


Do Japanese students lack critical thinking? Addressing the misconception

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Abstract

In recent years, content integrated language education has taken center stage in Japanese university English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) settings. The emphasis on content has created an opportunity for students to demonstrate analytical thinking, assessment, inference, and problem-solving skills through oral communication activities in English (L2). However, the opportunity may be perceived as a challenge by students, who were exposed to teacher-centered pedagogy during their pre-tertiary language education and raised with cultural values that conflict with the expectations. Therefore, some students may remain disengaged or give short answers when they are asked to demonstrate critical thinking. Students' lack of response is often misconstrued as the absence of critical thinking, leading to a misconception among language educators. The present article attempts to offer insights into the challenges facing Japanese EFL students when they attempt to demonstrate critical thinking and emphasizes the role of language teachers' intercultural competence in understanding the challenges students experience and proposes learner autonomy as a critical step towards overcoming this challenge.

Keywords

Critical thinking, intercultural sensitivity, Japanese students, language teachers, learner autonomy, oral communication activities

The rapidly changing socio-economic circumstances worldwide have made it necessary to integrate geographically dispersed knowledge and expertise in academic institutions. Japanese universities have also followed suit and ramped up their internationalization efforts by adopting open and inclusive educational policies (Heinrich and Ohara, 2019). In 2014, the government announced reform plans to internationalize universities in response to the dynamic global trends (MacWhinnie and Mitchell, 2017; Rose and McKinley, 2017). One of the main goals of the reforms was to foster

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globally competent students through the expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) programs. The reforms also aimed to expand the number of international faculty and students (Egitim, 2022).

These changes have presented opportunities for university students to get involved in oral interactions in EMI classes. Therefore, the goal was accomplished to a certain extent. However, the new circumstances have also presented pedagogical challenges. Language teachers were expected to promote active participation through oral communication activities with students who had developed passive learning habits over years of exposure to teacher-centered instruction (Egitim, 2021; Mitchell, 2017).

As communicative language learning opportunities grew for students, they were asked to perform tasks demanding critical thinking in their second language (L2). Oral communication activities are often adopted from course book contents, which are focused on improving students' global competence and intercultural communication, and executed through rephrasing, modification, and negotiation to elicit critical thinking. However, more often than not, students either choose to remain silent or give short answers when they are asked to engage in these activities (Harumi and King, 2020).

Language teachers' struggle would turn into frustration and potentially hurt their motivation and confidence about teaching disengaged students. Student silence or lack of engagement in oral communication activities was often misconstrued as a lack of critical thinking skills by language educators. For teachers who have the necessary credentials and experience, it is understandable to express frustration when students remain unresponsive. However, the misconception is real, and the need for raising foreign language teachers' intercultural sensitivity is evident if we are to address this conundrum.

Do Japanese students lack critical thinking?

Critical thinking is defined as the person's willingness to analyze, evaluate, and improve their own thinking process (Carter et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2016). When the person attempts to think critically, they employ analytical thinking, assess the issue, make logically justified inferences, and produce well-reasoned solutions (Paul and Elder, 2019). Math and the sciences are the two subject areas that often require critical thinking skills. Thus, understanding how well Japanese students perform in math and the sciences could give us clues about their critical thinking skills and address the misconception.

Global student assessment surveys suggest that Japanese students regularly achieve high scores in math and science subjects, which require the core critical thinking skills of analysis, evaluation, inference, and problem-solving. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, Japanese elementary and junior high school students have never been ranked below sixth in all categories globally since the test was first administered (Mito, 2019). Japanese students' performances on PISA indicate that it is not the matter of lacking critical thinking as students are capable of demonstrating it in other subject areas in their native language (L1). Instead, the issue appears to be demonstrating critical thinking in the L2. Then it would be useful to delve deeper into the potential reasons behind students' struggle with critical thinking in the L2.

Reasons behind students' struggle with critical thinking

There is no one simple answer for what leads to the difficulty of demonstrating critical thinking in L2. However, if we are to make a diagnosis, it would be useful to look more closely at students' prior language learning experiences. Since demonstrating critical thinking requires a degree of fluency in

communicating analysis, assessments, thoughts, and reasons (Wang and Lee, 2021), inadequate spoken English proficiency remains a hurdle for L2 speakers. There is also a deep-rooted systematic issue that needs to be addressed.

Standardized English language education, prevalent in Japanese primary and secondary institutions, creates a phenomenon called excessive teacher dependence, which gradually leads to passive language learning habits. As a result, promoting active participation becomes a daunting task for language teachers (Burke and Hooper, 2020; Mitchell, 2017).

Not all language teachers have the same motive when they walk into the classroom. Especially in traditional primary and secondary school classroom environments in Japan, language teachers often resort to teacher-centered instruction. The teacher is viewed as the primary source of knowledge, and students act as passive recipients. A learning environment based on teacher-centered instruction is not conducive to developing communicative language skills (Dörnyei, 2006; Little et al., 2017). Teacher-centered instruction is used in tandem with the grammar-translation method and promotes outcome-based language education, in which success is determined based on test results. The influence of this pedagogical approach is also evident in textbooks primarily designed for exam preparation purposes. As a result, teacher-centered instruction through the L1 becomes a convenient medium to ensure learners accomplish their pre-determined goals (Egitim, 2021; Steele and Zhang, 2016).

Furthermore, studies argued that there is a shortage of communicative language teacher training programs for Japanese English teachers who teach English at primary and secondary institutions (Steele and Zhang, 2016). When the shortage of training opportunities is coupled with local language teachers' self-esteem issues to teach English classes in the L2, such as the fear of making mistakes and losing face in front of students, using the L1 as the medium of instruction remains the safer option (Machida, 2016). Having to teach large classes also adds a logistic hurdle to the challenging endeavor even if the teacher may be willing to incorporate oral communication activities.

Despite the prevalence of teacher-centered instruction in Japanese primary and secondary institutions, there has been a shift towards learner-centered instruction in tertiary English language classes in recent years (Kashiwagi and Tomecsek, 2015; Rose and McKinley, 2017). In a study performed by Saiki et al. (2011), the majority of Japanese students preferred minimal teacher involvement in their in-class learning, while some students specifically expressed their desire to be more engaged in active participation and self-expression. However, putting these desires into practice comes with challenges. Especially studies indicated that L2 speakers may experience a cognitive overload due to the complexity of reasoning when they are to demonstrate critical thinking skills (Lin et al., 2016; Moseley et al., 2005).

According to Moseley et al. (2005), reasoning, also construed as purposeful thinking, is developed through metacognitive habits. When purposeful thinking is employed in the L2, it facilitates the process of inquiry and eventually leads to critical analysis, evaluation, and inference. However, developing this metacognitive disposition while also determining communication strategies in the L2 can be a daunting task, and thus, it requires time, effort, determination from students with patience and guidance from language teachers.

Language teachers' intercultural sensitivity, which is defined as "an active desire to understand, appreciate, and accept cultural differences," is especially important to accurately interpret the cultural values students embrace so that they can make pedagogical adjustments (Perry and Southwell, 2011: 458).

Researchers argued that cultural values may also inhibit Japanese students' desire to engage in critical thinking in the L2 (Durkin, 2008; Miyanaga, 2012; Okada, 2016). When students are asked

to perform critical analysis, evaluation, and inference, they may find themselves in situations where they are required to confront the values they were raised with, such as groupism, harmony, avoidance of self-expression, and confrontation (Miyanaga, 2012; Okada, 2016). As a result, demonstrating critical thinking in front of others may appear to be an intimidating process or, at best, an unnecessary attempt.

According to a study performed by Okada (2016), Japanese students generally assessed the risk of self-expression in terms of how it would be received by the teacher and other students before they expressed themselves. In order to develop the necessary metacognitive disposition, students had to go through several phases to adjust their cultural assumptions and expectations to Western norms. This process requires guidance from language teachers with sufficient intercultural sensitivity which can help establish a mutual understanding through a conciliatory dialog so that students can express critical thinking in ways, which they feel most comfortable.

The role of learner autonomy in demonstrating critical thinking

The complexity of the way we perceive and relate to the external environment increases with our cognitive and emotional intelligence. In the language classroom, the way learners think, feel, and make sense of the external environment is facilitated through social and collaborative interactions with peers and the teacher. These interactions can only flourish through an autonomous learning environment where all learners are provided with freedom and a safe space to take ownership of their learning (Benson, 2016).

Through social interactions in the language classroom, the teacher and learners can create a reflective classroom culture that allows learners to make sense of what they are learning, why they are learning it, and eventually recognize the value of their classroom experience. Learner autonomy allows learners the freedom and psychological safety to observe, predict, explain, and make learning decisions in the L2. In other words, it gives learners the agency to be fully present in their own learning. Being fully present is what promotes “disciplined, self-directed, and purposeful thinking,” and this reflective and mindful practice activates the self-management of thoughts in the L2 (Carter et al., 2017: 1). Thus, it would be appropriate to conclude that learner autonomy could potentially provide learners with the agency they need to think beyond the boundaries established by the cultural values and demonstrate critical thinking.

Conclusion

In this review, I shed light on the reasons behind the challenges experienced by Japanese students when they are asked to demonstrate critical thinking skills in the L2. By sharing my insights into the issues surrounding language education in Japan, I have raised the issue of labeling learners as non-critical thinkers. In this regard, foreign language teachers’ intercultural sensitivity appeared to be critical to guiding students to adjust their cultural assumptions and expectations to Western norms and their subsequent success in demonstrating critical thinking. Raising language teachers’ intercultural sensitivity would not only help teachers become more empathetic towards disengaged students but also lead to more effective content integrated language teaching strategies.

Furthermore, language teachers’ awareness of self and the workings of the environment around them is critical to overcoming methodological limitations and biases (Egitim, 2017). When reflective practice becomes a habit, teachers can develop an empathetic lens that will not only help them understand the challenges students are facing but also stimulate their desire to create a

favorable environment for students to succeed. As a result, growth opportunities would remain open for teachers as change agents and classroom innovators.

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