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A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL

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This article presents four more-or-less independent reasons why TESOL educators should be cautious about adopting critical thinking pedagogies in their classrooms: (a) Critical thinking may be more on the order of a non-overt social practice than a well-defined and teachable pedagogical set of behaviors; (b) critical thinking can be and has been criticized for its exclusive and reductive character; (c) teaching thinking to nonnative speakers may be fraught with cultural problems; and, (d) once having been taught, thinking skills do not appear to transfer effectively beyond their narrow contexts of instruction. A more recently developed model of cognitive instruction, *cognitive apprenticeship*, is then briefly discussed as a possible alternative to more traditional thinking skills pedagogies.

This thing we call “critical thinking” or “analysis” has strong cultural components. It is more than just a set of writing and thinking techniques—it is a voice, a stance, a relationship with texts and family members, friends, teachers, the media, even the history of one’s country. This is why “critical analysis” is so hard for faculty members to talk about; because it is learned intuitively it is easy to recognize, like a face or a personality, but it is not so easily defined and is not at all simple to explain to someone who has been brought up differently. (Fox, 1994, p. 125)

One of the most widely discussed concepts in education and educational reform these days is *critical thinking*. As recently as the early part of this decade, the notion was still largely confined to L1 education in the U.S., especially at the primary and secondary levels. But like other educational concepts originating in L1 settings, such as process writing, schema theory, and collaborative learning, it was only a matter of time before critical thinking passed into the realm of TESOL. And—as I believe many TESOL professionals will readily acknowledge—critical thinking has now begun to make its mark, particularly in the area of L2 composition.¹

¹ Recent treatments of critical thinking in TESOL include Adamson (1993), Atkinson and Kaplan (1994), Ballard (1995), Belcher (1995), Benesch (1993), Fox (1994), Gajdusek and

In this article I attempt a critical, if at times speculative, exploration of the notion of critical thinking. Rather than simply accepting the concept on faith and urging its application in the ESL classroom, I offer four more-or-less independent reasons why TESOL educators can profit from examining the notion cautiously and carefully. My four reasons are as follows:

1. Rather than being a well-explicated and educationally usable concept, critical thinking may be more in the nature of a *social practice*; that is, what we commonly refer to as *critical thinking* may be an organic part of the very culture that holds it up as an admirable achievement—more at the level of common sense than a rational, transparent, and—especially—teachable set of behaviors.
2. Dominant current conceptualizations of critical thinking can be and have been critiqued for their exclusive and reductive nature. Feminist critics in particular have charged that much critical thinking theory and pedagogy marginalizes alternative approaches to thought, approaches that may in fact lead to more socially desirable consequences in the long run.
3. Not only is critical thinking a culturally based concept, but many cultures endorse modes of thought and education that almost diametrically oppose it. This fact suggests that the teaching of critical thinking to international and language minority students may be much less straightforward than has been commonly assumed.
4. Quite apart from the issues noted so far, attempts by psychologists and cognitive scientists to test a crucial assumption behind critical thinking pedagogy—that thinking skills thus taught transfer beyond their narrow contexts of instruction—have led, at best, to very mixed results with L1 populations. These results raise questions as to what such instruction can be expected to accomplish in and beyond classrooms, if in fact critical thinking does exist as an explicit and teachable concept.

In exploring each of these more-or-less separate points, my primary intention is not to undermine the whole critical thinking enterprise. Rather, I am attempting, in a preliminary way, to critically interrogate the notion of critical thinking itself. In the concluding section of the paper,

vanDommelen (1993), and Mohan and van Naerssen (1996). Recent textbook treatments can be found, to a variable degree, in Swales and Feak (1994) and Gardner (1996).

Closely related to the issue of the place of critical thinking in the ESL classroom is its role and function in non-ESL classes where large numbers of nonnative speakers are present. This situation has become much more common in recent years at all levels of U.S. education due to increased immigration, growing international student enrollments, and budgetary pressure to mainstream ESL students as quickly as possible (Santos, 1992; for specific examples, see Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Harklau, 1994).

I move beyond potentially problematic aspects of critical thinking, considering a modified model of cognitive learning that may offer real advantages over the so-called thinking skills pedagogies that have infiltrated L1—and increasingly L2—education in recent years.

CRITICAL THINKING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

By *social practice*, I mean the kind of behavior in which an individual is automatically immersed by virtue of being raised in a particular cultural milieu and which the individual therefore “learns though the pores.” Such behavior is almost by definition tacit—it is learned and practiced in a largely unconscious (or at least unreflective) way. The tacit or “commonsense” nature of social practices is what makes them functional in a society, allowing members to go on smoothly and efficiently in the living of everyday life. For precisely this same reason, social practices tend to resist satisfactory definition and are especially difficult for their users to describe.²

One set of social practices that has received widespread scholarly attention in recent years is that by which young children are socialized into traditional gender roles. Studies of caregiver-child interactions in the U.S., for instance, have shown that parents tended to dress boys and girls differently, talk to and about them differently (e.g., girl babies were “cute” and “sweet” whereas boy babies were “strong” and “big”), and give them different kinds of toys to play with (Block, 1983; Fagot & Leinbach, 1987; Langlois & Downs, 1980; Rheingold & Cook, 1975; Shakin, Shakin, & Sternglanz, 1985). This sort of unreflecting approach to gender socialization is a clear example of what I mean by social practice. Until, at least, it was pointed out by researchers, many parents did not even consider the powerful effects of their behavior on their children. They were following a social practice—a tacit, culturally valued approach to child rearing that existed at the level of traditional practice and common sense.

Now what evidence exists, one may fairly ask, that critical thinking is more in the nature of a social practice than a well-explicated and rational response to what its advocates describe as a national crisis in education (e.g., Bruer, 1993; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)? I can offer two kinds of possible evidence.

² The description of social groups based on the long-term observation and involvement in the daily lives of their members by a trained outsider, or ethnographer, is one of the few ways by which social practices can be satisfactorily explicated. This is due to the phenomenon, frequently noted by anthropologists, of the “invisibility of everyday life” (Erickson, 1986, p. 121) to those fully engaged in pursuing it.

The first is that, whereas everyone seems to know what critical thinking is, very few people actually ever attempt to define it. This phenomenon is patent to anyone who has heard from parents, educators, or politicians on the topic. All the more interesting and troubling is the fact that academics, normally considered masters of precise definition, seem almost as unwilling or unable to define critical thinking. Rather, they often appear to take the concept on faith, perhaps as a sort of self-evident foundation of Western thought such as freedom of speech. And even those scholars who do recognize the concept's serious lack of definition and have attempted to address it may be engaging more in reifying a social practice than in describing a commonly agreed-upon, explicit, and a priori understanding.³

This argument is supported by the work of a growing number of scholars (e.g., Fox, 1994; Ramanathan & Kaplan, in press; Scollon, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Wilson, 1988), some of which is reviewed in this article. Resnick (1987), for instance, in her influential review of thinking skills instruction carried out under the auspices of the National Research Council, writes,

³ According to Nickerson (1990), a widely cited author on teaching critical thinking,

We can talk of thinking skills and processes, and even of specific thinking skills and processes, but we have to recognize that our language is only marginally descriptive of that to which it refers, and we must not be surprised when the entities we identify in our models or frameworks of thinking persist in jumping out of the boxes in which we have put them. (p. 503)

With this as a salutary caution, attempts at definition include McPeck's (1981) "reflective skepticism" as practiced in the established academic disciplines; Paul's (1990) "disciplined thinking which exemplifies the perfections of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thinking" (p. 33); Ennis's (1987) wide-ranging taxonomy of thinking skills, as well as his earlier "the correct assessing of statements" (1962, p. 6) and his later "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (1992, p. 22); Benesch's (1993) "a democratic learning process examining power relations and social inequities" (p. 547); and Atkinson and Kaplan's (1994) "the ability to use the intellectual tools thought necessary to sustain a politically pluralistic, democratic society" (p. 2), including skepticism, logic, and creativity. It is clear that many if not all of these definitions are desiderative or polemical definitions, that is, what their proponents would like to see included in the discussion and teaching of critical thinking rather than what it simply or actually is.

Definitions of critical thinking are also complicated by what Johnson (1992) calls "the network problem" (p. 41), that is, the fuzzy relations among certain more or less interchangeable terms, including *metacognition*, *higher order thinking skills*, *problem solving*, *rationality*, and *reasoning*, that are used when talking about critical thinking.

Several readers of earlier versions of this paper mentioned critical pedagogy and critical literacy as approaches to critical thinking that differ at a basic level from the notion of critical thinking I aim to treat here. Benesch's (1993) definition of critical thinking, given above, is in the critical pedagogy tradition—it emphasizes the concentration of critical faculties on the political inequalities that pervade Western democratic political systems and the development of solutions to these problems. My understanding, however, is that critical pedagogy has very different intellectual roots and is a minority movement at least in L1 contexts, compared with mainstream critical thinking approaches. The very appearance of the word *critical* in *critical pedagogy*, I assume, is largely coincidental, having its origins in the classic Marxist concept of *critical consciousness*, rather than non-Marxist traditions of Western thought and the critical traditions that accompany them.

Thinking skills resist the precise forms of definition we have come to associate with the setting of specified objectives for schooling. Nevertheless, it is relatively easy to list some key features of higher order thinking. When we do this, we become aware that, although we cannot define it exactly, we can recognize higher order thinking when it occurs. (pp. 2–3)

Likewise, Fox (1994) describes interviewing seven university professors who had extensive experience working with nonnative graduate students on their academic writing. Hoping to receive from them precise understandings of the notions of *analysis* and *analytical writing*—terms that she equates directly with critical thinking and that the professors commonly used—Fox asked them to define these terms. She reports, however, that “this question was surprisingly difficult for them to answer, despite their confidence in using these terms in the language of their assignments” (p. xviii) and despite the ease with which they were able to identify such characteristics as “good analysis” and “difficulties with analysis” in their students’ writings. Much of the rest of Fox’s book is an exploration of just why critical thinking and analysis are so hard to define and so difficult for nonnative students to learn.⁴

Its rather slippery, non-overt, and yet self-evident nature—the fact that even though people cannot define critical thinking clearly, they can still (a) talk about it, (b) apparently understand one another when they do so, and (c) even “recognize [it] . . . when it occurs” (Resnick, 1987, p. 3)—suggests that critical thinking exists largely at the level of tacit, commonsense social practice.

The second piece of evidence that critical thinking is a social practice comes from studies of early language and literacy socialization. Cochran-Smith (1984, 1986), Heath (1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c), Michaels (1981, 1986, 1991), Scollon and Scollon (1979, 1981), Wells (1985, 1986), and many other anthropologists, linguists, and educational researchers paint a group portrait of oral/literate language socialization practices in North American and British mainstream culture.⁵ These practices fit hand-in-

⁴ Fox’s (1994) *Listening to the World* is a compelling description of one teacher’s gradual realization that critical thinking, or at least its written correlate *analytical writing*, is in fact a social practice and therefore in need of extreme pedagogical care and attention if it is to be successfully taught to and learned by nonnative students. This is not an easy discovery to make, because, as stated previously, social practices are largely invisible to those engaged in them. But Fox’s role as teacher and writing consultant to a very large number of international students, combined with her experience living in several non-Western societies and her use of formal research techniques, has provided her with a commanding vantage point. Based on this perspective, Fox reaches the conclusion that

the dominant communication style and world view of the U.S. university, variously known as “academic argument,” “analytical writing,” “critical thinking,” or just plain “good writing,” is based on assumptions and habits of mind that are derived from western—or more specifically U.S.—culture, and that this way of thinking and communicating is considered the most sophisticated, intelligent, and efficient by only a tiny fraction of the world’s peoples. (p. xxi)

⁵ Some of this literature is reviewed in Schieffelin and Ochs (1986).

glove with pedagogical approaches taken in those cultures' schools, contributing to general educational success for the mainstream children who attend them.

Many of the modes of socialization identified in this body of research appear closely related to the notion of critical thinking as a social practice. Based on her monumental ethnography of different social groups living in the Carolina Piedmont, for instance, Heath (1983) notes how early socialization in four areas served to differentiate the middle-class children she studied from one or both of her nonmainstream groups (working-class African American and Anglo children, respectively): (a) the asking and answering of questions in general, and *why* and *how* questions in particular; (b) the classification and labeling of objects according to their abstract attributes; (c) the breakdown and step-by-step teaching and learning of complex behaviors; and (d) the overall use of language as a creative and heuristic device.

Heath found these same social practices to play crucial roles in the strikingly different success rates in school of the three groups she studied. In work expanding her research to language-minority children, Heath (1986b) describes how, directly reflecting early middle-class socialization in these behaviors,

teachers and tests ask students to explain the meanings of words, pictures, combinations of events, and their own behaviors. *It is not sufficient to say what something is; one must also learn to say what it means—how it was intended, what action will be its result, and how it is to be interpreted and valued* [italics added]. (p. 168)⁶

But whereas middle-class children excel as a group in meeting these demands, children from some nonmainstream backgrounds are typically confused by them, contributing substantially to the latter's progressive failure in the classroom (see Michaels, 1981, 1986, 1991 for other examples of this phenomenon).

If critical thinking is in the nature of a social practice—and one that is highly valued in mainstream U.S. culture and schools—one should not

⁶ Compare Heath's (1985) description of early middle-class socialization practices as revealed in her 1983 study:

Before they were two years of age, mainstream children offered accounts which were attended to by adults who asked for further explanation of events children reported, commented on alternative outcomes of events, and assessed the attitudes and actions of reported actors. (p. 14)

Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) show that similar practices are prominent even at much higher levels of schooling. In their description of pedagogical practices emphasizing critical thinking in a freshman writing program at a large U.S. university, they found that comments like the following, written by a teacher on an essay draft discussing the effectiveness of one company's advertising, were common: "Anticipate questions and argue for why you are right. It seems that you end up simply describing the company's goals" (p. 545).

be surprised to find it appearing in one form or another in the early socialization of mainstream children. One might also expect a society whose mainstream schools have become progressively more accessible to nonmainstream groups over the past 30 years to see itself in crisis—a crisis for which the active teaching of critical thinking skills appears to be one handy solution.

Perhaps the major problem with introducing such non-overt social practices into the classroom is that they are hard—if not impossible—to teach (Fox, 1994; Gee, 1990). Because they are not seriously theorized concepts but exist rather at the level of common sense and tacitly learned behavior, it is practically speaking beyond the capability of most teachers to teach them in more than an anecdotal and hit-or-miss way. In fact, in the major testing ground for teaching critical thinking to date—the L1 classroom—what passes as its teaching may often reduce substantially to the offering of opportunities to rehearse and perfect this particular set of social practices to students already exposed to them as part of their early socialization (Fox, 1994; Gee, 1990). Similar situations may also occur—and with similar disadvantageous consequences—in classrooms where L2 students are represented, either mixed with native speakers (e.g., Harklau, 1994) or segregated (e.g., Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995).

THE EXCLUSIVE AND REDUCTIVE NATURE OF CRITICAL THINKING

Quite apart from whether critical thinking exists as a well-defined and teachable set of behaviors, serious criticisms have been leveled at the apparently exclusive and reductive character of its dominant manifestations. For example, Walters (1994b), a philosopher, views most current versions of critical thinking as highly “logicistic” in nature—they reduce all academically useful thinking skills to informal, and to a lesser degree formal, logic (see Ramanathan & Kaplan, in press). The ideal model for a critical thinker, according to Walters (1994a), thus becomes someone like Mr. Spock of the original *Star Trek* series—a totally objective, rational being; Walters terms movement toward this educational ideal the “vulcanization” of critical thinking. Further, in Walters’s view, logicism is claimed by its advocates to be universal, whereas in fact it is exclusive in that it marginalizes alternative ways of knowing. Taking a similar critique directly into the political realm, Weinstein (1993) suggests that the critical thinking movement may well be part of educational reform on a conservative, upper-class model. He asks rhetorically,

Just what is critical thinking’s policy on the thinking of the urban under-class, of the disenfranchised and oppressed, of non-literate, non-technological

cultures, on the televisual thinking so many of our students understand better than we? How do “arguments” made in rap videos fare. . . ? (p. 17)

However, the most powerful critique of the exclusive and reductive nature of critical thinking comes from feminist scholars. Thus, Clinchy (1994) and Martin (1992) develop their objections in terms of the masculinist normativity of many current conceptions of critical thinking; their arguments are worth considering closely.⁷

Clinchy (1994), a developmental psychologist, begins by equating critical thinking with *separate knowing*, which she defines as

detachment. The separate knower holds herself aloof from the object she is trying to analyze. She takes an impersonal stance. She follows certain rules or procedures to ensure that her judgments are unbiased. All disciplines and vocations have these impersonal procedures for analyzing things. (p. 36)

Clinchy then describes a study she undertook with colleagues (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985) in which women students were asked to read and react to statements such as “As soon as someone tells me his point of view, I immediately start arguing in my head the opposite point of view.” Although the students’ responses suggested a number of different approaches to thinking, the most common was one that the researchers labeled *connected knowing*. In connected knowing, the knowers attempted to “get into the heads” of people they wanted to understand, trying to see through the other’s eyes—a position diametrically opposed to the separate knowing/devil’s advocate role of traditional critical thought. In this regard, as Clinchy points out, connected knowing is most centrally *noncritical* thinking.

Clinchy (1994) goes on to draw parallels between connected knowing and the influential ideas of Russell on studying philosophy (“the right attitude is neither reverence nor contempt” but “sympathy”; as cited in Clinchy, p. 40) and Elbow on writing. In fact, Elbow’s (1973) well-known distinction between “the doubting game” and “the believing game” seems to mirror the separate versus connected knowing dichotomy closely.

Martin (1992) investigates other types of activities in which knowers make concerted efforts to assume the viewpoints of their subjects. Cultural anthropology is one signal example, but Martin focuses more directly on the adoption by women scientists (such as the Nobel Prize winner Barbara McClintock) of a position called *a feeling for the organism* (Keller, 1983). The special power of this position, although by no means automatically negating rational thought, is to give access to types of knowledge that are not directly amenable to it.

⁷ Belcher (in press) provides a feminist critique of written academic discourse as it relates to adult L2 writers of English.

Neither Clinchy (1994) nor Martin (1992) advocates the simple replacement of critical thinking/separate knowing with the alternative approaches to thinking they identify—approaches that they also take pains to point out are not gender-exclusive. Martin, however, implicates the distancing nature of critical thinking in ethically questionable judgments, suggesting that social actors cognitively connected to the subjects and consequences of their decisions would be more likely to select ethical alternatives. Robert Oppenheimer and Werner Von Braun, she suggests, were almost certainly premier critical thinkers in their respective cultures (see Belcher, in press).⁸

CRITICAL THINKING AND NONNATIVE THINKERS

The possibility that critical thinking represents a set of social practices, and the idea that its dominant current conceptualizations may tend to marginalize even some members of U.S. society, suggest a further (though largely independent) question: How might individuals from cultural systems that manifestly differ from mainstream U.S. culture respond to and benefit from thinking skills instruction? Although no ready answer to this question exists at present, cross-cultural research into the early socialization and educational practices of non-European peoples is richly suggestive in this regard. In this section, I review findings from such research pointing to three areas of potential discontinuity between cultural assumptions that may underlie critical thinking and modes of thought and expression prevalent among non-Western cultural groups.⁹ These three areas concern (a) opposing notions of relations between the individual and the social system, (b) contrasting norms of self-expression across cultures, and (b) divergent perspectives on the use of language as a means of learning.¹⁰

⁸ Many feminist scholars have made related points about the unfortunate distancing effects of abstract, rational thought, which they usually equate with a masculinist ideology. For example, Harding (1991) identifies the modern division of labor between the sexes as a central condition for abstract thought and the valorization of abstract concepts: “Men who are relieved of the need to maintain their own bodies and the local places where they exist come to see as real only what corresponds to their abstracted world” (p. 128).

⁹ Although I fully support the criticism that such descriptors as *Western*, *Japanese*, and even *mainstream U.S.* are misleading in their suggestions of cultural homogeneity, I am not prepared to totally forgo using them in the description of social practices and cultural norms. They are therefore used here in a qualified sense, as necessary if quite imperfect descriptors for regularities that currently have no other means by which to be expressed.

¹⁰ Where I use *culture* (and its variant lexical forms) in this paper, I mean the “bodies of knowledge, structures of understanding, conceptions of the world . . . collective representations” (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p. 166) and social practices through which, by virtue of participating in, one is marked as a member of a social group, or Discourse (Gee, 1990).

Notions of the Individual

Cultures that view individuals as primary units appear to permit—and even depend on—relatively unconstrained individual activity and expression. Where such individual activity exists, individual conflict and competition seem to be inevitable. Notions of the primacy of the individual and their consequences underlie the social practice of critical thinking at a fundamental level: The very concept of *critical* presupposes that individual conflict and dissensus are a social reality, if not a tool for achieving socially desirable ends, while *thinking*—at least in a Western context—assumes the locus of thought to be within the individual.

A vast amount of cross-cultural research shows that various cultural groups assume notions of the individual that are almost diametrically opposed to Western or at least mainstream U.S. assumptions. In a discussion of Japanese approaches to politeness, for instance, Matsumoto (1988) points out how a Western view of self assumes that

the basic unit of society is the individual. With such an assumption, however, it is almost impossible to understand behavior in the Japanese culture. A Japanese generally must understand where s/he stands in relation to other members of the group or society, and must acknowledge his/her dependence on the others. Acknowledgment and maintenance of the relative position of others, rather than preservation of an individual's proper territory, governs all social interaction. (p. 405)

Research on early socialization of Japanese children indicates how they learn to think and act in this sociocultural system. Matsumori (1981, as cited in Clancy, 1986), for example, reported on the basis of an empirical study that Japanese mothers “tended to appeal to social norms while correcting misbehavior” (p. 218) in their children, whereas U.S. mothers expressed themselves personally (e.g., “I don't like the way you're speaking.”) while engaged in the same activity. In a particularly detailed analysis, Clancy (1986) has shown how Japanese infants are socialized into the twin normative social values of empathy and conformity. Thus, Japanese mothers train their children in empathy by constantly attributing feelings to others (and even inanimate objects) as they elicit and mold socially appropriate responses. A child pretending to cook and eat, for example, is told to share her imaginary food with a (real) adult visitor, because the latter “is hungry” (p. 232). Conformity training, on the other hand, takes place when the mother indicates that her child's speech or actions are socially deviant. For instance, a 2-year-old who on being prompted to describe an object refuses by saying, “No!” is scolded with “There's no one who says things like ‘No!’” (p. 237).

Without a doubt, early socialization practices like these have a

profound impact on the ways individuals define themselves in relation to their social and physical worlds. The term *primary socialization* was coined by anthropologists to convey the powerful influence of this intensive, highly interactive, home-based training over individuals' lifelong thought and behavior. Crago (1992), Heath (1983), Ochs (1988), Schieffelin & Ochs (1986), and Scollon and Scollon (1981) are just a few of the many researchers who have contributed in-depth descriptions of primary socialization practices across cultures, especially as they relate to the subsequent educational experiences of children.

But such training, while particularly intensive in the early years, by no means ceases when children start to attend school. Innumerable studies of early education have revealed how strongly socialization continues in the schools and how in many cases it is patterned closely on the primary socialization practices of mainstream social groups. Thus, to follow the socialization of the Japanese child a bit farther, Carson (1992) identifies the teaching of students to "valu[e] group goals above individual interests" (p. 39) as a major aim of Japanese education and shows that actual educational practices in this system correspond closely to this ideal. In a separate study, Hamilton, Blumenfield, Akoh, and Miura (1991) compared 10 Japanese and 9 U.S. fifth-grade classrooms in terms of the relative attention paid to individual students. They found that Japanese teachers paid significantly less attention to individual students in comparison to groups, with 51% of speech directed at the whole group when in teacher-fronted mode against 22% of the U.S. teachers' speech.

Although Japan has been especially well studied in terms of its educational beliefs and practices in recent years, research on socialization and behavior in other group-oriented societies, including work directly comparing Western and non-Western cultures (e.g., Bond, 1986; Hsu, 1981, 1985; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Muchiri, Mulamba, Myers, & Ndoloi, 1995; Roland, 1988; Scollon, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1994) also abounds. A brief review of some of this latter research follows.

As described previously, a mainstream U.S. view of individualism seems to inhere in notions of critical thinking. Scollon and Scollon (1981) contrasted their 2-year-old daughter Rachel's ability to separate herself from her spoken and "written" texts¹¹—to "fictionalize herself" in those texts, as they put it—with the behavior of even much older (Native North American) Athabaskan children. At 2 years old, for example,

¹¹ At 2 years old, Rachel was of course too young to write. However, this did not prevent her from producing "written" texts—texts made up of crudely formed letters and imitations of connected script. She then "read" her texts orally to her parents, typically relating a fully formed and sometimes elaborate narrative.

Rachel was already describing herself in the third person when narrating her own activities and using other distancing strategies as well. Scollon and Scollon trace the development of these special abilities to the particular brand of preliteracy training Rachel was receiving as a middle-class U.S. child. The decontextualizing power of print, exhibited by Rachel in her use of third-person narratives, special reading prosody, conventional story structure, and literate performance frames, encouraged her also to take a more-or-less individualist and “objective” position in the course of her daily activities—to see herself as in some sense apart from them. This positioning was reinforced in the Scollons’ own talk to Rachel: They offered accounts of her activities that encouraged her to see herself from a distanced perspective. In contrast, older Athabaskan children related narratives that were highly contextualized in the here-and-now, in which the author was not fictionalized, and that included various other features of prototypical on-line oral narrative.

In a second study, this time of (Taiwanese) Chinese university students’ reactions to U.S.-style process writing instruction, Scollon (1991) suggested that

the writing process asks of the writer that he or she take the rhetorical position of an autonomous, rational mind, untroubled by the inconsistencies of the phenomenal world and equally untroubled by the push and pull of human arrangements. This is a persona that Western students are all too ready to adopt; to them it seems a natural intuition. (p. 11)

The naturalness/intuitiveness of this position for Western students, as I have already argued, is directly related to its role as an important social practice in their cultures—it is substantially the same position seen under development in the 2-year-old Rachel. It is also a stance that, not surprisingly, Scollon’s (1991) Chinese students found nearly impossible to comprehend, much less to write from. Such findings do not bode well for much current critical thinking instruction in the ESL classroom, or classrooms in which large numbers of nonnative speakers are present (see Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995, for an example).

Self-Expression

Very closely related to differing notions of the individual across cultures are contrasting norms of self-expression. To quote Scollon (1991) again, “the stance of self-expression . . . is so productive in North America because it is so squarely based on the Western, individualist sense of self” (p. 4). As with other displays of individuality, however, the direct expression of ego via language seems to be substantially proscribed in many cultures.

In her review of Chinese and Japanese educational practices related to

literacy, Carson (1992) cites the conclusion of Tobin, Wu, and Davidson that language “is viewed less as a tool for self-expression than as a medium for expressing group solidarity and shared social purpose” (as cited in Carson, pp. 41–42). While this comment was made specifically in the context of Japanese educational practices, it also appears to generalize fairly well to the descriptions of (PRC) Chinese education reviewed by Carson. 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 and use of various formulaic phrases. Not surprisingly, innovation and individual creativity in writing are strongly discouraged at this level, if not automatically ruled out of court. Even at the university level, as Scollon (1991) indicates, Chinese students write in ways that highlight their organic place in their chosen academic communities, and (what may amount to the same thing) their scholarly responsibility to pass on the knowledge they have received.

In various studies of Native North American cultures (e.g., Basso, 1972; Crago, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 1981), scholars have shown how self-expression violates highly valued cultural norms, at least in cases where individuals are not known to each other or differ recognizably in relative social status. These norms are indicated crudely in well-known stereotypes of the “silent Indian” (Basso, 1972) and, much more convincingly, in actual exchanges like the following, which took place at a report-card meeting between an Inuk parent and a mainstream Canadian school teacher, as reported in Crago (1992):

Teacher: “Your son is talking well in class. He is speaking up a lot.”

Parent: “I am sorry.” (p. 496)

Beyond simply the expression of opinion, any form of speech seems to be a violation in such circumstances—in the case just described because the socially appropriate role of the subordinate/student is to listen, observe, and learn. In cases where unacquainted adults remain silent while in close contact, sometimes for days, linguistic “politeness” phenomena (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Scollon & Scollon, 1981) appear to be at work; speaking in such circumstances could threaten the carefully guarded independence of the potential addressee.

Using Language to Learn

A final area of cultural difference that may influence the teaching of critical thinking to nonnative thinkers concerns the use of language explicitly to effect thinking and learning. The notion that language—and especially written language—is a “tool for intellectual exploration, an avenue for debate and dialectic” (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995, p.

558) is enshrined in U.S. educational practice to the extent that it has its own terminology, for example, *writing-to-learn*. The connection between this notion and critical thinking is clear—one tests one's ideas agonistically by using language, whether informally in "B.S. sessions" among peers or more formally, for example, in drafting a composition for a freshman writing class. In the same sense, *argument* is a major mode of discourse from the lowest to the highest levels of the academy, and verbal evidence of critical thinking is the surest sign that someone is a critical thinker or that critical thinking has taken place.

Although this area has not been researched to the extent of culturally based notions of individuality and self-expression, various studies report findings relating to its cross-cultural variability. To start simply, the very idea that one can learn about others by talking to them casually seems to be a notion that is peculiarly "American." As mentioned previously, research on Native North Americans has shown them quite typically unwilling to converse with strangers, to the extent that individuals can have intensive and prolonged contact without ever interacting verbally (e.g., Basso, 1972). On the other hand, Native North Americans report intensively observing unknown individuals in order to learn about them. If such behavior seems extreme, consider its opposite: the "cocktail party" approach (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). The idea that one can, after spending an hour or two in a room full of (alcohol-imbibing) people, say that one has actually gotten to *know* some of those people even to some degree seems odd on the face of it; it might certainly seem so, at least, to members of a culture in which the assumption that one learns substantially from casual talk does not obtain (see Barnlund, 1975, for parallel comments on Japanese versus U.S. norms of verbal self-disclosure). Perhaps an even more compelling example of the extent to which U.S. mainstream culture equates verbal interaction with gaining knowledge is the job interview, wherein the decision to hire or not is substantially based on what the interviewee says.

As mentioned previously, Heath (1983; see also Heath, 1986a) ascertained that one of the main skills middle-class U.S. children bring with them to school is the ability to use language heuristically and creatively. Other subcultural groups in her study—most notably the white working-class dwellers of the mill town "Roadville"—socialized their children to use language in ways that encouraged literalness and strongly discouraged discovery and invention. The educational result of this approach was that Roadville children, although they adapted to school norms to some degree over time, were ill-equipped to engage in self-fictionalizing, as when teachers requested that they assume the role of a imaginary or historical character.

Cross-cultural studies of indigenous literacies (e.g., Besnier, 1989; Ochs, 1988; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1993) have also revealed

that in no sense does written language necessarily serve thought-stimulating and thought-defining functions. Rather, such textual functions are found in the cultures studied primarily in domains that have been influenced by Western-style schooling.

Finally, a few studies of nonnative speakers and programs designed to teach them in U.S. schools and universities have pointed out cross-cultural discontinuities and differences in using language to learn. In an ethnographic study of Chinese immigrant teenagers in U.S. high schools, Harklau (1994) found "the most salient aspect" of her observations of these students to be "their reticence and lack of interaction with native speaking peers" (pp. 262–263). When asked to explain this lack of verbal involvement in the classroom, one of her subjects quoted a Chinese proverb and then proceeded to explain it in terms of his educational experience in Taiwan:

"Being quiet is good and vigorously debating is silver." Being quiet is considered polite and intelligent because only the insecure ones need to prove themselves smart by talking loud. For that reason, the school [in Taiwan] wanted the students to keep quiet in the classroom. (p. 251)

In a comparative ethnographic study of a freshman writing program and an ESL institute at a large U.S. university, Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) found that differing emphases were placed on writing-to-learn for nonnative students in the two programs. In the freshman writing program, whose clientele was over 80% native speakers of English, writers were constantly prodded to "deepen" their thinking, to "go beyond" surface-level observations, and to be "insightful," "original," and "thought-provoking" in their written work. In the ESL program, on the other hand, although similar concepts were not wholly absent from instruction, the overall emphasis was on the clear written communication of ideas, in a style described in the study as "workpersonlike prose."

THE GENERALIZABILITY AND TRANSFERABILITY OF THINKING SKILLS

A fourth and final issue regarding critical thinking stands somewhat apart from the first three. This issue concerns (a) whether thinking skills actually exist that are generalizable beyond their original domains of application and (b) given that they do exist, whether such skills can in fact be taught and learned so that they are usable in other settings and situations. Following VanderStoep and Seifert (1994), the first of these issues can be called "the generalizability problem," and the second "the transfer problem" (p. 30). Although various researchers (e.g., Johnson, 1992) distinguish between these two problems, I will basically treat them together here.

Not surprisingly, much of the work testing the generalizability/transferability of learning and thinking skills has been carried out by psychologists and cognitive scientists. The consensus among these researchers seems to be that most attempts to find confirmation of the phenomenon have failed (e.g., Gick & Holyoak, 1987; Gray & Orasanu, 1987; Hill & Resnick, 1995; Resnick, 1987; VanderStoep & Seifert, 1994). In the words of Butterfield and Nelson (1991),

The abundant literature on the transfer of instruction [including, but not limited to, instruction in thinking skills] has been reviewed from several perspectives, and the consensus is that the majority of investigations have not found flexible use of appropriate variants of taught knowledge and strategies in diverse contexts and for diverse purposes [13 citations follow]. (p. 69)

Despite such generally gloomy assessments—and there are many of them—researchers have held out at least two rays of hope. The first is that, because generality/transfer is widely acknowledged to be very difficult to measure, the problem is largely a methodological one (Cormier & Hagman, 1987; Ennis, 1992; Kennedy, Fisher, & Ennis, 1991; Perkins & Salomon, 1989). These researchers adopt the position that with the development of better measurement and evaluation instruments and better operational definitions of concepts like *problem-solving task* and *domain of application*, transfer effects will finally start to appear. The second ray of hope held out by some researchers is that, although thinking skills do not appear to transfer generally, transfer seems to be possible under highly specific conditions, especially where initial training and later testing take place in identical or near-identical situations on highly similar tasks (Gray & Orasanu, 1987; Kennedy et al., 1991; Norris, 1992; Perkins & Salomon, 1989).

It is not my intention to critique these expert assessments—rather, I would like to make a different kind of point.¹² Stating it in the form of a question: Do we have any business teaching academic thinking behaviors that have not been shown by the very researchers studying them to have any substantial transferability whatsoever? Perhaps the answer is yes, on the basis of one traditional perspective on education—that it is good for its own sake. This, in fact, appears to be the position implicitly taken by Resnick (1987) in her influential report. Having reviewed existing

¹² A couple of observations on these assessments, however, can be made. First, the beliefs of thinking skills researchers that transfer effects can be found if training and testing conditions and tasks are made similar enough place serious limitations on claims for generalizable thinking skills. Second, it is perhaps germane to observe that the research programs of the psychologists and cognitive scientists cited here appear for the most part to be predicated on the eventual discovery of positive transfer effects. This alone could be taken as sufficient to explain the conspicuous general optimism among these researchers that such effects will eventually be found, in the face of almost 100 years of findings to the contrary.

research, Resnick advises cautious optimism about and adoption of thinking skills instruction, even though

it is clear that if we were to demand solid empirical evidence supporting a particular approach to higher order skill development before implementing educational programs, we would be condemned to inaction. There is far less empirical evidence [for effective transfer] of any kind available than we might have imagined and the evidence we have is often of limited utility. (p. 34)

But if my interpretation of Resnick's conclusion is correct—that we as educators should adopt thinking skills instruction primarily for its own sake, just as we might teach spelling rules or grammar—then why are we trying to “reform” education by introducing such innovations in the first place? In opposition to Resnick's recommendation, I would like to suggest that the uncertain empirical status of thinking skills transferability is yet another good reason why TESOL educators should approach the critical thinking bandwagon with care and caution.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO COGNITIVE INSTRUCTION

As one solution to the problem of teaching cognitive skills to nonmainstream—including nonnative-English-speaking—students, scholars influenced by Vygotskian learning theory and research on the social basis of cognition have developed the pedagogical model of *cognitive apprenticeship* (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Hill & Resnick, 1995). Although this model is still new and thus remains underspecified in practice, I briefly indicate some of its potential strengths as an alternative approach to teaching thinking skills.

Cognitive apprenticeship is based on the notion that all significant human activity is highly situated in real-world contexts—and that complex cognitive skills are therefore ultimately learned in high-context, inherently motivating situations in which the skills themselves are organically bound up with the activity being learned and its community of expert users. In a sense, then, cognitive apprenticeship takes as a starting point the cultural and social-practice nature of all significant learned experience. Recent studies by anthropologists and sociologists (e.g., Lave, 1988, Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990) of nonformal learning traditions across a wide range of cultures strongly support this assumption, and cognitive apprenticeship is in part an attempt to operationalize these findings in the U.S. classroom.

In the cognitive apprenticeship model, the teacher-learner relationship is largely reconceptualized as an expert-novice (or master-apprentice) relationship, and the learner is as much socialized into a particular

worldview (operating on a particular content domain) as taught particular ways to think. Such practices are already common to some degree in the academic disciplines and professions represented in the U.S. university, although typically only where faculty and students work together intensively on a small-group or one-to-one basis (see Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988).

Collins et al. (1989) provide guidelines for organizing instruction following the principles of cognitive apprenticeship, describing its three major instructional methods: *modeling*, *coaching*, and *fading*. Modeling is the early and repetitive demonstration of complex, holistic, and goal-centered activities, as situated in their actual contexts of use rather than decontextualized and broken down for ease of teaching and learning. Coaching involves the active mentoring by teachers or more experienced peers of individuals or small groups of students in their own repetitive attempts to perform these activities in real contexts. It aims to provide a supportive, nonjudgmental environment in which intensive practice, guided and shaped by real-world consequences, leads to real learning, a process convincingly advocated by Smith (1988) in his essay, "Joining the Literacy Club." The final step, fading, concerns the gradual discontinuation of expert guidance as the student-apprentice internalizes the skills and norms of knowledgeable performance. Although none of these pedagogical methods is new or original to cognitive apprenticeship itself, their use within a framework emphasizing naturalistic and highly situated learning gives them new potential.

Two natural arenas for cognitive apprenticeship in formal school settings appear to be discipline-specific writing (see Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996) and classrooms that emphasize the use of computer-based technologies (e.g., Collins, 1991). Other formal learning situations in which related approaches have been employed include basic reading, writing, and mathematics classes in primary and secondary schools. Hill and Resnick (1995) discuss the possibilities offered by a cognitive apprenticeship-type approach in the teaching of university-level writing. Establishing real-world contexts of writing through partnerships between schools and the business community (Williams & Colomb, 1993), engaging students in the work of college governance committees (Mansfield, 1993), encouraging internships and volunteerism, and providing consultation services for charitable organizations and small businesses have all been employed as means of realizing the model. Although various drawbacks relating to traditional constraints on educational practice, such as grading requirements and large classes, have caused some problems in these early attempts, results have been promising enough to encourage further development and experimentation.

Based as it is on pedagogical traditions shared across a wide range of cultural groups (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990) and openly

acknowledging the basic social-practice nature of all learning, cognitive apprenticeship is perhaps more appropriate as a pan-cultural model of cognitive instruction than the more culture-specific models that appear to underlie most current versions of critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

Much of what I have written here about critical thinking can be captured in an aphorism: *Critical thinking is cultural thinking*. Thus, I have suggested that critical thinking may well be in the nature of a social practice—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. Likewise, I have offered evidence that some critical thinking practices may marginalize subcultural groups, such as women, within U.S. society itself. Further, I have reviewed extensive research pointing to vastly different understandings across cultures of three notions directly implicated in critical thought: individualism, self-expression, and using language as a tool for learning. Although the claim that critical thinking is cultural thinking should not necessarily block the importation of thinking skills instruction into the L2 classroom, I believe that it should give TESOL educators pause for thought—and pause long enough to reflect carefully and critically on the notion of critical thinking.

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