

*Teaching History
to Promote Critical Thinking Skills in EFL Students*

تدريس التاريخ

لتعزيز مهارات التفكير النقدي لدى طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية

Dr. El Ghalia Kaabeche

Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University, Setif (2), Algeria

e.kaabeche@univ-setif2.dz

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الملخص:

التاريخ ليس مجرد مجموعة من التواريخ والأسماء والأحداث المتعلقة بالماضي. كما أن التاريخ لا يتعلق فقط بمجرد معرفة وحفظ هذه التواريخ والأسماء والأحداث التاريخية. إن نطاق التاريخ وطبيعته يذهبان إلى ما هو أبعد من كل هذا. في الواقع، يلعب التاريخ دورا مهما في إعانة الطلبة على فهم العالم من حولهم وذلك بتزويدهم بأفكار ورؤى حول ما حدث في الماضي وتأملات عما يحدث في الحاضر والمستقبل. بهذه الطريقة، يمكن لتدريس التاريخ أن يعزز مهارات التفكير النقدي لدى الطلبة. تعتبر هذه الورقة البحثية محاولة لتسليط الضوء على أهمية تدريس التاريخ من أجل تعزيز وتنمية مهارات التفكير النقدي لدى طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التاريخ، التدريس، مهارات التفكير النقدي، طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Abstract:

History is not a mere collection of dates, names, and events about the past. It is not just knowing and memorizing these historical facts. The scope and nature of History go well beyond all of this. In fact, History plays a significant role in shaping the students' understanding of the world around as it can provide them with insights into the past and reflections about the present and future. This way, the teaching of History can promote critical thinking skills in students. The present theoretical paper is an attempt to shed light on the importance of teaching History in enhancing and promoting critical thinking skills in EFL students.

Keywords:

Critical thinking skills; EFL students; History; Teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION:

At the university level in Algeria, the teaching of History courses¹ to EFL students is often characterized by the old traditional method of lecture-based classes in which the students are usually passive recipients of information or knowledge. It is also often focused on one main skill, memorization which the students find boring. As a consequence, the students' interest in the subject decreases.

As History teachers, however, we can help our EFL students develop their critical thinking skills that would enable them to interpret facts and analyze historical events relying on both primary and secondary sources. This would in turn allow them to look at these historical events from different perspectives and therefore evaluate them objectively and as a consequence draw their own conclusions based on the given historical data. The present paper attempts to shed light on the importance of teaching History in order to enhance and promote critical thinking skills among EFL students. It starts first with a general overview of the philosophy of history and history teaching. Then it moves on to deal with the importance of teaching the civilization of the target language to EFL students. After that, the paper discusses the main critical thinking skills that teachers can promote in their EFL students within a History or a Civilization course. It then discusses a number of techniques and strategies that teachers can use in order to foster critical thinking skills in their students. At the end, the paper tackles the main potential challenges that History teachers may face while attempting to attain the desired objectives.

2. The Philosophy of History and History Teaching:

History is the intellectual discipline that is centered on the study of the chronological record of past events. On the basis of critical and objective examination of source materials, it attempts to interpret and explain these past events.² In his major work *The Idea of History*, the great Oxford philosopher, archaeologist, and historian Robin George Collingwood stated: "History is 'for' human self-knowledge...the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is."³

In this quote, Collingwood discussed the purpose of History and stated that it serves for human-self knowledge. He also focused on the value of History. For him, History teaches people about the past in order to enlarge their historical understanding of human nature. Hence, understanding a particular human society is achieved through learning and understanding its past.

History teaches students about different civilizations and cultures. This fosters in students “cultural understanding” which in turn promotes the idea of “acceptance of the other”. This is the case when students are taught History the right way. However, when students are taught History badly, they will focus just on the names, dates, and places they find in historical texts while reading or trying to memorize historical events. In this respect, Robin George Collingwood wrote: “A man who was taught history badly when he was at school, and has never worked at it since, may think there is nothing in it except events, and dates and places: so that whenever he can find events and dates and places, he will fancy himself in the presence of history.”

According to Collingwood, when people are taught History in a bad way they will develop a mistaken idea about it. They will always think that History is just a mere record of past dates, places, and events. However, people who have ever worked at History intelligently know that it is never about mere historical events, but about “actions that express the thoughts of their agents; and that the framework of dates and places is of value to the historian only because, helping to place each action in its context, it helps him to realize what the thoughts of an agent operating in that context must have been like.⁴ For Collingwood, dates and places are important in History just because they help the historian place historical events in their real contexts.

In the same context, Linda Elder, Meg Gorzycki, and Richard Paul explored the same question in their book *The Student Guide to Historical Thinking: Going beyond Dates, Places, and Names to the Core of History* and stated:

History is still generally taught as a series of names, dates, and places. Instruction in history sometimes helps students learn to detect a degree of cause and effect. But students are not typically taught to think critically while reading historical accounts, or to write critically when composing essays on historical events, issues, and ideas. Students, for most part, are not taught to listen critically during discussions on history. They are not taught to think through historical concepts, nor internalize historical meanings ... Even the best students are often unable to make connections between the past and the present because they have not learned to think critically about evidence or lack of evidence, the historian’s perspective, or the implications of a particular narrative.⁵

Linda Elder, Meg Gorzycki, and Richard Paul agree with Collingwood on the philosophy of history teaching. For them, students are often not taught to think critically about historical data.

Accordingly, we should correct our mistaken ideas about what History is and how it should be taught. History should not be looked at as a mere record of dates, names, and places about past events. It is not just about knowing and memorizing these historical dates, names, places, and events. In the same vein, the teaching of History should not be based only on the classical lecture-based lessons which are mostly focused on a single skill, memorizing which students find boring.

3. The Importance of Teaching the Civilization of the Target Language to EFL Students:

During my teaching experience at the Department of English Language and Literature as a History teacher, many of my undergraduate students have asked me the same question: Why should we study a History or a Civilization course if we are interested just in learning the English language? In fact, within the Algerian academic circles, many EFL students are unaware of the importance of studying the civilization of the target language. In the same context, a number of language teachers still underrate the importance of the inclusion of a Civilization or a History course in the curriculum neglecting the fact that this is basic to a successful teaching-learning process.

For students who study English as a foreign language, the “Civilization of the Target Language” is part of the curriculum because the history of the nation or the country where the target language is spoken as the mother tongue represents the culture of the language itself. And because language and culture are two inseparable entities, since they have a complex homologous relationship and both are deeply intertwined, language cannot exist without culture and as a consequence cannot be taught without it. Therefore, the teaching of History in an EFL classroom can be a very effective tool for the teaching and learning of the culture of this language.

As a matter of fact, many scholars and researchers have focused on the relationship between language and culture and concluded that both are closely related. For example, in his book titled *Principles of language learning and Teaching*, Henry Douglass Brown pointed out the close relationship between language and culture and stated: “A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.”⁶ In this respect, Alicia Ardila-Rey also held that culture and language are “inextricably linked with each other.”⁷ In the same context, Kuang Jin-Feng stated: “Language is the carrier of culture and culture is the content of language. There is no language without culture content.”⁸ Based on this idea of the language-culture interconnectedness, many scholars and researchers have therefore highlighted the need to integrate culture in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

4. Promoting Critical Thinking Skills among EFL Students in a History or a Civilization Course:

Scholars have provided different definitions for critical thinking. In a statement written by Michael Scriven and Richard Paul for the “National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking”, critical thinking is defined 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 ... It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue; assumptions; concepts; empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions; implications and consequences; objections from alternative viewpoints; and frame of reference. Critical thinking—in being responsive to variable subject matter, issues, and purposes—is incorporated in a family of interwoven modes of thinking, among them: scientific thinking, mathematical thinking, historical thinking, ...⁹

In this statement, Michael Scriven and Richard Paul provided the most important features of critical thinking. According to them, critical thinking is defined as the intellectual disciplined process in which the thinker actively and skillfully uses higher modes of thinking. Being responsive to variable settings, critical thinking is incorporated in a set of interrelated higher thinking modes including historical thinking.

History and Civilization courses play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language at the university level. The inclusion of a Civilization course in the curriculum is, therefore, basic to a successful teaching-learning process within an EFL context. In addition to promoting the learners' knowledge and familiarity with the civilization and culture of the country where the target language is spoken as the mother tongue, this will also enhance and promote critical thinking skills in students. This part of the paper, therefore, attempts to shed light on the main critical thinking skills that teachers can promote in their EFL students in a History/Civilization course and suggests a number of activities, techniques, and strategies that these teachers can use in order to reach the desired objectives.

In addition to memory skills that are based on the acquisition, retention, and retrieval of knowledge in the form of historical data, critical thinking skills that teachers can develop in their students in a History class include, but are not limited to, the following: information gathering and assessing, comparing and contrasting, data interpretation, argument analysis and evaluation, raising vital questions, hypothesis formulation and testing, deductive reasoning, making reasoned judgments about controversial issues, thesis statement formulation, and drawing valid conclusions.

In order to enhance the above mentioned critical thinking skills in EFL students in a History or a Civilization class, teachers can make use of a variety of activities, techniques and strategies. The following are some guidelines:

1-Expose the students to multiple historical texts about the same topic. This would allow the students see the topic or issue in question from different perspectives and viewpoints. By considering multiple perspectives, students can learn to analyze historical issues and draw logical and well-supported conclusions.

2-Make use of both primary and secondary sources. This would help the students differentiate between first-hand and second-hand accounts of a historical event or a topic. This would also foster in students historical thinking skills including sourcing, gathering evidence, thinking critically about historical input, and citing correctly both primary and secondary sources.

3-Organize roundtables and use the sharing technique. This would provide the students with the opportunity to share different interpretations of the same topic and ask vital questions about it.

4-Encourage group work in the form of presentations. By elaborating, stating, and illustrating ideas, this would help the students improve the way they express their ideas and think clearly and systematically. It would also improve the students' ability to work cooperatively.

5-Encourage historical research work in the form of research papers. This would improve higher level thinking skills in students including: gathering and assessing information, data interpretation, arguing, analyzing, and drawing valid conclusions. Writing research papers on historical issues increases the students' mastery of critical thinking skills.

5. Challenges Facing History Teachers while Attempting to Promote Critical Thinking Skills in their EFL Students:

The main potential challenges that teachers may face while trying to promote critical thinking skills in their EFL students in a History or a Civilization course include, but are not limited to, the following:

The first important challenge is that the historical content to be covered is immensely extensive. Teachers often feel pressured to teach everything and cover the whole syllabus. As a result, the traditional lecture-based approach of teaching is usually adopted neglecting higher levels of thinking.

The second challenge is related to the burden of teaching History in a foreign language. Teaching students the history of another country in a foreign language is not an easy matter. The focus here is not just on the historical data but also on the foreign language since students usually find difficulties comprehending the historical input provided for them.

Another important challenge is the lack of teachers specialized in the field of History and Civilization. In this case, the History/Civilization courses are assigned to other teachers who find themselves teaching subjects that they are not familiar with their nature and for which they have little background. This is known as “out-of-field teaching”; a type of teaching in which teachers usually lack inadequate qualifications because their specialty does not match the subject taught. Teachers filling these roles often find themselves teaching unfamiliar content to them, and as a result they usually opt for the traditional lecture-based instruction in which critical thinking skills are neglected. As a matter of fact, in this form of teaching the challenges usually outweigh the benefits.¹⁰

The large number of students per class also makes a major challenge for History teachers. Large classes do not create a healthy environment for the teaching/learning process to take place. In large classes, interaction between the students is difficult to take place and high level thinking including critical thinking skills are often ignored as the teacher cannot focus on the individual differences between students and their learning styles.

In addition, the lack of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) push most teachers, even specialists in the subject being taught, to rely just on the traditional methods of teaching with the consequence of neglecting higher-order thinking skills that students can develop in class. History teachers also face another major challenge related to the difficulty of raising the interest of the students who often complain that learning History is boring.

6. Conclusion

Within the Algerian higher education context, teachers who are assigned History or Civilization courses in an EFL context usually rely on the traditional method of lecture-based lessons. In this form of classes, teachers focus predominantly on one basic skill, which is memorization, neglecting the critical thinking skills that a student can develop in a History or a Civilization course.

This traditional teacher-centered mode of instruction is based solely on rote memorization neglecting high level thinking skills that are basic to a successful learning. Teaching History, however, has the potential to promote the development of critical thinking skills in students, including the ability to analyze historical data, ask valid questions, evaluate arguments, and draw reasonable conclusions.

In fact, the integration of critical thinking skills in teaching a History or a Civilization class is central in leading the students from being passive recipients of knowledge—in the form of historical data—to being good critical thinkers able of conducting research work in the field of History and related subjects. The main critical thinking skills targeted in a History course may include, but are not limited to, the following: gathering and assessing information, comparing and contrasting historical events and drawing parallels in History, interpreting historical data, analyzing and evaluating arguments, asking vital questions, formulating and testing hypotheses, making reasoned judgments about controversial issues, and drawing valid conclusions based on reasoning

History teachers could employ different techniques and strategies to enhance critical thinking skills in their students including the organization of roundtables, group work discussions, and oral presentation. Teachers should also expose their students to multiple historical texts about the same topic and make them familiar with the existence of both primary and secondary sources in History. Most importantly, teachers should encourage their students to engage in research work doing.

Whereas teachers could exercise a variety of teaching techniques and strategies in order to foster critical thinking skills in their EFL students in a History or a Civilization class, a number of potential challenges may prevent them from achieving the desired objectives. These challenges may include: out-of-field teaching, over-crowded classes, lack of ICTs, students' low interest in History, long courses to be covered, and the burden of teaching History in a foreign language. In fact, these challenges are both administrative and pedagogical in nature.

Taking everything into account, mistaken ideas about what History is and how it should be taught must be corrected. History is not a mere record of dates, places, and events. Teaching history should not be focused solely on rote memorization of historical data. It should promote higher-order thinking skills in students including critical thinking skills.

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1 The titles and content of history courses within the EFL curriculum vary according to each level. For example, for first year EFL students (within the new “canon Licence” 2023-2024), the history course is titled: the “Civilization of the Target Language”, taught across the two semesters of the same academic year. During the first semester, the students receive a course about British History/Civilization, while during the second semester they receive a course about American History/Civilization.

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