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Original research paper

APPLICATION OF STANDARDS-BASED ASSESSMENT FOR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS DURING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract: Critical thinking, a fundamental cognitive process, is recognized as pivotal across various domains of human endeavor. Employers prioritize this competency due to its indispensable role in comprehending challenges, exploring opportunities, and making informed decisions within contemporary competitive environments. Consequently, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to underscore the necessity of integrating standards-based assessment methodologies to evaluate critical thinking skills within language acquisition. Emphasizing this imperative during curriculum design and implementation is crucial, necessitating delineating effective strategies to incentivize students to enhance these proficiencies. As seasoned educators, we recognize the profound significance and applicability of critical thinking across disciplines, hence integrating activities to foster diverse facets of critical thinking within our instructional frameworks. This paper presents the outcomes of analyzing standards-based assessments about critical thinking skills in the domain of the Macedonian language for professional purposes during the academic year 2022/2023 at the South East European University in the Republic of Macedonia. Mastery of these skills is imperative for students to grasp the conceptual underpinnings of their academic pursuits, thereby equipping them for their forthcoming professional endeavors. However, educators consistently grapple with students' deficiencies in these competencies, with fostering critical thinking emerging as a primary pedagogical challenge. Our research findings affirm a significant correlation that is heightened awareness among students regarding the significance of critical thinking correlates positively with increased dedication toward solving pertinent tasks conducive to advancing these cognitive abilities.

Keywords: *critical thinking skills; standards-based assessment; language acquisition; Macedonian language*.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of critical thinking[1] in the modern educational concept has a key and significant role in the teaching and learning process. It includes the expression of attitudes and perceptions that are formed through critical evaluation of information and different ways of expressing it, while a person who thinks critically can accept or agree with the ideas and attitudes of others. Critical thinking emerges prominently when a problem needs to be solved, so each person should be able to make decisions independently of others, employing essential critical thinking skills.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that having one's point of view as part of critical thinking in no case means arrogance, humiliation, dominance, power, or a clash of views. On the contrary, it means having a reasoned personal position, which may differ from the perceptions of other people. "The core aspects of systems thinking are gaining a bigger picture (going up a level of abstraction) and appreciating other people's perspectives." (Chapman, 2004). According to Fisher (2011), critical thinking is a form of evaluative thought that incorporates both critique and creativity, focusing specifically on assessing the quality of reasoning or arguments that support a belief or a course of action.

Furthermore, critical thinking ranks at the top of the core competencies required by employers because they are necessary to understand challenges, explore opportunities, and make appropriate and precise decisions in a new competitive environment. It is an essential issue both in the educational process and in modern educational reforms. In this context, encouraging students to think critically is a key challenge for university professors. Mastering these skills helps students understand what they are learning, preparing them for their future professional work.

Above all, the starting point is paramount, with students grasping the importance of developing these skills that will enable them to properly analyze data, evaluate arguments, and draw appropriate conclusions. At the same time, the entire process of critical thinking implies the inclusion and application of thought processes for incorporating previous knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, students need to master these skills but also to ensure that they can use them in their assignments and projects during their studies, and further, during their employment, as a final goal. Therefore, our primary intention, especially emphasized in the curricula of the subjects we teach, is the acquired skills for students to apply in their further career path because: "developing critical thinking together with language skills activates study potential, refines key competencies for both study and job performance, and reflects the needs for modernization and optimizing teaching methods at the tertiary level" (Sieglová, 2017:189).

[1] Which according to Haber (2020) is "a type of thinking with characteristics distinct from general intelligence or intellectual virtues such as thoughtfulness and wisdom."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining the term critical thinking is complicated because it covers complex activities. On the other hand, there are numerous definitions and ways to measure critical thinking. This diversity can make it challenging for researchers and educators to agree on the essential elements of effective critical thinking, potentially hindering their ability to develop a cohesive theoretical framework for teaching these skills effectively (Dwyer et al., 2011).

It is our belief that the precise definition of this term is stated by Facione (2011) as follows: "we understand critical thinking to be a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as an explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (p.26). Therefore, it is very important to stress that critical thinking allows the individual to deal with reality in a reasonable, mature, and independent way (Lipmann, 1991). In our opinion, critical thinking is a complex concept and the development of critical thinking skills is extremely important special attention should be paid to it during the lectures, especially to the development of the ability: (1) to analyze the information objectively and (2) to make a reasoned judgment.[2]

With regard to the concept of critical thinking within the educational process, **c**ritical thinking has long been considered an effective educational technique (Roberts-Cady, 2008). It is a term used by educators to describe those forms of learning, thinking, and analysis that go beyond memorization and simple reference to information and facts. As critical thinking revolves around intellectual abilities, its concept, and its stimulation should be well thought out in the educational process, especially during the studies when the person achieves the necessary intellectual maturity.

Furthermore, many authors state that effective teaching can significantly enhance students' capacity for critical thinking (Ellis, 2001; Yang & Chun, 2009). For that reason, it is a central concept in modern higher education reforms in which educational institutions are required to put more emphasis on critical thinking skills that, on the one hand, are used in all scientific fields, and on the other hand, students can apply them in all educational, professional and social aspects of their living, that is, they will enable students to successfully walk and progress in the modern world, and "a crucial goal of Higher Education is to support students in developing their ability to think critically." (Horvath and Forte, 2011)

These 21st-century skills also improve an individual's flexibility which means that students who acquire them during the educational process will be able to think in a way that accepts different attitudes and opinions. In addition, they will also be able to quickly perceive the constant changes in all spheres of life, adapt to them, and be abreast of developments relevant to their field of research. This means that the concept of critical thinking does not imply unique knowledge,

[2] Our analysis of the development of critical thinking during the Covid-19 pandemic is presented in the paper "Development of critical thinking skills for Macedonian Language for Professional Purposes 2 during the online teaching period" published in 2020.

but much deeper and broader abilities through which the acquired knowledge will be analyzed, evaluated, understood, and connected with other cognizance. Thinking skills are seen as crucial for educated people to cope with a rapidly changing world.

Many educators and researchers argue that specific knowledge will not be as important to the workers and citizens of tomorrow as the ability to learn and make sense of new information. On the other hand, a lack of ability to think clearly, or what experts refer to as a "cognitive error" is a systematic deviation from logical, optimal, rational, reasonable thinking and behavior (Dobelli, 2013). This so-called error can be overcome through techniques that lead to the development of useful mental skills, and critical thinking has been determined as one of the most important cognitive skills.

At the same time, great attention should be paid to the students' deficiencies concerning these skills, as well as to the appropriate approaches to overcome them. Namely, students face problems when they have to apply these skills in their assignments. On the other hand, professors are aware of the importance of critical thinking, but they are also aware of students' weaknesses.

Digital skills and critical thinking skills are mandatory skills specified by EU member state employers that every student should acquire during their studies because, regardless of their professional field, they are crucial for effective and efficient work.

At the same time, students master digital skills faster, but university professors face significant problems when it comes to applying critical thinking skills. It is a serious matter that should be given a lot of attention during studies.

The importance of critical thinking stems from the fact that it is a general ability. However, it improves language and presentation skills to accurately and systematically present information and knowledge. In that direction, the language learning curricula should clearly define the critical thinking skills to which attention will be paid within the subject, the exercises through which it will be realized, as well as the evaluation method.

It is especially important to establish intellectual standards based on which this assessment will be conducted. They should be explicit, clear, and unambiguous not only for those who teach and assess but equally important to be understood by students. Evaluating these skills is an extremely important issue, and „students and teachers are important partners in the assessment process because teachers can help students to understand assessment and grading criteria and students can help teachers to create the most appropriate criteria according to their needs" (Taneska & Zdravkovska-Adamova, 2018: 481). In this context we will mention the standards specified by Paul (1995) (Table 1):

Table 1. Intellectual standards that apply to thinking in every subject (Paul, 1995)

Thinking that is	Vs	Thinking that is
Clear	Vs	Unclear
Precise	vs	Imprecise
Specific	vs	Vague
Accurate	vs	Inaccurate
Relevant	vs	Irrelevant
Plausible	vs	Implausible
Consistent	vs	Inconsistent
Logical	vs	Illogical
Deep	vs	Superficial
Broad	vs	Narrow
Complete	vs	Incomplete
Significant	vs	Trivial
Adequate (for purpose)	vs	Inadequate
Fair	vs	Biased or One-Sided

Previous studies related the the present study are those from Paul and Elder's conducted in 2008. This guide provides a strong framework for integrating critical thinking into language acquisition. Through the application of these elements according to intellectual standards, educators can design curricula and activities that not only teach language but also develop essential critical thinking skills. This approach ensures that students become proficient in the language and enable them for effective and logical communication.

Furthermore, Ennis, who is a prominent figure in the field of critical thinking, (1993) in his paper explored different methodologies for evaluating critical thinking skills. His work is very important because it highlights the significance of integrating critical thinking assessments into educational curricula to ensure that students develop the ability to analyze, evaluate, and create logical arguments across disciplines, including language acquisition. Based on his recommendations, educators can design language acquisition curricula that not only teach linguistic proficiency but also develop students' abilities to think critically. This integrated approach ensures that language learners are prepared to use their language skills effectively in real-world contexts, where critical thinking is essential.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to comprehensively assess the critical thinking proficiencies of students at the South East European University during the academic year 2022/2023. The Macedonian language is a curriculum requirement for all students whose Macedonian is not their native language.

Participants

The study involved a cohort of students enrolled in the Macedonian Language for Professional Purposes (MLPP) course. The cohort comprised 75 students, with 49 students from Skopje and 26 students from Tetovo. The student population was

diverse, primarily consisting of Albanian nationality (approximately 90%), with the remainder including Turks, Bosnians, and other ethnic groups. Students attend two classes per week, ensuring regular and consistent language practice. This structure facilitated continuous learning and allowed students to progressively build their language skills. The course spanned the first two semesters of the students' studies, integrating language learning into the early stages of their academic journey.

Instruments

Quantitative data were obtained through a structured survey administered to the participants of this research. This quantitative methodology facilitated the collection of numerical data concerning students' performance in predefined critical thinking exercises, enabling subsequent statistical analysis and representation of the acquired results. The second instrument was a meticulous examinations and descriptions of the critical thinking tasks delineated within the MLPP curriculum. This qualitative approach entailed systematic documentation and analysis of students' responses to the assigned tasks, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the cognitive processes and reasoning strategies employed by the participants.

Procedure

The amalgamation of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of critical thinking among MLPP students. While the quantitative component provided numerical insights into the prevalence and distribution of critical thinking skills within the cohort, the qualitative component offered in-depth insights into the qualitative aspects of students' critical thinking abilities, including the rationale behind their responses and the effectiveness of instructional interventions. This hybrid methodological approach not only facilitated a thorough examination of critical thinking skills among MLPP students but also ensured the convergence and cross-validation of findings, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the study outcomes.

It should be emphasized that in this paper we aimed to cover and describe 4 different types of critical thinking that are useful to them during the period of language acquisition, based on the stated evaluation standards. Namely, we worked according to the following procedure:

- In the curriculum for MLPP, for each different critical thinking skill, an appropriate activity and criteria for its evaluation are specified. During the evaluation of the activities, out of a total of 10%, half, that is, 5%, was for exactly determined evaluation intellectual standards from Table 1. Additionally, students were informed about which standards would be pivotal for each respective task.
- Particular attention was paid to giving students clear instructions for each task separately, through explanations on Google Classroom. A deadline of 1 week was set for the completion of the activity. Exercises that were sent after the deadline were not taken into consideration.

RESULTS

The curriculum for the subject Macedonian language for professional purposes clearly shows the activities that will be used to develop the different types of critical thinking – analysis, application of established standards, access to information, and logical reasoning – as well as the way of evaluating these skills based on the mentioned standards.

Analysis is one of the key skills for developing critical thinking. To improve analysis skills, it was very important for students to get clear directions and instructions, but also to become aware of their importance.

The activity for the development of this skill is related to the enrichment of the professional vocabulary. Namely, the students from each faculty were shown an appropriate law on the Macedonian language from which they will individually have to choose professional words through a common shared dictionary (Google Sheets).

Enriching the personal and professional vocabulary (Macedonian–Albanian) is one of the objectives of the subject specified in the curriculum. We were aware of the challenges we would face with this activity, knowing that the first thing to emphasize to students is that a rich professional vocabulary will greatly facilitate communication throughout their future careers. With that, we wanted to direct the students not to use the words they already know but to direct their attention to the possibility of finding, adopting, and applying new professional terms in a language context.

What we could notice is that they easily found a translation of the vocabulary, using, above all, online dictionaries. However, a serious obstacle was the ambiguity of the words, the ability to find a suitable translation depending on the text, and especially the skill to use the term in a self-created example and at the same time take into account the language context.

In terms of evaluation, out of a possible 10%, half of the percentages referred to students' analysis skills based on the following assessment standards (from Table 1): adequate analysis, broad choice of words, and precise determination of the meaning of professional terminology. The other 5% was about the appropriate application of the words in a given context through the use of a measurable instrument. "Students arrive in the classroom with varied educational backgrounds in terms of language proficiency" (Taneska & Zdravkovska-Adamova, 2018: 481).

Considering that for this task the students themselves selected the professional vocabulary based on their previous knowledge, the different levels of proficiency did not affect the total number of percentages they received for the specific task. Analyzing student performance on the Activity, Selection of appropriate professional terminology (Table 2), we can conclude that out of a total of 75 students who followed the MLPP course[3], 10 students (13%) did not complete the assignment. Other students performed solid analysis as a critical thinking skill. An equal number of students (18) received 5% and 4% each, which represents almost half of the total number of registered students for the subject (48%). 20 students

[3] For each critical thinking skill we have produced charts. However, since the scope of the paper is limited, we only give a presentation of the data.

(27%) received 3% for the assignment. 9 students showed poorer results, that is, 6 (8%) students got 2%, and 3 (4%) students got 1%.

We can conclude that the students understood the importance of enriching their professional vocabulary and demonstrated good analytical skills. We believe that the poorer results of 12% of students are due to insufficient motivation to complete the task in its entirety, and not to weakness in terms of critical analysis skills.

Table 2. Analysis as a critical thinking skill

Critical thinking skill: ANALYSIS Assessment standards: ADEQUATE (FOR PURPOSE), BROAD, PRECISE THINKING Activity: SELECTION OF APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL TERMINOLOGY

The ability to apply established personal, professional, and social standards and criteria reflects the ability of students to present information in the best possible way. The development of this skill was followed by an extremely important activity: formulating and answering questions for a job interview (entry and exit interview) for a suitable profession from the students' professional sphere.

Before the interview procedure, links were shared on the Google Classroom platform to help students understand the importance of a job interview and prepare appropriate questions and answers. We have analyzed the important steps for successful communication, in terms of language expression, gestures, physical appearance, ability to self-control, i.e. everything that can be useful.

For this activity, students could get 10%, that is, 5% for the following standards listed in Table 1: specific, clear, and significant thinking. The other 5% were about intonation, gesticulation, facial expressions, and physical appearance.

The job interview was the last activity in a series of tasks related to the student's future professional activities. The first task was analyzing, structuring, and designing a job advertisement, then filling out a job application and job description.

Since none of the students had been interviewed before, they showed great interest in this activity and singled it out as extremely important.

Analyzing student performance on the Activity, Job Interview, (Table 3), we can conclude that 70 students have completed this task, that is, they participated in the job interview simulation, and only 5 students (7%) did not show interest. In general, they were well prepared (using the published materials on Google Classroom). In terms of evaluation, 24 students (32%) received 5%, 23 students (31%) received 4%, and 15 students (20%) received 3%. The lower results (7 students got 2% and 1 student was evaluated with 1%) are the result of the fact that they did not do any previous preparation. In our opinion, if the importance of the specific task and the importance of the relevant skill are clearly explained to the students, they make a great effort to complete it.

Table 3. Application of established standards as critical thinking skill

Critical thinking skill: APPLICATION OF ESTABLISHED STANDARDS Assessment standards: SPECIFIC, CLEAR, SIGNIFICANT THINKING Activity: JOB INTERVIEW

In the modern world, access to information is readily available. What is especially important is to assess the credibility of the source. That is, the search for facts and knowledge should be realized by identifying relevant grounds. In that direction, the students were asked to present the received objective, subjective, and contemporary information through an oral presentation lasting 5 to 7 minutes. Each student presented with a PowerPoint the institution in which they would like to work in the future and stated the reasons for this. In that direction, we want to emphasize that the students showed excellent skills not only in terms of accessing information but also in terms of evaluating the reliability of data, their relevance, the selection of different sources, and in terms of the ability to present the acquired knowledge and digital skills.

The evaluation of the oral presentation was based on several aspects that were previously explained by the professors through a post on Google Classroom. One of those aspects, for which students could get 5%, related to the skills of presenting accurate, deep, and relevant thinking.

Analyzing student performance on the Activity, Presentation of an Institution, (Table 4), we can immediately notice is that for this task there are more students (12 students, ie 16%), compared to the other tasks, who did not send it and did not present it because they should have devoted more time and read different sources. However, the common view of the professors is that those who completed it showed amazing results both in terms of digital skills, but also in terms of skills to access information. Regarding the evaluation of accurate, deep, relevant thinking, 22 students (29%) were evaluated with 5%, 18 students (24%) with 4%, and 14 students (19%) with 3%. The weaker results (8 students got 2% and 1 student got 1%) are mainly the result of the students having consulted a limited number of sources.

Table 4. Access to information as a critical thinking skill

Critical thinking skill: ACCESS TO INFORMATION Assessment standards: ACCURATE, DEEP, RELEVANT THINKING Activity: PRESENTATION OF AN INSTITUTION

The development of critical thinking through mastering the skill of logical reasoning was in the direction of establishing correlations and conclusions that are supported or determined by data in the form of a Debate (Table 5) about the criteria for successful professional communication.

Namely, during week 11, the students were given 8 generally accepted rules for holding an effective meeting. Their task was to pick out and arrange the three most important rules and give their explanation. They were asked to analyze Internet sources, provide links, and list at least two more rules for a successful meeting. Through the well-executed additional exercise, they confirmed our opinion that they possess good digital skills for searching the appropriate topic in the Macedonian language.

They received a maximum of 5% for their digital search skills, and 5% for their logical, complete, and consistent thinking. The results clearly show that the students showed the greatest interest in debate (only 2 students, ie 3% did not participate) and the best results. Even 2/3 of the students showed excellent results, i.e. 31 students (41%) received 5% and 21 students (28%) received 4%. Furthermore, 15 students (20%) were rated 3%, and 6 students (8%) were rated 2%. Students demonstrated excellent skills for logical reasoning as their views were supported by strong and clear opinions, and this was confirmed by creating a meeting agenda.

Table 5. Logical reasoning as a critical thinking skill

Critical thinking skill: LOGICAL REASONING Assessment standards: LOGICAL, COMPLETE, CONSISTENT THINKING Activity: DEBATE

All in all, as it can be seen from the tables above, this evaluation is based on the predefined standards, ensuring that students' progress is measured accurately and objectively. Through this comprehensive approach, the curriculum aims to equip students with the critical thinking abilities necessary for their professional success.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to explore the application of standard assessments of critical thinking skills at a University level of education. Critical thinking stands as the paramount educational attainment towards which students should aspire upon the culmination of their studies. In this vein, we contend that its cultivation warrants meticulous attention throughout the educational trajectory, encompassing a spectrum of critical perspectives fostered through deliberate and contextually appropriate methodologies and activities.

The findings derived from our research unequivocally underscore the imperative of clearly elucidating the significance of critical thought to students, buttressed by empirical evidence. Such clarity ensures their earnest engagement in activities conducive to the refinement of these cognitive faculties. Central to this endeavor is the cultivation of a workforce responsive to the exigencies of the contemporary labor market. Individuals endowed with adept critical thinking skills are poised to exert a profoundly positive influence on professional endeavors, irrespective of the disciplinary domain.

The empirical results of our research confirm that students understood the importance of enriching professional vocabulary and demonstrated solid analytical skills. Similarly, Qian's study (2002) examined the effects of vocabulary instruction on students' critical thinking skills. The results demonstrated that students who received structured vocabulary lessons exhibited improved critical thinking and analytical abilities. The study concluded that vocabulary development is essential for cultivating higher-order thinking skills.

Although none of the students have had a job interview before, they possess excellent skills in terms of application of established standards. It is safe to emphasize that this is the result of the clear guidelines and the appropriate materials published on Google Classroom, but also the result of the student's motivation to improve language skills that are exceptional for their future careers.

Considering that the characteristic of the generations of the 21st century is the ability to acquire digital skills quickly, we did not doubt their skills to easily access all information However, students should be able to find the relevant information themselves and thus become more autonomous learners. The same conclusion was provided by Bruce's research (2004) who investigates how information literacy contributes to autonomous learning. The study reveals the importance of information literacy education in helping students develop the skills needed to independently find, evaluate, and use information, thus promoting greater autonomy in their learning processes.

The meeting agenda created by the students validates their logical reasoning skills. Concerning all the mentioned skills, it is generally that students should be motivated to cooperate in terms of improving their critical thinking skills and it is imperative that they also receive appropriate guidance and relevant materials.

Concurrently, the evaluation of these skills assumes paramount importance, underscoring the collaborative partnership between students and educators. Teachers assume a pivotal role in explicating assessment and grading criteria to students, while the latter contribute to the formulation of criteria tailored to their specific learning contexts. This symbiotic relationship is integral to the evaluative process, within both the educational milieu and ongoing pedagogical reforms.

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