

ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING FOR YOUNG EFL STUDENTS USING ANECDOTES

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Educators know that students should be taught to be critical thinkers starting at a young age. What can be unclear is how to define critical thinking, how to teach critical thinking, and how to assess if critical thinking has been taught. Additionally, when the student population is composed of young English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, another component is added: how can critical thinking be incorporated into learning another language. This paper will discuss a working definition of what critical thinking is within the context of primary education in Uzbekistan and methods for teaching critical thinking.

The idea of critical thinking has remained a buzz-phrase in education as a high-level, ephemeral goal; if students achieve “critical thinking” both they and the teacher are a success. However, as discussed by Kuhn (2019), for something so popular, critical thinking has developed very little as a corporeal, achievable concept (p.147). Wale and Bishaw (2020) have a stricter, though not necessarily narrower, view of how to define critical thinking, and they see it as consisting of, “...interpretation, analysis, evaluation, synthesize explanation, inference, and self-regulation” (p. 1). They try to distill the concept of critical thinking into inquiry, where Kuhn sees it as a twofold skill. Kuhn (2019) discusses how critical thinking is looked at by the United States’ common core standards—as argument and by the Next Generation Science Standards—as inquiry. She states, “Inquiry and argument can be regarded as twin pillars of skilled thinking, replacing the more generic critical thinking label, if we regard inquiry as an input process of seeking and analyzing new information and argument as an output process of drawing and communicating justified conclusions” (p. 147). As the student population targeted in this article is composed of predominantly young learners, the main focus of this article will be the first step of critical thinking, inquiry.

Inquiry should be the basis of the educational input if students are to become successful critical thinkers. According to Wale and Bishaw (2020), inquiry is when students are active partners in their learning and they are able to decide what they want to learn, question what they are learning, and are able to look at multiple perspectives. They continue by adding that inquiry occurs when “...the teacher facilitates and scaffolds learning than gives facts and knowledge so that students engage in investigating, questioning, and explaining their world in a student-centered learning environment” (p. 2). While this paper will give teachers practical tools to teach critical thinking through anecdotes, it is a requirement that students have a sense of agency in what is taught and how it is taught. One of the most difficult realities of teaching critical thinking to students is the fact that the teacher has to consent to releasing some of the

control of the students' education into the hands of the students themselves based on their needs, wants, and interests.

Inquiry in a classroom of young learners in Uzbekistan is somewhat curtailed by traditional teaching methods and students having had limited practice. That lack of agency may inhibit the ability to participate in critical thinking, so one hopes that the use of anecdotes will help generate some of the interest, especially with so many to choose from. Anecdotes tend to be funny and relatable, so students should be able to find material that is of interest to them. The inquiry-based aspect of critical thinking might have to be more determined by the process aspect of the learning. According to Gholam (2019), even if students here have less choice in what they learn, asking them, "How do you want to show what you have learned?" can still encourage critical thinking (p. 128). Teachers should be prepared to offer options or listen to student suggestions on how they want to demonstrate their understanding.

Introduction

In Uzbekistan, the student textbooks are compulsory. As the authors are working within the context of Uzbek primary schools, the activities in this article are modeled after the mandatory book, *Guess What! Level 4 Pupil's Book*. The book consists of 8 units; each unit is subdivided into vocabulary, grammar, skills, story, value, talk time, and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) sections (Reed, 2015). The anecdotes were chosen from a book of government-approved anecdotes so that they would be acceptable for young learners; we specifically selected the ones which can enhance logical reasoning and critical thinking of learners aged nine and 10. All the activities described here can be used with the different anecdotes to increase students' English language learning and critical thinking.

For this article, the authors, opting to choose from a government-approved book of anecdotes, students will be presented with planned anecdotes rather than unplanned ones. According to Deniz Selli-Capur (2008) there are three types of anecdotes: (1) planned anecdotes, (2) semi-planned anecdotes, and (3) unplanned anecdotes (p. 35). Planned anecdotes are anecdotes that are written down and are often part of the linguistic traditions. Semi-planned anecdotes follow a familiar theme, but they might not be fully thought-out or fleshed out. Lastly, unplanned anecdotes are more along the lines of a personal story and happen tangentially. As the anecdotes are the vehicle for teaching English and for critical thinking, the anecdotes used for these activities must be carefully examined in order to be used for teaching.

Additionally, it is important to understand the issues students might face when learning about anecdotes, especially when the anecdotes are humorous. Learning humor in a second language can be difficult for any learner, but specifically young learners will struggle. One main issue for young learners is when the teacher does not scaffold the lesson to promote student understanding. To scaffold student comprehension, first students have to understand that humor is taking place and the students have to form a connection with the material to internalize the humor (Rucynski, Jr. & Prichard, 2021, p. 2). It is only worthwhile to explain humor that the students will encounter in the target language, and if it is something they will

encounter, it is necessary. The real goal of explaining humor is that students not only understand it, but find it funny, and are able to reproduce humor in the same way (Rucynski, Jr. & Prichard, 2021, 2). The humor present in the chosen anecdotes will hopefully be familiar to Uzbek students, but it is also the type of humor seen in anecdotes in English.

For this reason, when teaching young learners it is better to start with the Uzbek anecdotes translated into English. This will ensure understanding and develop the cultural understanding that is also crucial while teaching with humor and about humor. If humor can be injected into a classroom, students will not only learn, but will enjoy their time in the classroom (Rucynski, Jr. & Prichard, 2021, 3). When students understand humor and participate in it, then they will be able to replicate that humor in the target language using critical thinking.

Anecdotes

The anecdotes below were adapted from the book of approved anecdotes and then translated into English by one of the authors (Tilavov, 2018).

A mouse who knows a foreign language

The father mouse is walking around with his two sons, when the cat comes. Then the mouse immediately hides his children under the cupboard, jumps on the chair, and begins to bark. The cat runs away when it hears the howl.

"You see," says the father mouse, laughing, "how important it is to know a foreign language!"

When are apples picked?

The teacher was explaining about the seasons:

- Children, there are four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter. In spring, everything is green and flowers bloom. Summer is hot. Crops are ripened. In autumn, the fruits ripen, and the leaves turn yellow and fall off. Winter is cold, it snows.

The naughty student Aziz did not listen to the lesson. The teacher scolded him and asked:

Who drank my coffee?

The rabbit goes into the coffee shop and buys a coffee and a bun. When he comes back after washing his hands, the coffee is not there.

- Who has drunk my coffee?

There is no sound from the animals.

- I'm asking again, who has drunk my coffee?

Then the bear gets up, growls, and says:

- I have.
- Ah... why haven't you eaten the bun?

"Geography" country

As the plane ascends and the passengers fasten their seatbelts, one passenger says to his companion:

- Is it your first time abroad? I have traveled all over the world. China, Sweden, Spain, Monaco, in short, there is no place left that I haven't seen.
- Then you must know geography well?
- Unfortunately, I have not been to that country yet.

- Stand up; you are not listening to the lesson.
- Teacher, I'm listening.
- Well, in that case, answer my child, when do we pick apples?
- When they are ripe, teacher...

Excellent doctor

- This doctor is very good. He cured my wife in a few minutes.
- How?
- The doctor told him that all his ailments are a symptom of old age.

A student's worth

Little Akbar came from school and said:

- I won't go to school anymore!
- Why?
- The teacher asks me every time he doesn't know something.

A fly

The teacher asks the student:

- There are ten flies on the table. If you kill two of them, how many are left?
- Two dead flies remain.

School bell

In the last class of elementary school, the teacher finished his lesson a couple of minutes before the bell rang and addressed his students:

- If you have questions, ask, I will answer...

A student raised his hand from behind:

- Master, when does the bell ring?

Nurse exam

The surgeon gives advice to the young nurse:

- Cleanliness and discipline are highly valued in our work. So, have you wiped your feet before entering my room?
- Of course!
- We value honesty more than cleanliness. For your information, there is no rug on the threshold.

Because he doesn't know

School has started. In the first grade, a student is brought to the blackboard by the teacher. Whatever he asks, he never answers.

The teacher gets angry:

- What, you don't know anything?
- Yes teacher, I don't know!
- What do you mean by that?
- I have been sent here from home because I don't know anything.

The most useful animal

The teacher asked Salima a question:

- Tell me, my girl, what is the most useful animal?
 - It's a chicken, teacher!
- Teacher asks her why:
- Simple, it is eaten before it is born and after...

Why did you sit down?

In history class, the teacher asks a student a question:

- Who discovered America?

The boy cannot answer the question. The teacher, exhausted, shouts:

- Christopher Columbus!

The boy then sits down. The teacher is angry:

- What is this? Who let you sit?

The student hastily answers:

-Sorry teacher. I thought you were calling someone else.

Activities

The following activities were chosen to implement in the process of teaching young learners and enhancing their logical reasoning and critical thinking skills at elementary schools. The activities for the anecdotes are divided into initial reading activities, during reading activities, and post-reading activities.

Initial Reading Activities

Word, Sentence, and Passage-Level Reading. In an article by Lynn (2020), he proposes that students have three different interactions with a text (p. 28-30). While these three interactions do not directly relate to critical thinking, they are supplemental and will help students to read and understand texts with fluency. Students will access the material ahead of reading for comprehension.

Word-Level Reading.

1. Put students into pairs and have each student take turns reading one word aloud at a time. Students will compete to complete the reading faster than the other student pairs.
2. Students in the same pairs will then read the anecdote backwards one word at a time taking turns. Again, the goal will be to finish reading the anecdote faster than the other pairs.

Sentence-Level Reading.

1. Put students into pairs and have students take turns reading sentences aloud to see who will finish reading the anecdote first.
2. Then the teacher will read the anecdote one sentence at a time, and the students will repeat it after attempting to mimic pronunciation and intonation. Do this for each sentence of the anecdote.

Anecdote-Level Reading.

1. All the students will read the anecdote aloud at the same time. Again, encourage students to read correctly but quickly. Each student should read with the goal of being the first to finish.
2. Set a timer to see if the students will be able to finish reading the anecdote aloud within a certain time period. Have students mark where they are when the timer goes off. You can do this over a period of days to see if student reading fluency improves.
3. The teacher will read the anecdote slowly while the students read the anecdote aloud with them. The teacher will increase the speed of their reading until students are able to read with native-like fluency.

Re-ordered Anecdotes Part One. Before students have read the anecdote for comprehension, it is a good activity to give the students the anecdote in pieces and have them try to re-order it based on logic and critical thinking.

1. Choose one anecdote and then make at least as many copies of it as you need to have small groups of three to four students.
2. Cut out each sentence so it is alone.
3. Give each group a set of sentences and see if they can determine the correct order of the anecdote.

Dictogloss. This activity is meant to allow students the opportunity to analyze where their language comprehension is adequate and where they are missing input. Students are then allowed to work together to construct meaning from their collective understanding (McLeod, 2023, p. 27). Students must activate their critical thinking skills and collaborative skills in order to create understanding.

1. The teacher will read the anecdote two times.
2. The first time through, the students should just listen to the teacher and the second time they should write down any words or phrases that they know. The teacher should not slow or modify their speech to make listening easier.
3. Once students have a list of words and phrases they heard, the teacher should put the students into small groups.
4. The students will then try to create a story with a similar meaning to the original anecdote based on their first two listenings.

Pictogloss. Like its earlier iteration, the dictogloss is an opportunity to demonstrate basic understanding of a text when they first are able to listen to it, but this time, through images (McLeod, 2023, p. 2).

1. The teacher will read each line of the anecdote aloud, and will pause for the students to draw a small picture for each.
2. Students will then try to understand the complete anecdote from their illustrations.

Illustration Matching. In almost a reverse dictogloss, the teacher can have images related to several of the anecdotes and the students have to match the anecdotes with the corresponding pictures to start deepening their understanding.

1. The teacher will post images related to the anecdotes around the room. And then will read the anecdotes one at a time.
2. Students will need to move to stand next to the picture that they think is represented by the anecdote. Based on where students stand, the teacher can gauge their level of understanding.

During Reading Activities

Read and Walk. If students are to learn to start thinking critically, they need to be able to read information, retain what they have read, and then synthesize ideas. For this activity,

students cannot just read what is in front of them, they have to piece together a deeper understanding.

1. Break up the anecdote into sections and label them with numbers in order.
2. Post the sections of the anecdote around the room.
3. Allow students to walk around the room and read the sections.
4. When students have read the whole anecdote in order, they can then begin to decipher what they have read.

Skim, Scan, and Run. This activity was adapted from an article by McCaughey (2018), and it promotes reading fluency as well as critical thinking (p. 45-52). Students are not given enough time to thoroughly read the article, rather they are tasked with taking a cursory look and making educated guesses. Students like challenges such as this and will put pressure on themselves to complete the task ahead of other students.

1. Choose five of the anecdotes from the list above, preferably related to the unit in class. Label each one with a number, letter, or color so that students can identify which anecdote they are talking about.
2. Hang the anecdotes around the room at student eye-level, space them as far apart as possible.
3. Write 10 questions for the students to answer from reading the anecdotes as they walk around the room.
4. Put students into small groups and set a timer for 10 minutes. Students may go up to the anecdotes as many times as they need to, but the anecdotes must stay on the wall and the student's answer sheet must stay on a desk and not move.
5. When the time is up, students must return to their seats near their group's answer sheet.

The Five Senses. This activity activates students' critical thinking by asking them to apply their knowledge of the five senses, sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste. It was adapted from an article by Carter (2015), which encourages students to internalize the anecdotes by relating them to their personal experiences (p. 37-40).

1. Choose any of the anecdotes above, but try to select one that can elicit students to think about each of the five senses.
2. On a piece of paper, have students make a T-chart. On the left side, they will write each of the five senses: See, hear, feel, smell, and taste; they will save the right side, for the student's observations.
3. As students read the anecdote, they should write down what they can visualize seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting.

Gap-Fill Predictions. This activity, adapted from Willis and Willis (2007), allows students to play an active role in the reading process by asking them to fill-in blanks before they have even read based on their prior understanding of anecdotes and English (p. 50). This activity is highly scaffolded in order to promote student success.

1. The teacher should place students in groups of about three students.

2. Read the title of the anecdote and allow students to discuss in their groups what the title might mean with a partner. Have students share their ideas out loud and write some of the ideas on the board.
3. Give the students the anecdote with two or three words removed. These words should not be chosen at random, but rather be words with close collocations to the surrounding words in the anecdote or are vocabulary the students are familiar with.
4. The students will work in their groups to try to fill-in the missing words. Have groups read their anecdotes one at a time and compare what their answers were.
5. When students agree on the missing words, read them the anecdote to check their work.

Word Bank. Once again, this activity is considered a during reading activity, because students will develop their understanding as they complete the assignment.

1. Take one of the anecdotes and remove several key words. Make a key of the words you have removed.
2. Students can work individually or in pairs to match the words in the word bank with the blanks in the text.

Re-ordered Anecdotes Part Two. This activity is used after students have had time to interact with several of the anecdotes and will check for student comprehension.

1. Choose several anecdotes and then make at least as many copies of them as you need to have small groups of three to four students.
2. Cut out each sentence so it is alone.
3. Give each group a set of sentences and see if they can separate the different anecdotes and then put them in the correct order.

Post-Reading Activities

Memory Game. This activity is deceptively simple, but it requires students to have read, understand, and be able to explain what they read to another student (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 50).

1. After students have read and understood several anecdotes, give students different anecdotes and let them read them for a minute or two.
2. Take the anecdotes from the students and then ask them in partners to tell each other what their anecdotes were about. As most students won't have memorized the anecdote, it will require them to use their English language skills to describe what they read and have their partner understand.

Giving Advice. This activity is more grammatical in nature, but will give students the language and the tools that are required for them to apply the anecdotes that they read to their own lives. It was adapted from an article by Kidwell (2020), and she discussed the importance of students being able to not only understand what they have read, but to also apply it in novel concepts (p. 42-48).

1. Teachers should explicitly teach students the modal verbs of *should*, *must*, and *would* as well as imperatives, and give them examples (e.g., you should listen to your parents or listen to your parents).
2. Tells students that based on the lesson in the anecdote(s) they should talk about what they learned through using modal verbs and imperatives.
3. When students have had a chance to practice, pairs of students can come to the front of the room and roleplay giving advice. For example, one student could ask, "Based on the anecdote, what should I do if I don't understand the teacher?" The second student could respond with, "Ask them to repeat the question!"

Summarize the Text. Summarizing activities are important for critical thinking as students must first understand the anecdote to the extent to which they can write about it in a parallel manner. It is also helpful to have students demonstrate that they understood the humor enough to write about the anecdote in a parallel fashion.

1. You can have students work alone or in pairs to rewrite the anecdote in their own words.
2. It is important that students not only change key vocabulary using synonyms but actually re-create the story using entirely new structures.

Personal Experiences. While this may seem like a simplistic activity, when students are able to not only apply anecdotes to their personal experience, but also expound on those experiences language and meaning become ingrained for the learner.

1. After sharing anecdotes, the teacher can ask students to think of a time in their life in which they had a similar experience.
2. After students have had time to reflect, students can share a personal story related to the anecdote.

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