Q: Skills for Success

Think critically. Succeed academically.

New

Article Booklet

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What is critical thinking?

Lawrence Lawson

"Why do I need my raincoat?" I asked my grandmother. It was itchy, hot, and I didn't want to wear it.

"Look outside. Why do you think you should wear it?" she replied.

Dark clouds covered the sky; puddles vibrated with new rain. I collected these clues, connected them, and shouted, "Because it'll keep me dry!" Instantly, my raincoat changed from something uncomfortable to something necessary and important.

With one question, my grandmother encouraged me to *think critically* about my world, make connections, and discover my own answers—something teachers want students to do every day."

But what is critical thinking?

A critical thinking approach asks students to *do something* with information being learned. Teachers can set small goals, or learning outcomes, to give students targets to hit—for example: "After this lesson, you will tell a partner three reasons why people immigrate to other countries." The readings, questions, and exercises in the lesson encourage students to use language to discover *their* three reasons. Students and teachers work together to *understand*, *analyze*, *synthesize*, and *evaluate* the lesson's content to reach the stated outcomes— which are all skill categories in Bloom's Taxonomy, a resource that outlines goals of the learning process. By providing students with learning outcomes, students can critically think about information and develop their own meaningful answers.

How can teachers encourage critical thinking?

Questions are important tools in the critical thinking process. Questions encourage students to reflect on and apply their knowledge to new questions. Yet how do we help students answer difficult, thought-provoking questions? We don't present them with a selection of answers and hope they choose wisely. We provide them with skills to find their own answers, and we make them care about the answers.

My grandmother presented clues and asked me to consider them until I found an answer. For her, my *understanding* of the weather wasn't enough. She wanted me to analyze why the weather would influence my choice of clothing for the day. She wanted me to think of my own answer; she made the answer matter. By asking questions, she helped me realize the importance of my own answer and the value of my thinking process.

Because I cared about the answer, I worked hard and meaningfully with the clues. Care encourages critical thinking, and critical thinking creates a meaningful learning process students remember long after they leave the classroom.

What are student learning outcomes?

Lawrence Lawson

Imagine your favorite game. Imagine that you know all of the rules and understand its complex moves. Now imagine that you don't understand *why* anyone plays the game. How do you win? Are there even winners? What's the point of the game? Who cares?

But you care, right?

Games need a purpose. The concept is similar in the language classroom. Students want to know the point. They want to know "why" even when they understand "how." In the classroom, the point is known as the learning outcome (LO), and to be successful, students need to know it.

"Why study the present continuous?" one student might ask.

"Because our learning outcome is to write a paragraph about what you are doing *right now*," a teacher might reply. "To do that, you need to know what the present continuous is and how to use it." Knowing the LO gives this student an understandable reason for her work in the classroom.

Research from the University of Miami finds that "students are more likely to master subject matter if clear expectations are communicated to them for how they will be asked to demonstrate…learning." In other words, students need to know the "why" of what they're learning. How will the teacher, and the students themselves, know when they've learned it?

LOs provide the clear target that everyone in the classroom recognizes from the beginning of the lesson as the learning goal.

Some teachers put their LOs on the board at the beginning of each lesson. Others tell their students the LOs or highlight them in the textbook—if the textbook has LOs. How do *you* communicate learning goals to your students? If you use LOs, how do your students respond to these "clear expectations"?

LOs create expectations in the classroom of what students will learn, what teachers will teach, and what lessons will focus on. With the end in mind, students know they need to learn the content for a purpose and take the task seriously. And teachers benefit because they can plan activities that introduce and help students practice the skills they need to reach the learning outcome. LOs help students *do something* meaningful with what they are learning and answer the many "why" questions students may ask. In short, LOs are the point of the game.

Why thought-provoking questions are a good way to stimulate language learners

Jennifer Bixby

English Language Learners are bombarded with questions in the classroom, but most of the questions are predictable. They are questions that either the teacher or the student already knows the answer to. "Where are you from? What's happening in this photo? What's the main idea of this paragraph?"

These types of questions are the building blocks for language learning, especially at the lower levels, but let's admit it—they can be a bit tiresome for all involved. Why? Because they don't push us to think very deeply.

Thought-provoking questions are an entirely different matter, and these are the questions that intrigue me. What can I ask that will make my students pause and think before answering? Is it a question that would also make me stop and think? Is it a question that doesn't have an easy *yes* or *no* answer?

Take, for example, the question "Is it ever OK to lie?" Now that is a question that we might initially answer with "No," but think about it again. It's not so simple, right? It begs for deeper thinking, and it can lead students to think more carefully. So this question passes my stop-and-think test.

But I also want an interesting question, a question that I don't know the answer to. I'm not actually sure of my answer to the question about lying. I also can't predict how my students will answer it. In addition, it's a question that carries a bit of an emotional charge. It's a question I've faced in my own life as a parent and as a daughter. That's the kind of question I am looking for. A good thought-provoking question is interesting.

The value of a thought-provoking question is multi-faceted. Because the question connects with students at a very personal level, they will be more motivated to communicate their ideas. They know that others will listen carefully and perhaps challenge them on their answers. Such a question will naturally lead students to think of ways to support their opinions, perhaps with examples from their own lives.

This is key: thought-provoking questions push students to think critically—they will naturally analyze, apply their ideas and compare.

Another value of this kind of question is that it can be revisited as students read related materials, listen to experts discuss it, or develop their ideas through classroom discussion. I want a question that will lead students on a kind of journey, challenging them to refine and develop their answers.

What's your criteria for a good question?

Joe McVeigh

As teachers, we use many different types of questions in the classroom. We ask students questions to see if they know the answer. A question like, "Can you answer number six, please?" is one example. "What does *remote* mean?" might be another. These are questions that we know the answer to already. They are used to quickly gauge comprehension and to make sure students are following along.

Compare this with another type of question, such as "What did you do this weekend?" In this case, the teacher who is asking the question doesn't know the answer. When the student answers, some real communication has taken place. Still, the question is not going to lead to a lot of conversation.

A third type of question is more likely to stimulate student learners. This is a question like, "Why does something become popular?" This is a question without an easy answer—and chances are that the teacher doesn't know the answer either. To answer this question will require not only good language skills, but the ability to think in English.

Helping students answer challenging questions

While some students might enjoy this type of question and dive right in, others may need some help from the teacher. Here are some tips on working with questions with your students.

Warm ups

Students will respond better when they have an opportunity to get warmed up. Rather than starting off with a challenging question, lead them up to it gently by asking some easier questions. For instance, if the essential question you are looking at is "*Why does something become popular*?" you can start off with some easier questions, such as *"What are some popular trends today?"* You could also have students look around the room at the clothing they are wearing or think about the music they listen to and answer questions about how those things became popular.

Vocabulary building

As with most classroom activities, a question-based approach will benefit from vocabulary development. Prepare your students to address the question by introducing them to helpful new words. You can introduce these with photos, by having students use their dictionaries, or by using targeted vocabulary activities.

Build schema

To help students with questions, try drawing on their "schema" or background knowledge. Usually, this means eliciting from students what they already know about a subject. This can help activate vocabulary and critical thinking skills.

Provide food for thought

To give a point of view about the question, you can share some students' ideas by using a listening activity or a reading passage. Even better, offer two different points of view, and then let students make up their own minds.

Applying Bloom's Taxonomy in the classroom

Marguerite Ann Snow

Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive objectives has been around for a long time. Since 1956, it has served as a guide for teachers to think about how they can design lessons that will help their students to think critically. Basically, the taxonomy designed by Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues provides a way to describe levels of thinking. The taxonomy is essentially a hierarchy with *knowledge* as the first level and *evaluation* as the sixth level. I've listed the six levels below and included an example of each in parentheses.

- *Knowledge*— recalling information (e.g., answering comprehension questions from a reading)
- *Comprehension*— interpreting information (e.g., discussing why a character behaved in a particular way)
- Application— using knowledge gained to solve problems (e.g., applying information from one situation to a different situation in a debate activity)
- *Analysis*— breaking down concepts or ideas to understand the relationship of the parts to the whole (e.g., analyzing prefixes to see how word meanings change)
- *Synthesis*— putting together something original from learned information (e.g., writing an essay; making an oral presentation)
- *Evaluation*— judging something against specific criteria (e.g., peer editing using a checklist or rubric)

Bloom's taxonomy has had tremendous influence in assisting teachers of any subject matter to design instructional activities that cover the six levels of the hierarchy. It has also inspired others to offer their own "take" on critical thinking. Unrau (1977) for example, believes teachers need to help their students develop a disposition— or inclination— to think critically. What does it mean to have a disposition to think critically? Some examples are

- Imagine alternative solutions and perspectives
- Make an effort to persevere in acquiring and integrating knowledge
- Play with ideas
- Evaluate the consequences of beliefs, decision, and actions
- Reflect on one's own thinking and that of others in order to gain knowledge of oneself and others

While there is ongoing discussion as to whether critical thinking should be represented as a taxonomy or as a set of dispositions, teachers need to be aware that critical thinking is important. Students will be required to apply critical thinking skills in their language classes, their academic classes, and in their future careers. Do you apply critical thinking skills in your courses? What tools and strategies work for you?

References: Bloom, B. S., et al. (1956). Taxonomy of educational objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive domain. New York: Longman. Unrau, N. J. (1977). Thoughtful teachers, thoughtful learners. Scarborough, Ontario: Pippin Publishing.

About the authors

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Joe McVeigh is a co-author of *Q: Skills for Success*. He has been active in ELT for over 25 years. In the U.S. he has taught at Middlebury College, the University of Southern California, the California Institute of Technology, and California State University, Los Angeles. His classrooms have included students from more than fifty countries. Joe has also lived and worked overseas in the U.K., Hungary, China, India, and Chile. He works independently as a consultant, teacher-trainer, workshop presenter, author, and editor. Joe has also been active in many roles in the TESOL association, including as a member of the Board of Directors and on the Book Publications Committee. You can visit Joe's website and blog at www.joemcveigh.org where he offers ongoing perspectives on the teaching of culture and on English language teaching. Also follow him on Twitter (@JoeMcVeigh).

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