



## What Makes Critical Thinking Critical for Adult ESL Students

Critical-thinking skills help to prepare adult education students for a successful transition to college degree programs and for job advancement. Yet fostering critical thinking poses a challenge to ESL instructors. Brookfield (2012) provides a way forward for adult educators when he explains that the crux of critical thinking is to discover one's assumptions. The author describes how instructors can model uncovering their assumptions, thus creating a safer environment for students to engage in critical thinking. Three of Brookfield's critical-thinking tasks—speaking in tongues, the critical incident questionnaire, and scenario analysis—implemented during an intermediate ESL writing course at a community college are explained. Students' responses to these tasks are summarized and reflections on both the benefits and challenges of using critical-thinking tasks in ESL classes are described.

Adult education students must learn to engage in critical thinking. Because of recent changes in legislation, the ability to critically analyze arguments—rather than to merely memorize information—has become a prerequisite for college. California's Common Core State Standards (2012) uphold that 11th- and 12th-grade students should be able to “introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.” Because the new 2014 GED has been designed to reflect state standards, the writing section of the new GED now assesses students' ability to “develop an argument in which they use evidence directly from the passages they are given in order to support their assertions” (GED Testing Services, 2012, p. 8). As adult education administrators and instructors consider their mission to prepare students for transi-

tion into degree programs, how can they integrate critical-thinking tasks into the curriculum?

As I reflected on this question, I prepared three critical-thinking tasks for an eight-week noncredit ESL writing course that I taught in an adult education program at a local community college. What follows is an account of my experience implementing these tasks with one group of adult ESL students. The findings below are based on written feedback that students provided at the end of each class as well as the notes that I took as I reflected on our class sessions. In the first section of this article, I review the literature on critical thinking. Then, I describe how *teaching* critical thinking begins with *modeling* critical thinking. In each of the final three sections, I explain the tasks I implemented and students' responses to these tasks. I conclude by affirming that while there are challenges to introducing critical-thinking tasks, such tasks provide adult students with formidable learning experiences and are essential for transition into college degree programs.

### **Literature on Critical Thinking**

"Critical thinking is essentially learning to ask the right questions," explained an audience member at a 2011 TESOL Convention presentation. Brookfield (2012) identifies what constitutes the right questions when he explains that the "core process" of critical thinking is "hunting assumptions" (p. 7). That is, people learn to think critically when they question whether their assumptions about anything—discrimination, what makes a good résumé, how to get a job—are true or not. Scriven and Paul (1987) define critical thinking as "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" (as cited in Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2009, para. 2).

Why should the process of fostering critical thinking be used by adult education instructors teaching students from multiple contexts? First, Beaumont (2010) asserts that critical-thinking skills learned in the classroom extend to life beyond the classroom. Second, Jarvis (2010) argues that adult education teachers should structure learning that is relevant to felt needs or problems because adult students are motivated when there is some "disharmony" between their experience and their perception of the world (p. 133). Such disharmony leads to students' questioning their assumptions about their perception of the world and thus helps students "critically analyze their social context" (Jarvis, p. 69). For instructors convinced they must rise to the challenge of introducing critical-thinking tasks, how should they begin?

Atkinson (1997) employs the “cognitive apprenticeship” (p. 87) approach, which involves the phases of modeling, coaching, and fading. First, instructors *model* the critical-thinking task that they expect their students to complete. Then instructors *coach* students through these tasks. Finally, as the “student-apprentice” (p. 88) internalizes critical-thinking skills, the instructor’s role *fades*.

### **Introducing Three Critical-Thinking Tasks**

There were 14 students in the class in which I introduced three critical-thinking tasks. Seven of the 14 students were from Mexico, and the others were from Russia, Bulgaria, South Korea, Egypt, and Romania. Of the 14 students, 10 were women, and 4 were men. During the eight-week writing course, I spent the bulk of time in the modeling phase as our class completed the three critical-thinking tasks described below. While I did not consciously reach the fading phase, the coaching phase did take place as I provided students with additional content to complete in groups and on their own the same task that I had modeled with the entire class.

Often the best way instructors can model critical thinking is by showing students how their own assumptions are challenged during normal interaction in class. For example, while listing items for the writing prompt “disadvantages to living with one’s parents,” I suggested that one disadvantage is that some people may not be able to keep their entire paycheck when their parents live with them. One student disagreed by stating that Americans like me were different from her. Another student explained that he helped his mom because he wanted to, not because he was obliged to help her. During this brief exchange, I realized that I had projected my mentality onto my students, assuming that they agreed with my view—the view that being required to give money to one’s parents was a disadvantage to living with them. I acknowledged to the class that my assumption did not accurately describe most of the people in the classroom, and I removed it from our list. During the course, I continued to model critical thinking as I introduced three critical-thinking tasks. Below, I summarize these tasks and complete each section by sharing feedback from students.

#### **Task 1: Speaking in Tongues**

The first time I intentionally modeled critical thinking for students during this course, I used Brookfield’s technique “speaking in tongues” (2012, p. 62). I wrote the following question on the board: “What do ESL students need to get a good job in Chicago?” I told students that I would give them four popular answers to this question. Then, I asked them to stand up and to follow me to the wall on their

right, where we gathered around a piece of paper that I had taped there with the words “language skills.” For two minutes, I explained that some people believe speaking and writing in English are essential for employment, and some students nodded in agreement.

Then, I asked students to follow me to another wall, where we stopped in front of the paper marked “connections.” “What do you need to get a good job in Chicago?” I asked. “It’s not what you know. It’s who you know. A diploma is important, but it doesn’t guarantee you’ll get a job.” After I gave reasons for why “connections” were important, the students followed me to the third and fourth walls, where I explained why some people deem “customer service” and others “following orders” as the most important factors for getting a good job.

The next step of this task was for students to formulate their opinions by standing in front of one of the four papers—the one that they believed most accurately answered the question regarding employment in Chicago. Then, with the other students in that group, they wrote a paragraph using examples from their own lives to support the answers they had selected. Later, as each group took turns expressing its views, students again had the opportunity to reflect on viewpoints different from the one they had chosen.

### ***From Modeling to Coaching***

As students began to understand what speaking in tongues involved, I gave them more ownership of the process. The second time we did speaking in tongues, the question I used was: “How should immigrants respond to the culture of their new country?” I provided three different answers—resist change, assimilate, and acculturate—using an English proverb to represent each answer. For example, the first piece of paper read, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” to represent assimilation. I could tell that Taciana, a student from Romania, wanted to speak, so I gave her the floor.<sup>1</sup> She declared that she was in agreement and that when people come to America, they must be ready to change. When we walked to the two alternative answers, I allowed other students to share their thoughts with the class.

### ***Student Voices***

The second time our class engaged in speaking in tongues, Pedro, a 35-year-old immigrant from Mexico, commented on the proverb “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” He said that he was very surprised and had never thought about this proverb before. During an informal course evaluation on the last day, I asked students to provide both written and oral feedback on each of the critical-thinking tasks used during the course. Part of the written feedback required students

to rate the critical-thinking tasks on a Likert scale, with 1 being *Extremely helpful* and 5 *Not helpful at all*. While many students, including Pedro, rated speaking in tongues as a 1 or 2, Oksana, a woman from Russia, rated it as a 5. She wrote, "I did not like this one. Too hard to write paragraph in a short time." Although Oksana wrote some well-organized paragraphs during the course, clearly the limited time I allotted for writing the speaking in tongues paragraphs created an obstacle for her to express her thoughts in writing. I realize that there were times during this writing course that I experienced tension between fostering critical thinking in students' writing and providing the support and practice for students to write with correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. If I learn from Oksana's feedback, I will give future students more time to write an in-class paragraph when critical thinking is involved than when I give them writing prompts such as "Describe the city you are from."

### **Task 2: Using the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ)**

I gave students a modified version of Brookfield's Critical Incident questionnaire (CIQ) ([http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr.\\_Stephen\\_D.\\_Brookfield/Critical\\_Incident\\_Questionnaire.html](http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr._Stephen_D._Brookfield/Critical_Incident_Questionnaire.html)) at the end of class each week for the purposes of (a) getting students' feedback on the classes that week and (b) using their responses to model critical thinking. The CIQ entails students' spending 10 minutes to give anonymous responses to the following questions:

1. What have you liked the most about this course during the last two classes?
2. What has surprised you the most?
3. When have you been confused or puzzled?
4. Do you have any other questions?

After reading students' responses to these four questions, I would return to class the next week and share some of the anonymous responses with the entire class. I explained how students' responses at times confirmed and at other times challenged my assumptions. In addition to helping students see the value of critical thinking in the form of critical self-assessment, my goal in using the CIQ to model critical thinking for students was to show them that the process of questioning one's assumptions was difficult but not catastrophic. At the risk of being overly simplistic in this article, my aim was to engender in students the attitude, "If our teacher can question what he believes to be true in the context of this writing classroom, so can we." I hoped that by taking the risk of reporting how students' anonymous

comments in the CIQs at times exposed flaws in my thinking that they would take similar risks in critical-thinking tasks by being willing to consider alternative opinions and even identifying weaknesses within their own arguments.

Thus, I often began the week by explaining to students how they had helped me question my assumptions. At the beginning of one class, I said, “One student wrote on the CIQ, ‘I really enjoyed the dictation.’ This comment surprised me. I did this activity to fill 20 minutes of time while I was helping other students log onto their computers.” Yet even when none of the CIQs challenged my assumptions, I still read some of the students’ responses to show students that their responses confirmed my assumptions. “It’s reassuring for students,” notes Brookfield (2012), to learn that critical thinking can sometimes “lead to us committing even more strongly to assumptions we already hold” (pp. 67-68).

### ***Student Voices***

On the last day of class when I asked students to evaluate the CIQ, Taciana wrote, “I don’t think it’s necessary for this class. Maybe for a longer class, but for me personally you are a good teacher and it’s better just teach.” Other students, such as Pedro, however, recognized some of the pros of this task. Pedro said that this task was helpful because it provided him with an opportunity to release his feelings and that it also served as a landmark for what he had learned. In Pedro’s comments, however, there was no evidence that my using the CIQ to model critical thinking helped him develop critical-thinking skills.

### **Task 3: Scenario Analysis**

I composed scenarios of fictional characters at my students’ language level and with the types of real-life issues I thought they might face. The goal of these scenarios, or mini case studies, was for students to “put themselves into the head of the character and try to identify the assumptions that the character might be operating under” (Brookfield, 2012, p. 87). For example, during a two-week unit on work, I wrote a three-paragraph scenario to help students identify the assumptions of an immigrant working at McDonald’s. What follows is a summary:

Charles, an African immigrant, was angry because his new manager—a woman from a neighboring African country—constantly corrected him. Charles had never had any complaints from customers as a custodian, but when his new manager made him work as a cashier, it seemed that she constantly ordered him to change the way he talked to customers. Charles was certain that his new

manager was making his life miserable because his country had fought against hers in a recent war. Charles decided to ask his co-workers to help him contact his old manager, an American man, to get help with this problem.

After students read the scenario, they asked questions for clarification. Then a couple of students summarized the scenario for the class.

The next step was for students to respond to the writing prompt: “Make a list of some of the things that Charles thinks are true.” I provided some examples, and then students made their lists and shared them with the class. One student said that he thought the new manager did not like Charles. After eliciting additional responses, we discussed the question, “How can Charles find out if these things are true?” Most of the responses centered on who Charles could talk to. He might ask his new manager why she corrected Charles so much. Charles could also ask his coworkers whether it would help for him to talk to his old manager. The final step was for students to give an alternative interpretation of the scenario. For example, one student suggested that Charles might have had problems because when he was a custodian he did not have to talk with customers.

### ***Student Voices***

Students’ responses to the scenario-analysis activity were also mixed. After one scenario analysis, Pedro mentioned that the activity was important because his own manager had to deal with employees who showed up late to work. Pedro explained that at times his manager asked Pedro for advice on how to deal with other workers. After Pedro explained the advice that he gave, other students critiqued the validity of his advice. Ali, a cashier at Wendy’s, agreed that he thought some employees have experiences similar to those of the man in the scenario. Yet he explained that his own experience was different because he had a good manager and thus did not have problems. Thus both Pedro and Ali were able to make real-world connections from the scenario analysis to their own work situations.

### **Conclusion**

Although I never used the term “critical thinking” with Pedro, Taciana, Oksana, Ali, or with other writing students, I was intentional about implementing critical thinking by regularly incorporating the three tasks above into my lesson plans. In this article, I have been transparent about the difficulties associated with these tasks, yet these tasks challenged students to analyze the information they were given. Higher-order critical-thinking tasks clearly demand language

skills that not every student possesses, but adult education instructors should not be scared away from all critical-thinking tasks. Even the three tasks presented in this article can be adapted for lower levels of learners. As instructors carefully introduce critical-thinking tasks—first by modeling and then by coaching—students will be able to make real-life connections. They will progress toward the writing standards reflected in the Common Core State Standards and the 2014 GED. When our adult students learn to analyze a problem from multiple perspectives and explain these perspectives in written English, they are one step closer to successfully transitioning into college degree programs—and one step closer to achieving their dreams.

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### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>The real names of students have been changed.

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