



1. Critical thinking – challenges for teachers and learners

1.1 The role of culture: Western vs Confucian reasoning

When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it – this is knowledge.
Confucius
I am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there.
Confucius

The only thing I know is that I know nothing.
Socrates

The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn.
Cicero

You cannot teach anyone anything; you can only help him find it within himself.
Galileo

1.2 Language/ logic debate

Problems with critical thinking are often attributed to reasoning rather than language - concepts of critical thinking, such as *argument, claim, evaluate, infer* can present difficulties for students.

This view is contended by some experimental studies (e.g. Floyd , 2011) where Chinese students performed better when they took a critical thinking test in Chinese.

There has been a conspicuous divide among scholars on the question of whether critical thinking is a generic or subject-specific skill.

Exactly what is involved in critically evaluating and being analytical, however, is frequently not made transparent to students.
(Sonja Elsegood)

2. PhD students as a specific group of learners

2.1 Academic experience

PhD students are often accomplished academics, having published articles, presented at the conferences or lectured at the universities in their own countries. Past academic experience is generally very positive. However, sometimes it can have negative repercussions: students may have formed preconceptions about academic writing, become trapped in a particular manner of writing and find it difficult to re-learn.

2.2 Language proficiency

The language proficiency of International PhD students is generally higher than other students. They must obtain an average IELTS score between 6.0 and 7.0, depending on the School. English language provision is not compulsory and is limited to 6-10 session courses in Academic writing style, Sentence Structure, Common Grammatical Difficulties, Academic Vocabulary, Presentation Skills and a number of workshops , for example Summarising and Paraphrasing, Writing Literature Reviews, Reporting Results, Proofreading Skills.

2.3 Social and psychological features

Socially, PhD students constitute a very distinct group with limited peer and student-lecturer interaction. This may be counter to the cultural expectations of students coming from countries where teachers have an *in loco parentis* role. Students can be quite lonely and pre-occupied about their families, if they are coming from the countries with on-going unrest, such as Libya or Syria. An additional psychological difficulty might be the loss of face for an accomplished academic who becomes a student and whose academic writing skills are challenged.

3. PhD students' needs and the scaffolding to address these needs

3.1 Culturally-determined needs

It would be useful to explain the possible cultural differences in approaches to thinking and reasoning . This is particularly important for mature PhD students with academic experience in their own sphere.

On the other hand, students should be made aware of the value of critical thinking in producing convincing and reliable arguments.

3.2 Academic needs

PhD students face two types of challenge in relation to critical thinking - evaluating and analysing the arguments in other scholars' as well as in their own research. Awareness of critical writing could be raised by evidence-based tasks where students analyse samples of critical and non-critical literature reviews or critical and descriptive pieces of writing, evaluating an argument in a piece of writing to identify author's stance, flaws in the argument, bias.

3.3 Language needs

These can be addressed by: clarifying the language of critical thinking, such as *evaluate, opinion, critique, argument;* and teaching the vocabulary used in academic writing to express criticism .

3.4 Needs related to subject-specific aspect of critical thinking

EAP practitioner needs to collaborate with PhD supervisors in teaching critical thinking skills.

4 Conclusions

1. International PhD students' needs with regards to critical thinking have to be addressed in a specific way.
2. International students often have difficulties in developing Western-style critical writing and reasoning. These difficulties are often rooted in their own cultural background. It would be helpful not to see students' writing and thinking style as deficient, but as different from the Western style.
3. Language-related problems with critical thinking could be addressed by clarifying and teaching a specific vocabulary.
4. The EAP practitioner needs to work closely with supervisors.

Could you help me with my further research by answering the following question?

Do your students experience difficulties with critical thinking? Please, place below

a blue sticker for YES

or a red sticker for NO

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