL2's struggle with vocabulary is also immense: being able to choose the right word to describe the right thought or emotion is challenging enough for native speakers, much less for LL2. As a result, it is only natural that critical thinking takes a back seat in the midst of all these concerns (Benesch, 1999).

5. Critical Thinking and The Banking Concept of Education

Cognitive scientists have long established the connection between language learning and cognitive development, but little research has been done on the development and teaching of critical thinking to English-language learners with few exceptions (Davidson, 1996; Atkinson and Ramanathan, 1995). Whether critical thinking could or even ought to be taught, and whether teaching this skill ought to be a priority in EAP, Bridge and first year writing programs points to one problem: critical thinking seems to be lacking in these classes, and that is why instructors feel the need to teach it to all their students, regardless of whether they are native speakers of English or not. This is problematic in EAP contexts because most university classes are still using the banking theory to teaching (Freire, 1970). Could it be that the so-called lack of critical thinking is simply the result of students' not being provided with the opportunity to show that they are capable of being critical thinkers? Could the teaching methodologies to which college students, and in particular those in freshman first year writing classes, are subjected, be the culprit when these methodologies do little to promote independent thinking and learning?

Most college classes, including first year writing classes, and to a lesser degree EAP classes, still consist of teacher-fronted classrooms where lecturing continues to be the preferred mode of delivering content. This approach to teaching conceives of the student as a passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge, a concept the Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, calls the

Banking Concept of Education (1970). According to this approach, instead of its being a process of inquiry, knowledge becomes a gift to be bestowed on the learners by those who view themselves as proprietors of this knowledge (the overzealous novice teachers), hence negating any knowledge those learners might bring to the learning process. In other words, the teachers' existence becomes justified by the ignorance they project onto the learners, and because of the passive role assigned to them, these learners are deprived of the chance to develop any critical thinking abilities (p. 67).

Teaching and learning consist of acts of cognition that take place through dialogue (Benesch, 1999). Both learners and teachers become critical co-investigators in dialogue with each other, a process Freire refers to as *problem-posing education*. In this process, " no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are 'owned' by the teacher" (67). But the question is how many novice EAP and first year writing teachers are able to use these teaching techniques in their classrooms today? The answer is: very few indeed since most first year writing classes are taught by teaching and / or graduate assistants, who generally lack necessary formal and rigorous teacher training, and part time instructors, "often with limited experience in teaching writing to this population" (Williams, 1995). In the case of EAP, the situation usually gets better since the novice teachers eventually gains more experience in their field, contrary to the first year writing instructors, who oftentimes teach first year writing on a temporary basis, until they finish their graduate degree.

Furthermore, since many American instructors, whether they are full professors or Teaching Assistants, are frequently mostly familiar with American / Western college practices, they tend to portray these practices as being universally known norms that should be applied in every college classroom, whether it is in Dallas or Dubai. Such a view extends to language; as a result, linguistic competence (using English appropriately) becomes associated with cognitive competence, and because of such expectations, many LL2 might be viewed as deficient in critical thinking simply because these skills are disguised behind their linguistic skills. In the same vein, non-Western practices brought to American classrooms by foreign students may be seen as debilitating and are therefore frowned upon and rejected as worthless and void of any academic or cultural value (Vandermensbrugghe 2004).

LL2 seem to be caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they are viewed as incapable of critical thinking because of their lack of proficiency in their L2 and because of their lack of cultural insight into their new environment. On the other hand, critical linguists (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; .Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tollefson, 2004) view attempts at learning about the new culture with suspicion by arguing against the hegemonic and assimilationist nature of English and deploring the complicity of language educators who contribute to English and by default American and Western supremacy. Language learning is by no means a neutral activity. Like other languages, English is a culturally loaded medium of communication, and learning it entails learning (or at least learning about) many of the cultural and educational practices associated with the environments where it is spoken (Hinkel, 1999). However, Morgan (2004) argues against presenting such concepts to students who might not be interested in the political ramifications of language learning. To succeed in learning a language, one is required to understand and even appreciate the cultural influences attached to such endeavor, regardless of the language they are learning, especially when such cultural or political influences have a relevance to the daily struggles of these learners. But if these cultural

peculiarities are presented out of context, they might harm the learning process of the LL2 rather than develop their critical thinking abilities.

It is true that English is often associated with the overbearing power of the United States and at times Britain. However, those who argue against the hegemonic and assimilationist nature of EAP perhaps do not realize that students engaged in learning EAP may in fact *want* to be assimilated or at least are not interested in this debate at all. Some of these students may even be disillusioned with their own values and the system and culture where they grew up and as a result may want to be immersed in their newly acquired culture.

Furthermore, the type of critical thinking that encourages learners to question the hegemonous nature of English does not necessarily transfer to their classroom critical thinking skills. Instead, this kind of critical thinking imposes on them a certain perspective and worldview that they may or may not agree without taking into account the cultural differences and language diversity of today's language learner. The truth is that it would be hard for anyone nowadays to argue against the pragmatic value associated with learning English as an international language, as it is viewed by many as key to upward mobility and socio-economic success. English may be seen as a culturally destructive force by critical linguists, but its economic benefits should not be discounted (at least from the perspective of its learners) simply because it represents certain hegemonic and / or imperialistic ideologies that LL2 may not identify with anyway.

Learning English might lead to cultural erosion and assimilation, but the same can be said about any other language, although these arguments seem to be more pronounced when it comes to English because of its association with the hegemonic forces of the US and Britain. One could also argue that learning English in an English-speaking environment could not simply be viewed as a destructive force; on the contrary, it may even have benefits that are non-linguistic, such as helping the LL2 gain a different perspective by constructing a new identity, all of which could be instrumental in enhancing one's critical thinking skills. Regardless, it is time critical linguists started looking at this debate from the LL2s' perspective, who may not necessarily see anything political about their motivation to learn English!

6. Conclusion

Critical thinking continues to be a buzz word in EAP, Bridge and freshman first year writing programs, although what it exactly means to possess this cognitive skill remains unclear. Nonetheless, the need to teach this skill continues to be a priority for many educators, some of whom have concluded that it can be taught as a separate skill (Davidson & Duham, 1996). Others (Atkinson, 1997; Willingahm 2007) have argued against any attempt at teaching critical thinking for different reasons: Atkinson has argued that teaching critical thinking may be ineffective because it is a Western middle class tradition tacitly acquired through socialization, thus implying that LL2 may not be able to display this set of skills because such skills are not necessarily valued or nurtured in the environments where they grew up. Willingham, on the other hand, argues that critical thinking cannot be taught because it is not "like riding a bicycle" (10) and cannot be applied to every situation that calls for critical thinking – in other words, it is not transferrable, and there is no "program that effetively teaches students to think critically in a variety of situations" (12).

Some educators have tried to immerse students in critical thinking instead of immersing them in academic content. The problem is that learners are unable to think critically about an issue that they know little about. Therefore, sustained content instruction is crucial to developing critical thinking skills, which become incidental in the process (Pally, 1997). Such requirements

seem to apply to all learners, regardless of whether they were born in middle-class Western environments or not, and whether they are native speakers of English or second language learners.

Nevertheless, the language factor ought to be taken into account when judging LL2 performance. LL2 may not display critical thinking skills because they have far more pressing priorities, namely the need to communicate their thoughts as clearly and as eloquently as possible and be understood by their instructors in particular. Therefore, the claim that critical thinking is a social practice that only students from the West may be capable of is a difficult proposition to maintain on the practical level, especially when one compares NS and NNS's writing samples (Janopoulos, 1992; Santos, 1988). The difference lies in linguistic expression, not in the ability to show evidence critical thinking and in-depth analysis.

Teaching critical thinking as a subject to EAP students who are still in the early developmental stages of learning English may be a useless endeavor; the focus, instead, should be placed on helping them develop their language skills with "gentle challenges by the teacher" (Benesch, 1999, p. 578) until they achieve a level where they are able to communicate effectively. Critical thinking skills will come at a later proficiency stage since this skill is a transferrable ability that many LL2 are capable of in their first language and eventually bring to the English-medium classroom. Yet, this skill cannot materialize until the students are proficient enough in the target language. Therefore, in my view, instead of attempting to teach critical thinking directly to the LL2, what is needed is to provide these learners with appropriate learning opportunities to develop their linguistic aptitude first; their creativity and critical and analytical skills will follow. LL2 are capable of critical thinking skills, but these skills are often disguised by a lack of proficiency in the English language, and the only way these skills can begin to surface is after the learner has developed the linguistic confidence to communicate effectively in the second or foreign language.

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