

**Thinking How to Think:
The Role of Critical Thinking in Developing Coherence & Precision
in Writing**

Anand Prakash Pathak, M.Phil. & Radhika B Pasricha, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Output of thinking is the projection of the thoughts it generates but thought is independent of language, though Language depends on thought.

On the basis of the hypothesis mentioned above, and on the basis of various existing maxims in this regard, this study aims at establishing the relationship and the role played by thinking in enhancement of writing skills, especially the role of critical thinking.

In order to study the impact of critical thinking activities on writing skills and vice versa, an activity was chosen which further was implemented amongst the students of B.Tech. (having almost same level of proficiency in English language & expression) as a task-based language learning activity in the Language Laboratory.

The findings were interesting and also established the inseparable relationship between critical thinking and writing; both acted as complementary entities in the enhancement of the other once implemented as a continuous activity.

Key Words: Thinking, Critical Thinking, Free Practice, Expression, Writing Skills, Task-based language learning activity.

Introduction

The meaning of a word does not lie in the word itself; rather its real meaning is there in our mind. We tend to derive the meaning of words through our own associations & past

experiences. Therefore, meaning can't exist independently rather it is created by the communicator.

as a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering. ... I have a notion that, when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them. ... So I should describe thinking as a discourse, ... not aloud to someone else, but silently to oneself.
(Plato)

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (3rd Edition) provides four different definitions of the word "Critical" (as adjective) out of which two fit into our purpose of describing the process of Critical Thinking. The first definition says: "*of the greatest importance to the way things might happen*" and the second defines it: "*as giving opinions or judgments on books, plays, films, etc.*" Combining these two definitions in order to understand the process of critical thinking we can infer from the above that *critical thinking* is a thinking process of the greatest importance which involves logic, judgment and reason in order to be more precise and specific in our understanding and expression. Critical thinking goes beyond accepting things complacently as they exist; it is about questioning and looking for evidences and for reasons before believing them to be true. Unlike *thinking* at times, critical thinking is an unbiased approach to develop or generate verifiable & reconstructive understanding based on skillful analysis and evaluation.

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. (Ken)

On the other hand, the output of thinking is projection of the thoughts it generates but thought is independent of language, though Language depends on thought. In this regard we already have several existing maxims which claim to establish *thought & language* as two separate entities without any interdependency.

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Thought is not Language. Thought is not based on Language. Thought does not depend on Language; Language is not a condition for thought. There is no essential connection between language and thinking except in two senses: that language is a translating device for the imperfect expression of thought or of awareness of experience; and without thinking, humans cannot produce language. (Gethin)

Let us recall the Aristotelian definition Spoken words are the symbol of mental experiences and written words are the symbol of spoken words. Saussure says Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. Nonetheless, thinking remains at the centre as the guiding force to develop and describe our ideas which could further be given a concrete shape in the form of written words. Language serves as a tool of communication but proper projection of thought requires coherent placement of ideas and words. Thinking clearly can only make the projection precise using a language which acts as a tool for thought projection. Communication stimuli can consist of almost everything within our environment and that is what makes it a complex process. We should therefore understand that it is not possible all the time on the part of the receiver to perceive accurately our message, though we should always try to make it as precise as possible.

Methodology

The kind of activity that is chosen aims at finding out how coherent and precise the students have been while developing their thoughts on the basis of their written responses. The written response was taken on the basis of the activity where out of hundred iconic images, the students were given one image each to develop multiple paragraphs with in hundred words each time. And right from the beginning they were told that their responses do not confine within the territory of correct or incorrect as the activity focused more on stimulating critical thinking process for enhanced language learning and their expression on the basis of varied perception. Students do understand that their test or assignments will not be considered on the parameter of right or wrong instead the assessment will be done on the basis of coherently developing their thought process depicting their varied perception using free practice. This free practice allows

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them to explore the possibilities of using new vocabulary without restricting them to the use of specific vocabulary (as most of them are ingenious). Students of common linguistic background were chosen to conduct the test so as to get more accurate result in terms of their written competence.

Description of the Activity

The activity is named as *Iconic Image Description* which is conducted in two sessions of 60 minutes each. In each session the activity is bifurcated into two parts:

- *Part I- Describe as you see!*
- *Part II- Describe as you perceive!*

Part 1: Describe as you see!

In the first half of the session, every student is given one of those iconic images and is asked to observe the given picture carefully and then to notice what is taking place in the image. The purpose is to identify what is clearly evident and visible in the image. Here the focus of the activity is on what they see or to interpret the denotative meaning of the given image. They are given a total time of 25 minutes to develop a paragraph of 100 words on the basis of what they see in the image.

Part 2: Describe as you perceive!

After a break of five minutes they are given a fresh set of instructions in which they are told to look at the same image again and understand the message beyond that is visible and evident in the image. In this part of the activity, now the focus shifts from ‘what they see’ to ‘what they perceive’ which is to focus on the connotative meaning of the image. The instructions given very clearly mentioned that nowhere they should describe what they see neither anything that is evident in the image.

In the second phase of the activity in the next session the images were shuffled and distributed amongst the same set of students. The teacher ensured that the students are not given the same image as given in the last class. The reference number put on the images is used for this

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purpose. The instructions given for the second phase of the activity remained the same viz. *Describe as you see! & Describe as you perceive!*



Image 1

<http://www.noupe.com/inspiration/photography/40-outstanding-award-winning-photos-around-the-world.html>

Analysis

After collecting the response sheets from students (both activities i.e. *Describe as you see! & Describe as you perceive!*), and after comparing them with the activity in the previous session, the findings were quite interesting. The comparison between the first parts of the activity was done. The response sheets of the activity *Describe as you see!* were almost same in terms of the students' description of the image as it was an activity that does not require much critical thinking, neither demanded more of personal investment. Around 8 different students were given the sample *image 1*. Following the instructions given to them, all eight of them described either the beauty of the bloomed lotuses in the pond or the happiness of the child which is quite visible in the image. (Image 1)

Whereas in the second part of the activity *Describe as you perceive!* the same set of students were instructed to develop a paragraph on the basis of what they interpret of the given image. Their interpretation of the image included aspects like; *happiness in adversity, comparing the budding lotus with the struggle of the infant in a mother's womb, Darwin's theory of the*

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survival of the fittest, life is an amalgamation of opportunities and adversities, happiness or contentment as a state of mind, social discrimination between the privileged and the under-privileged etc.

The same activity was conducted with multiple groups each consisting of 30 students. On the basis of twelve shortlisted iconic images it was observed that the interpretation of the same image was done by all 8 different students entirely in eight different ways as it required much critical thinking and also it was based on personal experiences and association which demanded personal investment leading to multiple interpretations of the same image.

Interpretation

The response on the basis of the part II of the activity i.e. *Describe as you perceive!* is of great use in identifying students' level of critical thinking and is also helpful to understand how coherent they were in their thinking process.

- Lack of coherent thinking is evident in many cases where the written responses have abrupt shift and/or broken sentences that lead to break in the flow in which the reader tries to perceive the written response. As a result, the responses were abstract and ambiguous.
- There were also some students who developed their perception in the form of written responses maintaining the right flow and coherence. There was a proper beginning leading to the description followed by a suggestive conclusion. Thereby, the responses were precise and free from ambiguity.

From these two kinds of responses it becomes quite evident that the assimilation of thought plays an important role in our expression. In both kinds of exercises the students' thought process was stimulated. While deriving the denotative meaning in the context of the image, less of evaluation, analysis and critical dissection of the image were done by the student which was comparatively much difficult for the student when they were told to depict the interpretation of the meaning in connotative context. Their write-ups often exhibit instances of ambiguity in expression which is suggestive of their ambiguous thought process.

Conclusion

After going through the written response sheets of around 240 students based on the activity mentioned above, the following important aspects came into light:

- The free practice nature of the activity allowed the students not only to juggle with their creativity but also to explore new vocabulary.
- Providing a setup in which the students are given an opportunity where their critical thinking skills are stimulated and they are exposed to the similar situation again, shows consistency in terms of development of thoughts and ideas.
- Involving them in writing activities with the same approach helps them improve gradually in terms of maintaining coherence and precision in their expression.

Thus, to infer from the above, we can say that writing does not exist as an independent process rather it is dependent on our thinking process. The way we think gets reflected in our writing. Coherence & precision in writing are the result of free flow of thinking that includes analysis & evaluation for the development of thought and deriving the conclusion of the given situation. Language skills and the critical thinking ability of an individual are interdependent & complementary which if exposed to rigorous drill and continuous practice show improvement in expression.

Reference Images



Image 2.



Image 3.

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<<http://www.echecs-photos.be/BobbyFischer-photos/slides/1967%20An%20iconic%20%20picture%20of%20the%20chess%20champion%20Bobby%20Fischer%20taken%20in%20New%20York.html>>

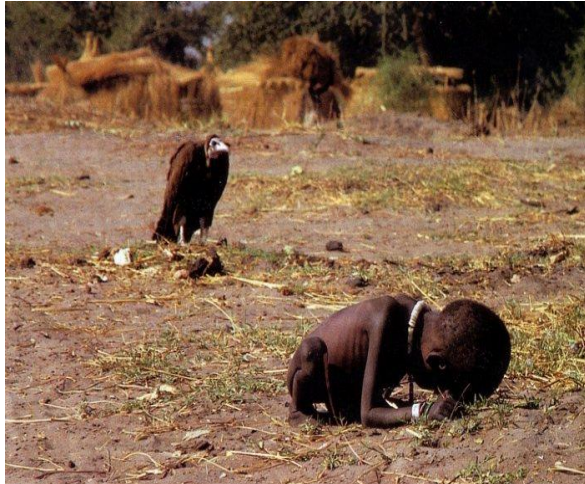


Image 5.

<<http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/08/12/vulture-stalking-a-child/>>

<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/article-611253/Travel-pictures-week.html>>



Image 4.

<<http://www.yeeeeee.com/2009/01/17/images-that-will-make-you-feel-lucky-30-pics/>>

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Anand Prakash Pathak, M.Phil. English
appathak@ddn.upes.ac.in



Radhika B Pasricha, Ph.D. English
rbpasricha@ddn.upes.ac.in

University of Petroleum & Energy Studies
Dehradun
Uttarakhand
India

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