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Language, learning and context: developing students' critical thinking in Hong Kong secondary school English writing classes

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Developing students' critical thinking has been a significant educational issue in many countries, such as the United Kingdom and Singapore. Educational psychologists have pointed out that critical thinking is fundamental to schooling in the 21st century, stressing that in the information age thinking plays a significant role in one's success in life. In terms of language education, cognitive psychologists emphasize that learners need to 'use their minds to observe, think, categorise and hypothesise' (William & Burdens, 1997, p.13) in order to work out how a language operates. Specifically, the cognitive operations involved in the composing processes that writers employ further confirm the close link between good writing and careful thinking.

In 1999, a new set of guidelines (CDC, 1999) requiring teachers to develop students' critical thinking through the English language subject was issued to all secondary schools in Hong Kong. The latest curricular methodology, which stresses the importance of involving students in the processes of thinking, and of using and applying the language for genuine communication, calls for nothing less than a new interpretation of both teaching and learning in the local educational context. However, as Morris (1996) pointed out, a gap between the intended and implemented curriculum is a common phenomenon in Hong Kong. The present study aims to shed light on the extent to which critical thinking comprises part of teaching and learning in English language education in local secondary schools.

Regarding developing students' critical thinking, the literature indicates that engaging students actively in critical thinking processes through effective use of questions and critical discussion in a context that values inquiry (D' Angelo, 1971) could contribute to students' development of both critical thinking skills and attitudes. But, Bourdillon and Storey (2002) have warned that teacher questions have to be handled appropriately. For instance, students are given too little thinking time to respond to challenging questions. They are not given the opportunity to ask questions

or to contribute to the classroom discourse. The space of learning for students' critical thinking development created in the classroom should aim to raise students' awareness of constructive uses of critical thinking, so that they can employ it more gainfully in their learning and future lives.

The three teacher participants, i.e. Lai, Mei and Fun (pseudonyms) were identified through existing university contacts. The schools where they were teaching are two of the many local schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction in most subjects. A case study approach was adopted to capture what happened in their classrooms during a three-month data collection period. With a focus on the close link between students' thinking and writing development, classroom observations and interviews were conducted to investigate the space of learning created for students' critical thinking development in writing classes. The classroom data were analysed based on the space of learning framework (Tsui et al, 2004). To counter potential bias, the results were presented to the teachers involved for validation. Due to the reasons of space, the complete interview findings are reported in a different paper.

The significant pattern that emerged across the three cases, i.e. ineffective questioning, reveals a continual failure to create an adequate space of learning for students' critical thinking development. Ineffective questioning emerged resulting from a number of factors, including brief waiting time and a predominance of lower order questions. As observed in the lessons, Fun and Lai seemed to be following a pre-conceived 'recitation-script' (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p.14) and so were not open to learning and thinking opportunities that arose. And, the questions the three teachers asked or the way they handled the questions mainly required students to play the role of a code breaker to locate information from the texts given.

The data reveal also a striking finding, i.e. students were constantly deprived of the time and space to engage in different composing processes in the writing lessons. The data show that Lai and Fun adopted primarily a product-oriented approach towards writing, i.e. their students were always supplied with writing ideas and were told exactly how to organize their work. Only Mei's students were allowed to engage in genuine communication with their teacher about various aspects of the writing tasks but most of them had difficulty expressing themselves in English. The situation improved when Mei violated the school language policy and allowed them to express themselves in Chinese.

The study reveals that the critical thinking syllabus was not translated into the three teachers' classroom practices. On the whole, the required space of learning aimed at helping students see and experience the critical features of critical attitudes or the opportunity to actually engage in critical thinking was hardly found in the writing lessons. In their interviews, the three teachers stressed that improvements had to be made in the school and broader contexts before the critical thinking syllabus could be implemented successfully but they did not seem to be aware of the significant impact of classroom context on student critical thinking development. The findings point to the need of helping frontline teachers understand the important role context plays in teaching and learning in the local educational context.

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