

# Developing Middle Eastern EAP Learners' Critical Thinking Skills through Contextualised and Reflective Teaching Materials

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## ABSTRACT

Middle Eastern students are often categorised as passive learners lacking autonomy and the ability to reflect and think critically. This paper reveals how critical thinking skills can be developed through various classroom tasks which encourage reflection and critical evaluation of sources both in pre-sessional EAP courses as well as throughout the students' academic career. Furthermore, it will discuss tasks and classroom materials tailor-made for EAP students at the University of Kurdistan – Hewler, in order to improve their higher order thinking skills.

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## Introduction

A common debate regarding critical thinking is often related to the learners' level of critical thinking skills due to their educational and cultural background. In this discussion, Western students are generally characterised as more autonomous and critical than other learners from around the world, whereas the stereotypical picture of students from the Middle East is characterised by a lack of autonomy, time management skills, and a reflective approach to their own learning (Derderian-Aghajanian & Cong, 2012, Ahmed & Mahrus, 2010). This should not be seen as an indication of Middle Eastern learners being less intelligent than university students from other parts of the world, but a sign of how their educational background has not provided them with the tools and opportunities to engage in critical thinking. Teachers at the University of Kurdistan (UKH) have clearly identified to a high degree that the majority of their students need to develop critical thinking skills.

There is a need to understand how Middle Eastern students can engage critically in various task types in the EAP classroom and, additionally, a need to know how EAP instructors can support international students' development of critical thinking skills instead of the tendency to become frustrated and criticise students' lack of understanding and engagement in the teaching materials.

Set in this context, this paper argues that EAP instructors as well as undergraduate (UG) lecturers have to be aware of the importance of gradually developing Middle Eastern students' autonomy and critical thinking skills throughout the students' academic career. This will be shown in a discussion of how various classroom tasks take the cultural and educational background of students at UKH into consideration when preparing teaching materials that feature in the academic demands of the critical learner.

## Literature Review on Critical Thinking

The Middle Eastern classroom is often characterised as being a passive learning environment consisting of students with an educational background mainly based on lectures, memorisation and examinations (Ahmed & Mahrus, 2010). As a result, many Middle Eastern

students are unfamiliar with project-based work, group work and small scale research such unfamiliarity is sometimes perceived by Western teachers as an indolent avoidance of autonomous learning and a lack of critical thinking skills.

According to many researchers in Western universities, students not only “...have to become competent language users and autonomous agents who are capable of independent thinking and action” (Illés, 2012, p.506) but also have to engage in higher order thinking. This means, for example, the ability to evaluate and analyse (Bloom, 1956). Likewise, EAP instructors as well as UG lecturers at UKH often refer to the importance of critical thinking skills, for example, by mentioning it in curriculum documents.

Critical thinking is a complex term defined in numerous ways and valued in many academic institutions. Questioning, thinking about alternatives and being able to make theoretical abstract comparisons is often the academic directive, but in fact there is no fixed definition that describes what critical thinking means exactly even though there are various attempts at explaining its complex nature. In this paper, however, I refer to Young’s (1992) definition of critical thinking as the link into the students’ experiences, where students can then apply critical analysis. At UKH, this understanding of a critical approach to sources implies that teachers should provide the students with the opportunity to contextualise the learning materials in their own Kurdish, Iraqi or (as a minimum) the Middle Eastern context. However, this is not a ground breaking perspective. Even in the 1950s, Bloom stated that students have to understand what they are studying before they can successfully develop their higher order thinking skills such as applying, analysing, and evaluating (Bloom, 1956).

Many EAP materials are departing from the Anglo Saxon focus to a wider range of global topics (Valente, 2008), and new materials at UKH have been developed by the EAP instructors to contextualise the teaching materials in order for students to be able to engage critically with the tasks.

Another method of developing EAP students’ critical skills could be completed through various reflective tasks. As Finlay (2008) explains, there are various perceptions of the term reflection, and how it can be used in a learning environment. According to Aliakbari and Faraji (2011), teachers can contribute to students’ ability to think critically by asking questions that encourage students to reflect on their own experiences, opinions, and thoughts. Reflective tasks could also be postscripts to essays (Cavdar & Doe, 2012), reading reaction journals (Evans, 2008) or simple reflective paragraphs which could be labelled as “metacognitive tasks which require learners to reflect on their progress.” (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2013, p.111). Similar to Bloom (1956), Gibbs’ (1988) stages leading to deeper reflection can be used as a model of how teachers can help students to reflect by guiding them through various levels of thinking such as description, evaluation and reflection. Without having learnt what it actually means to describe, evaluate and analyse, it is challenging for the students to reflect. However, it is possible for the teacher to provide the students with various scaffolding tools that gradually lead to critical reflection.

To illustrate the contextualised and reflective teaching approach to encourage criticality, a few classroom tasks in the EAP classroom at UKH that have been adapted to the students’ cultural and educational background will be evaluated in the following sections.

### **Contextualised Teaching Materials**

One way to contextualise the materials at UKH was to link the topics to the Kurdish context where the students were able to use their present knowledge of topics such as health, sociology, and media to engage in the materials more critically. As an example, a model

Compare and Contrast essay regarding the Kurdish and Nordic diet was written in order to be deconstructed by the students in order that they could become familiar with the building blocks of an essay and later construct their own compare and contrast essays. Another task involved the students giving a presentation on the advantages and disadvantages of different Kurdish newspapers.

As the students understood the Kurdish context, this approach created a new classroom dynamic as in a discussion of reliable sources, they were able to discuss different perspectives on politically biased TV channels in the region and critically challenge the validity of sources of information from various Kurdish newspapers and webpages. The contextualised materials clearly engaged students in discussion and different perspectives and arguments became evident. As they used topics and a context that linked into their present knowledge, the focus suddenly shifted from unpacking an Anglo Saxon context to teaching and engaging critically in EAP. Some students were sceptical about information in a model essay that mentioned the increasing number of young men who wanted a nose job in Mosul (Elias, 2012) and they questioned the facts and the reliability of this source. They did not blindly accept the information presented to them. This demonstrated critical thinking skills for the rest of the class and was a good starting point with regard to becoming a more critical reader and asking critical questions. Thus, by contextualising the teaching materials, students were able to develop their critical thinking skills.

### **Reflective Tasks**

Another method to develop critical thinking was to ask students to post their reflections on various topics but for many students it appeared to be a difficult task to express their personal opinions about simple topics like their progress and individual strengths and weaknesses and many tended to write general descriptive paragraphs. On occasion, many even copied directly from internet sources despite being provided with model reflective paragraphs and thorough explanations in class.

However, if the students were able to find their personal voice, it provided a useful insight into the challenges and achievements each student found to be part of their learning process which was then used as an example for the rest of the class to illustrate what it meant to reflect upon a question or topic.

Based on this experience, the instructors later decided that all students in the English foundation programme at UKH had to write reflective paragraphs to engage in critical thinking by reflecting on topics from the classroom either by using reflective tasks from textbooks (e.g. Slaughter, 2012) or via questions posed by the teacher after the students had obtained some knowledge about a topic.

A pre-sessional EAP class at UKH could include a task where students have to describe Kurdish newspapers, evaluate their advantages and disadvantages, and reflect on how reliable these sources are. In an in-sessional EAP class, reaching the level of critical reflection has developed into a more challenging task where students have to write an annotated bibliography including elements like the description of main points in a text, an evaluation of the validity of the source, and a personal reflection on the usefulness of this source in their own research. In this way, the EAP instructor gradually increases the complexity of the task and supports the students in reaching levels of critical thinking.

Inspired by Cavdar & Doe (2012), another in-sessional reflective task at UKH is reflective postscripts to academic compositions, where students reflect on peer reviews or teacher feedback and write a reflective piece of writing about how the feedback has been

incorporated in the final draft of the submitted composition. This critical approach to own learning improves the final draft and assists the students in making more informed decisions in the future. This can easily be completed through the plagiarism tool Turnitin where the teacher can post questions to help the students reflect on student feedback, the weaknesses of their composition, and how the draft could be improved.

## **Discussion**

Despite the opportunity to develop the EAP learners' critical thinking skills, a contextualised and reflective approach might be met with scepticism by both students and the academic institution. Firstly, a textbook that matches the learners' cultural and educational background is difficult to find. Consequently, students will have to rely on in-house materials, but at UKH this option of exposing students to materials prepared by instructors was considered too risky by the administration which feared students would consider these home-made materials 'unprofessional'. Preparing Kurdish contextualised teaching materials was also found to be a rewarding yet time consuming experience for the EAP instructors at UKH, and in practice was very challenging to produce the materials continuously as the students developed their language. These concerns were raised by the UKH management who stated that published EAP materials were applicable to all EAP courses around the world and from the top down EAP instructors were advised to present lectures using the available EAP materials where extensive feedback was considered unnecessary as the strategy was that as soon as possible students should become accustomed to the autonomous learning environment in an academic context.

This might be the right approach for post-graduate students, but due to the majority of students' underdeveloped critical thinking skills, this academic skill could be nurtured in a pre-sessional EAP course. It is therefore argued that developing students' higher thinking skills implies an adaptation of the teaching materials to the local context and the instructors' ability to ask questions that link into the students' experiences and thoughts.

Studies have shown that by contextualising the materials around the student journey so to speak, the learning environment will not only empower the students with higher order thinking skills but also be more motivating (Mahrus and Ahmed, 2010). This was confirmed in both student and teacher feedback at UKH.

Due to working with the students' lower order thinking skills such as understanding the topic and the relevance, they were able to critically engage in the materials and reflect on the topics instead of constantly trying to understand what the topic was. The importance of reflecting 'is a practice which forces and challenges the learners to think creatively and critically, and to adopt a critical attitude towards the world' (Kabilan, 1999, p.3).

## **Conclusion**

Generally speaking, there are ways to develop Middle Eastern students' critical thinking skills instead of labelling this group negatively. Preparing the students at UKH to think critically is a little complex, but contextualised materials and reflective tasks strategies may develop this.

These tasks provide ways in which teachers can engage EAP learners in critical thinking. Reading roles, group work, presentations, and project based work are other strategies to cultivate students' critical thinking skills, which can be implemented to various degrees in a pre-sessional year for the learners to be introduced to the higher demands in UG.

Despite the use of a textbook with global topics, it is still important to have a student centred classroom environment where the EAP learners' educational and cultural background is taken into consideration when preparing classroom tasks that can develop the students' ability to think critically.

It is clear that students in a one year pre-sessional EAP course will have not yet fully developed their critical thinking skills at this relatively early stage in their academic careers. This should be seen as an ongoing process bearing in mind the importance of lecturers who will continue to contribute to the development of the learners' higher order thinking skills when the students have been accepted onto their UG programmes.

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