

Critical Thinking and English Language Teaching with Reference to National Curriculum of India

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Abstract

The present authors will examine the current position of critical thinking in India from different perspectives in this section. Looking at the historical background of the concept in India, and long familiarity of the Indians with logical thinking, the authors illustrate the current status of critical thinking in India from two main perspectives. First, they review the Educational system which includes curriculum content and framework set for schools, the practices or teaching methods adopted by the teachers in the system, and finally the way that students' achievements are examined. Second, the authors discuss washback of the educational system, which demonstrates how successful or unsuccessful the present educational policies are in practice, based upon feedback of employers as one important stakeholder of the system, teachers, students, and so on. At the end, some suggestions will be posited on how to heighten the efficiency of Education with regard to English language teaching and critical thinking. The suggestions relate to areas of student teacher education, policy making, and assessment system.

1. Discussion

1.1. Historical Background

It has been asserted by some authors that people belonging to the culture of East lack criticality. Though India has not been specifically named to belong in this group of countries (e.g. China, Thailand, and so on), its people have similarly been always considered as not to be noncritical thinkers. However, the advancements happening in India over the past few decades are all copies of western technologies or the trace of other systems of thought existing in long past which has been sort of activated as questions to be answered. Studying the related literature shows that (Hongladarom, 2006) India and China had their own indigenous traditions of logical and argumentative thinking. Tscherbatsky (1962; 31-34)

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showed that India is one of the greatest logical and philosophical civilizations of the world. He evidenced that the argumentative thinking had existed since ancient times, and that the fate of entire monastery depended on public debates at the times of Dignaga and Dharmalirki. As such, Dignaga won his fame and royal support through defeating of the Brahmin Sudurjaya at Nalanda Monastery (cited in Hongladarom, 2006).

1.2. Status of Critical Thinking in English Language Education System of India

Prior to discussing on the position of critical thinking in the curriculum of Indian education system, it is needed to have an overview of the development and progress of the education system since independence. After independence, the Department of Education under the Ministry of Human Resource Development was established on August 29, 1947 with a mandate to provide and expand educational facilities for the public. After working on quantity of teaching materials for years, it gradually started working through quality education. A few drastic actions were thereafter taken in Indian education to get where it is now, in terms of quantity and quality. National Council of Educational Research Training (NCERT), was, for one, given the responsibility to develop a National Curriculum Framework (NCF). It was also assigned to review the framework at regular basis. The development of NCF provided opportunities for researchers and educationists as well as the experienced school teachers to reconsider the implemented curriculum, and to react to the collected and collated feedback based upon its washback.

One major move toward quality education can be traced back to when, for the first time, National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, incorporated critical thinking in the framework. In NCF (2005), a significant shift was made from underlying behavioristic theory of learning in extra curriculum frameworks to constructivist ones. Thus, in NCF (2005), the most important aspect of learning are: developing capacity for abstract thinking and reflection which students learn in a variety of experiences like reading. According to Khirwadikar, 2007 focus on issues, such as connecting knowledge to life outside helps shift from rote learning to constructing knowledge, providing wide range of experiences for overall development of a child and bringing flexibility in the examinations. That could be considered a revitalization of traditional logic which had existed in India at ancient times but waned for reasons.

However, the question arises that how the guidelines set by the NCF brought about Indian education system in effect. Observation of many Indian educational analysts (e.g. Neera Chopra) of the mainstream practices in Indian schools and colleges reveals that the biggest flaw in the education system is perhaps that it incentivizes memorizing above originality, and Indian education system is still a colonial education system geared towards generating *babus* and pen-pushers under the newly acquired garb of modernity. Evaluation system is also mismatched with critical thinking related guidelines of NCF (2005). The straightjacket testing practice fuels the teaching and learning practices in India. Much of the testing forces teachers to overly concentrate on lower-order thinking skills.

According to Neera Chopra (2015), the students cram before the examination and after the exam they cannot recall a thing. Neera Chopra further adds that teachers teach every page of a textbook that is prescribed whereas in B.Ed. trainee teachers are also taught that textbooks are only a teaching tool/ aid. After the elapse of many years from the time that the stepping stone of changes was laid, Indian school classrooms are now plagued by uncreative and non-critical thinking teaching and learning practices.

The present circumstances in English language subject classrooms, which turn out to be the focus of attention in the present study, need to be evaluated in detail. The common teaching practices in most Indian schools and colleges, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, are bilingual method or the translation method (Ponniah, 2007). Dictating notes and memorizing the dictated notes are common practices in the classrooms (Ponniah, 2007). In fact, teachers still stick to outdated language teaching approaches instead of adapting to the recent needs and changes. Moreover, the characteristics of the Indian English language classrooms are also responsible for part of the problems. The size of the class, the constrained time of it and the students of highly mixed abilities are just to name a few of these characteristics, contributing to more ineffectiveness of the teaching. It is obvious that the existing ESL classroom does not encourage students to think critically or creatively.

The students in Indian schools tend to lack the ability to express their inner words. That is, they are not able to demonstrate their voice. They mostly learn chunks of language (i.e. vocabulary, grammatical rules) without trying to use them in real context to meet communication needs. The students tend not to be able to construct sentences on their own

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and express their ideas while writing or speaking. This becomes more evident in their interaction with other English speakers. In fact, they are more directed to think of what to learn than how to learn. This undesirable form of interaction can be considered in terms of varied types of talk presented by Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, and Sams (2004, cited in Halbach, 2015). The three types of talk are Disputational talk, Cumulative talk, and exploratory talk. Indians' speaking performances may fall mostly in categories of Cumulative and Disputational. Because the Indian speakers may apply their memory and add information related to the topic come across in an interaction, they are less likely to engage critically and constructively. The above argument about Indians' speaking English abilities, mostly developed in schools both through English subject and content based instruction they receive in English-medium schools and colleges, can be supported by Wei and Llosa's (2015) study that analyzed Indian TOEFL test-takers' speaking responses. According to Wei and Llosa (2015), many responses from Indian test takers were rather linear in their rhetorical structure, which was identified by Indian raters as a feature of Indian English.

In addition to the mismatched teaching methods that are employed in instruction of various academic subjects, assessment system plays a pivotal role in any education system. The assessment, as a complementary component of instructional methods adopted, not only demonstrates students' achievement through a particular course period but also shows how the students are taught and what they are expected to learn. The skills and abilities students demonstrate is one determining factor of how practical the teachers' teaching and the students' learning are.

Studying the assessment system of India shows that students are expected to apply more memorization and less using higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Thus the students are mainly reliant on rote learning. This argument has been supported by many Indian educationists and researchers. For instance, speaking with *The Times of India* (June 19, 2011), former chairman of UGC and the chairman of the NCERT's National Curriculum Framework 2005, Professor Yashpal told: "No one can get 100% in so many subjects. Clearly, we can see the emphasis on rote learning, and an exam oriented approach, which is killing creativity and soft skills. This is a conspiracy of examiners, schools and coaching industry." Likewise, according to a research paper by a NCERT official submitted to the International Association for Educational Assessment, the present

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system of assessment and evaluation for school education in India is exam-based. The research paper also states, “Assessment focuses only on cognitive learning outcomes and in the process, co-curricular domains are neglected, even though co-curricular areas are an equally important and significant part of child development. Even in curricular areas, the focus is on rote learning and memorisation, characterised by a neglect of higher mental abilities such as critical thinking, problem solving and creative ability” (Sahay, 2015). Such documentation has been provided so as to get a deep insight into present circumstances.

The flaws of such an education system including the teaching practices and assessment discussed earlier both reflect in the society and undermine validity of Indian education system itself. One implication of the system encouraging more rote learning than critical thinking is a large number of college graduates who are not well prepared to do their social responsibilities in positions they should normally function. According to National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) only 10% to 25% of undergraduates acquire qualifications and specific skills sets based on which prospective employees are looking to employ. Such problems have also been stated a number of times in the Indian Media. For instance, *The Times of India* (13 Jun 2011) states that the skills deficiency of engineering graduates falls into three main areas, namely: critical thinking, communication, and the ability to function well as part of a team. However, it is not safe to make a generalization of this type since there are also many brilliant graduates in different areas of interest. The uncritical thinking majority we talk about in this study is an outcome of some mundane cultural and social conventions discouraging students to ever appreciate exploring the topics, but are directed to mug up the matter and focus on meeting the requirements of examinations and not to hone their communication skills.

Conclusion

Indian education, particularly in connection with English language education, requires that some urgent remedial actions be taken so as to heighten the efficiency of Education. As discussed earlier, deficiency of critical thinking in school and college graduates is a major problem caused by methodologies adopted by teachers who are not prepared to adjust themselves with modern aims of education stipulated clearly in NCF, and mainstream college and schools’ examinations. The teachers who have not been taught in critical thinking contexts could not adopt apt strategies to develop students’ criticality. Neera Chopra, the **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:6 June 2017 Reza Omidvar, Doctoral Student in Linguistics and Dr. B.K. Ravindranath, Ph.D. Critical Thinking and English Language Teaching with Reference to National Curriculum of India

Academic Analyst with 38 years of experience in planning, design, development and project management, in the website called *The Progressive Teacher* (March 4, 2015) has stated that “most teachers do not even know what Bloom’s Taxonomy is, how they will set questions which involve thinking skills”. The teachers may also become concerned about the time constraint considering the number of students in classrooms. Thus, it seems quite necessary to prepare student teachers in all disciplines using a curriculum which is totally based on critical thinking instruction. This aim can be only achieved by employment of experts in critical thinking instruction. Moreover, some courses in all disciplines can be held to train current teachers how to use critical thinking strategies in their teaching.

The examination system, which presently focuses on the students’ liability to learn the content of textbooks taught, requires a thorough revisit. In fact, the examination system should be modified so that it could encourage the conceptual learning in students. Then learners will be directed to deep understanding and application of the knowledge learned in classrooms.

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