

What is critical thinking and how can we integrate it into English language teaching?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 7 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS critical thinking, ELT, 21st-century skills, information, students, information landscape, zeitgeist, teaching, ideas

Welcome to Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council: the podcast for English language teachers around the world.

In each episode we look at a critical contemporary issue in the world of ELT.

Teaching English with the British Council

'Most of us would like to be language teachers so as to make the world a better place'

'We need to navigate the complex information landscape and communicate effectively across various media'

'Students are learning something about the world, you're not just asking them to do critical thinking in a vacuum, as it were, but you're helping them to build their knowledge of the world'

'Students are not going to say what they really think about a subject unless they trust you'

'And it's simply a way of saying to yourself: how can I provoke a little more thought about this? How can I get my students to think more deeply about this thing we're looking at?'

Teaching English with the British Council

This is episode 7: What is critical thinking and how can we integrate it into English language teaching?

We'am: Welcome to episode 7 of Teaching English with the British Council: How can we integrate critical thinking into English language teaching?

Chris: So why are we even talking about this, We'am? Why are we talking about critical thinking on an English language podcast?

We'am: I think the emphasis on critical thinking should be as a **mindset**, not as a skill on its own. But rather a mindset because in today's world we have a lot of information that we need to go through during the day and it's important to have critical-thinking skills to be able to differentiate between the different information that you gather and to judge whether it is reliable or not.

Chris: Absolutely, and I think it's a, like you say, it's a skill which has been around for some time within ELT but it's probably becoming more and more important for students, particularly, as you say, with digital information, with **deepfakes** and increase in **AI** and those sorts of things, it can become, you know, more and more difficult for young people to differentiate between those things. But I think it's an interesting thing just talking about critical thinking, because it seems to me we talk a lot about it within the ELT sector, but

often, in practice, teachers, schools, institutions, systems are not particularly critical-thinking-friendly. So even though the output, even though in terms of what students are learning about is quite critical-thinking-focused, the actual system itself is not necessarily geared towards that.

We'am: Yeah, and it's often, critical thinking is often branded recently as **21st-century skills**. We need to navigate the complex information landscape and communicate effectively across various media, I think.

Chris: Absolutely.

One of the challenges in doing this is that the only thing which people who write about critical thinking seem to agree on is that there is no one-size-fits-all definition – and if we're not able to identify exactly what it is, it can become difficult to talk about.

We'am: First up, to help us navigate this complex landscape, we will interview **Paul Dummett**, trainer and author of the book *How to write critical thinking activities*.

Paul: Hello.

Chris: So 'critical thinking' is a word, a phrase that's used all across English language teaching. What does it actually mean? Why is it considered so important within the field of English language teaching itself?

Paul: I think that's a really interesting question. I think probably the first thing to say is that it's actually a kind of fundamental basis for all learning. That is to say, to question the thing before you, not just to take it as read, to turn things over in your mind, to reflect, it's how deeper learning takes place. I think the second thing to say is that educators in general are probably more sensitive. ELT likes to do this; it likes to pick up on the **zeitgeist** really. So there's been a general focus on life skills in the last ten years, on 21st-century communication skills.

Chris: It's interesting that you say about the zeitgeist. All of these, like you say, zeitgeisty skills always seem to fall under the umbrella of English language teaching. It's seen as English language teachers' somehow responsibility. Why is that, do you think?

Paul: I think people try to bring as much as possible in ELT, I mean, try to bring the world into their classroom. I think that's a good thing, I think that's something to be admired really. But it's actually a kind, a kind of question. I wrote a book about critical thinking with a colleague called John Hughes, and we started it about seven years ago. And it was kind of the question that after sort of starting off writing, and thinking we knew what we were writing about, it's, a sort of question that came to us is that why are people in ELT sort of obsessed with critical thinking? Is it, are we doing critical thinking kind of to enhance language learning? Or is it part of a general life skill? And we kind of came to the conclusion that the answer was both. And so, I didn't know if this is how other language teachers had perceived it, but I suspect not so much. I suspect most of them were kind of thinking of it more as a life skill. We need to think critically about language both at, you can take it from word level, and then at sentence level, moving up to kind of text level, which is where most people do it within reading and listening comprehension, to think critically about the ideas that you are being presented and also to think critically about the medium through which those ideas are being conveyed. So it might be to do with visual literacy or **media literacy**. So another kind of zeitgeist is all these sort of 21st-century literacies as well now, whether you call it media or **digital** or whatever. So yeah, critical thinking is a mindset that informs the way you approach learning at all those levels.

Chris: So if it's a mindset, Paul, does that mean that you think it should be taught more as an embedded skill alongside the normal skills in systems of English language teaching or is it something which can be taught as a stand-alone unit or as some kind of hybrid of the two?

Paul: My feeling is it's not like a box of tools that you just sort of reach for when it's appropriate and then put away. I think that when teachers approach their lesson planning, what they should really do now is look and examine their lesson plans for a kind of balance of thinking skills, much in the same way that they would look for a balance of, say, productive and receptive activities, input and output, or a balance of things which stir students, which get students moving around or things which sort of settle them down. Just in the same way, they should look through the book that they're using, perhaps, to ensure there's a kind of balance of thinking activities, activities which might engage basic comprehension, critical thinking, and then also some creative-thinking activities.

We'am: And do you think teachers need a lot of resources in order to make those adjustments of integrating critical thinking?

Paul: I don't think it needs a lot. It takes a mindset from the teacher themselves, I think, to do that, just to delve a little bit deeper, to say 'What's really going on here?' I think in a lot of cases, actually, that it's things that teachers do already, I think they're probably doing a lot of critical thinking without knowing it.

Chris: Again, in many contexts, it seems that whilst critical thinking is seen as being a core element of the curriculum, and in English language teaching, actually many institutions are not critical themselves. You know, they don't kind of embody those principles in their ideas, in the way that they manage or organise or run their institutions. Is that something you've observed as well?

Paul: Yeah, I mean, I think higher-education institutions are trying to nurture critical thinking, but at the same time they're very mindful of their results and their **rankings**. It's very difficult – or it's very time-consuming, I should say – to test independent thinking. And it's also quite subjective. There'll always be this tension between what the institutions aspire to, which is to producing critical thinkers and nurturing critical thinkers. And there's that tension between that and actually what their commercial priorities are, which is to show that they have fantastic results.

We'am: I find that critical thinking has, it's the essence notion of learning and education. And scholars argue that the notion of critical thinking has resurfaced, like, recently and it's labelled under 21st-century skills. In most countries, you'd see, like, these workshops or training on 21st-century skills, and critical thinking is one of them. How can we relate, you know, the purpose maybe of education in the past and now in the present and the role of critical thinking?

Paul: Yeah, so I think, you know, even **Bloom** talking back in the 1930s was very aware of this need, that education was trying to channel people, and sort of produce people who had knowledge for certain industries or whatever. And it was important to try and open people's minds. I think the more recent trend for it is very much to do with the explosion in information.

We'am: Like, now we have artificial intelligence and, you know, some people doing essays, entire essays, for example, on ChatGPT. Students, maybe it's difficult for them to choose what is right, what is wrong, what is ... 'How should I think?' even, because there are lots of information. How can we encourage more teachers to use critical thinking in the classroom?

Paul: I think one thing that's very important for teachers is to try and use tools like this perhaps to play around with ideas of critical thinking. I was thinking about this the other day, and how fantastic it would be

to use it, for example, as a debating tool that you might get students to argue against. So set up a sort of classic sort of debate, that sort of thing, using tools that are out there, which may seem at first to be a threat to critical thinking and actually kind of turn it on its head by saying 'OK, I'm gonna get my students to play around with this and to see if they can form cogent and good arguments against a tool like ChatGPT'.

Chris: Yeah, it can link also to other 21st-century skills, like empathy, for example.

Paul: I think that's absolutely right, Chris, yeah. I mean, one thing I should say is I have come across countless times, really, people in sort of institutions teaching 15-, 16-, 17-year-olds saying 'My students don't do critical thinking'. Often it comes out of a place where their students don't actually know very much about the world. And I think that's something that often we underestimate, is the importance of, for instance, more mature people who've built up a knowledge of the world and have the ability to compare ideas to other things we've read. I think it's also very important in ELT that you keep your materials kind of information-rich, that students are learning something about the world, so they're not just, you're not just asking them to do critical thinking in a vacuum, as it were, but you're helping them to build their knowledge of the world. For all these kinds of creative exercises, if you just add some critical elements, so maybe ... there's something called reverse brainstorming. I don't know if you know, where rather than brainstorming all the ways to reach a particular solution, you brainstorm all the negative things that would reach the wrong outcome. So, for example, if you're giving a presentation, what are all the things that could go wrong? Which people tend to find sort of easier to do in a way, and then they make a list of those things. And then they can think about solutions to solving that. So ways of preparing for sort of more creative exercises. Another nice one a friend called Nick Bilbrough does is a six-line dialogue. So students are given a picture – two people, it could be two people looking at each other angrily in a restaurant or something like that – and they have to make a six-line dialogue, what these people are saying to each other, and they have to do it in reduced sentences. So it begins with six words, then five, then four, then three, then two, then one, like that. So you give some sort of structure which gives it a kind of critical-thinking element to it, they have to think about the **syntax** of the language and so on.

Chris: And sometimes giving those kind of reasonable, but sort of strict, frameworks is really good for students. You know, they need some kind of bounding. But it kind of also encourages them to be critical as well.

Paul: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. Yeah, and the other thing I just always try to make exercises kind of thought-provoking. So if, for example, you're doing the difference between *go* and *play* and *do* with sports, like *go swimming* and *play tennis* and stuff like that, you, like, give them gap fills, like 'I'll *beep* to win, that's the point of sports'. So they have to complete an exercise, but then it has a sentence in it which they may then discuss afterwards.

Chris: And that's great for teachers, who maybe are more constrained by having to teach the textbook by a kind of a grammar-based, vocab-based curriculum, etc. But you can still do what is needed, but that you can go beyond that.

Paul: I think that's right. It just takes very small additions. Just occasionally, just asking 'Why?' after a question or something like that, just a little bit of probing. Yeah. A little bit of thought-provocation.

Chris: Paul, thank you very much for your time today, that was really interesting.

We'am: Paul mentioned some practical advice for teachers to provoke deeper thinking, for example asking students to consider what's really going on in a text or a visual. This kind of questioning encourages

students to go beyond the surface-level understanding and engage more deeply with the materials. Do you have any other suggestions for how to integrate critical thinking?

Chris: Yeah, so I think a lot of what Paul was saying is that it doesn't need to be a massive change in what you do as a teacher. I think sometimes teachers can think it's a whole thing, that you have to change the way you teach, your pedagogical approach and so on, to in, to make your teaching more critical. You don't. I think there's lots of small things that you can do. So, for example, it might be if you're asking students a particular, their opinion on something and they have to share, rather than giving them five options ranging from kind of strongly agree, agree, don't know, slightly disagree, strongly disagree, just give them four. Take out that 'don't know' in the middle. Give them four options, so they have to take a position either way, even if it's just very slight. They can't just opt out and kind of say nothing. Similarly in a debate, for example, which lots of English language teachers do, often teachers will ask students what do they think about a particular subject first, and then they're given that side in the debate. But actually, if you randomly assign students to have a side or to actively make them argue against what they say they believe, it's a way of developing empathy and understanding of different people's views and perspectives. It doesn't mean you have to agree with that view, but it does mean you have to understand it and have to appreciate it and have to acknowledge it. You can also use digital tools like **Padlet**, for example, an online space where students can post their views anonymously. If you ask a room full of students, often teenagers in particular, to share their views on a subject, they may feel a little bit shy or embarrassed or they, there's that group-think which exists. They want to, they don't want to stand out from what everybody else is saying, but if you use a tool like Padlet and make it anonymous, they can share their answers on a particular subject and they can say what they really think without fear of other people judging them or saying what they think. So there's lots of ways that we can use different tools or introduce slightly changed approaches in our pedagogy to make our teaching much more critical.

We'am: Yeah, and it goes back to the emphasis on critical thinking as a mindset rather than a discrete set of skills. And this in result allows for lifelong learning and adaptability to be able to deal with the fast-paced world.

Chris: What underpins that approach is teachers and students having trust in each other within the classroom. Students are not going to say what they really think about a subject unless they trust you as a teacher or they feel able to share some of those views in a classroom. So that positive relationship is really important for critical thinking.

We'am: Yes, I agree. Another activity could be problem-solving scenarios. For example, you can engage students in solving a real-world problem. One thing you need to introduce first the concept of the activity and then you divide the class maybe into small groups and then you present the scenario. For instance, it could be about a local community facing issues with waste management. Invite students to research and discuss their solutions, and then present them in their groups.

Chris: And it can also be something at the level of the school as well. It could be a waste management problem within the school. It could be about plastic water bottles. It could be about gender disparity on things. It could be about all sorts of things within the school environment. So, yeah, it's a way of integrating those skills and making a positive change through the learning of language.

We'am: Yeah, and it's something real and related to the students. Sometimes students don't want to bury these problems but rather be part of the solution. And that's what critical thinking does.

Chris: And this idea, We'am, links closely to our second interview, with Professor **Graham Crookes** from the University of Hawai'i. His recent book, *English for a critical mind*, is subtitled *Language pedagogy for social justice*, and one of the main issues it explores is the importance of action, both for students and for teachers, to consider how they can apply critical-thinking principles not just in their classrooms but in everyday life.

We'am: Yes, I think it's something we sometimes forget about – that the classroom is a place where students can learn how to become active citizens in their own country. Sometimes we find in the world of English language teaching that critical thinking is taught, but not enacted. In his book, and in our interview, Graham talks about more than just 'critical thinking' as an ELT context. He talks about 'critical pedagogy' and 'critical language pedagogy' – that the language classroom can be a place where those who are marginalised or oppressed can develop the skills, ability and words to raise awareness about their situation.

We'am: Hi, Graham. Really good to have you. Can you tell us a little bit about the reason you wrote *English for a critical mind* and what does it try to do?

Graham: So *English for a critical mind* reflects a long-standing tradition in language teaching, probably 50 years in place, originally deriving from the ideas and L1 literacy practices of a person called **Paulo Freire**, who was a first-language literacy teacher in Brazil. The ideas have been around for a long time, but they simply haven't had enough practical expression. Klett, the publisher, also DELTA Publishing, has a nice, easy-to-access series of teacher handbooks, and we wanted to use the model that was provided there to put a practical, simple, straightforward indication of this tradition in teachers' hands.

Chris: What value do you think it can have in the, in the language classroom, the work of Freire? Like you say, historically it's been more theoretical or it's used in certain contexts, but, as you say, latterly it's declined in popularity, but what is it about that that you think is important in the language classroom?

Graham: I don't think it's declined in popularity. In fact, I think it's increased in popularity, and certainly increased in the breadth and depth of the academic parts of our field. But, then again, there's the question of, do we have materials in this area? I think it's increasing in popularity, and we want to capitalise on that and make materials available or make content available that will build on that. That said, what can it contribute? Well, it depends upon your values as a teacher and the extent to which you think teaching should have a moral, ethical and social justice purpose or not. Most of us would like to be language teachers so as to make the world a better place. But really, what are you doing as a teacher that makes your life worthwhile? People will say 'Well, I'm trying to help my students'. Sure. But there's, there can be a bigger picture. And what are, what are those students' practical problems? Would they like to talk about them? Would there be some benefit from them, for them thinking together about things that they could do to address the problems in their life? And can the teacher structure things so that is part and parcel of the classroom? So, yeah, making, making the world a better place is the basic reason for doing this.

Chris: There's lots of aspects of the modern English language teaching industry, if we want to call it that, which is very much against Freire, you know, it is a **banking model of education**. What would you say to teachers working in those contexts, how they can push back against some of those more oppressive structures that they are working within?

Graham: Every teacher will have to decide, or a teacher who is curious about this would have to decide in their own circumstances, preferably in discussion with other teachers – don't try to do this by yourself –

what small steps could be taken? Do you have any opportunity to choose content and activities in any part of your classroom or not?

We'am: And in the book, you address the dual nature of critical thinking in English language teaching as both a method and also as a vital life skill.

Graham: Yeah, so this is a problem-posing perspective. We are trying to move the classroom in the direction of allowing students to consider what it is in their lives that they would like to discuss, consider, write about and work together on. Certain amount of critical thinking may be needed for that. Giving students the chance to, as I say, talk, think, write together, using the target language and, as necessary, using first language so as to come to grips with what the problems are that they think they are facing. In the past, some students have been students who were in relatively conventional classrooms. And some of the problems they wanted to talk about were school uniforms. They didn't like them. They wanted to change them. And they were very happy to talk about that in English, and to consider possibilities. A teacher might like to try asking them to think about 'Well, why are there school uniforms in the first place? What are the pros and cons?' and so on, and extend that out to a wider understanding of society and social conditions as a whole.

Chris: Would you hope having done that speaking activity in class, that could then turn into something more of a project and actually the students within their own school could advocate, for example, against school uniform?

Graham: School-based projects addressing the issues that students raise would be perfect, and of course all forms of language can be involved in that sort of thing. And above all, help them realise, to the extent possible, that they possibly have an active role in society. They're not merely, we hope, consumers of the language but will use the language and their abilities to, as I say, contribute to making the world a better place.

Chris: It's interesting you use language about consumers and so on, because to me it often seems with the term 'critical thinking', it's something which big publishers and institutions like to say that they do, but they don't necessarily like it when they see it in action in their own spaces, you know, what you're saying about Paulo Freire, he was a radical writer. Critical thinking at its heart is, has a radical, if not revolutionary, kind of focus.

Graham: Yes, teachers must use their judgement. But they can develop better judgement by working with other teachers concerning what is feasible in their own circumstances. And, of course, also, I suppose, not get beyond where the students are at. But, yes, the kind of critical thinking that's involved, well, it can be perfectly practical, and it requires some analysis of 'Yeah, OK, what is the problem and what should we be doing about it and where does language come in, come in with all of that?'

We'am: And finally, Graham, what would you say to students and teachers whose institutions do not allow them to adopt these perspectives?

Graham: If there is absolutely no possibility, then you can't do it. Don't stick your head over the parapet right now but, at the same time, look for places where baby steps can be taken, build support networks with your fellow teachers and just very carefully look for those little places where improvements can be made.

Chris: So one of the things I was really interested that Graham had to say was about this idea of **micro-resistances**. It's something we've talked about in the last series with **Rose**.

Chris: And something I've often encouraged teachers to do in training I've done is to look at what micro-resistances they can also put in place – even if they have textbooks which have, for example, very traditional gender roles or it represents particular dominant groups within the society – is to simply encourage that space for critical reflection. So asking questions like does this reflect the reality of your society? Or if you're doing something like acting out the story, it's changing the roles so that boys play girls or girls play boys or whatever it may be.

Rose: Yeah, definitely. I like that – what was it? – micro-resistances? That's really nice. I'm going to start using that. It makes me think of something I did the other day. I was, I'm teaching in Bangladesh at the moment, and I think I was defining 'marriage' or providing an explanation for marriage. And it was just inserting the word 'usually' – instead of saying 'This is a partnership between a man and a woman', 'it's usually a partnership between a man and a woman'. So that's not necessarily opening up the discussion, but learners will notice.

Chris: Even if you can't do the big things, you can't push back against the big things, there's always some things you can do. Small things, planting seeds in students' minds, all those sorts of things. And there's always something you can do.

We'am: I like the link between critical minds and also a freer school of empowering learners to question and to reshape their world, which complemented the aim of *English for critical minds*.

Chris: It's something which we've seen across this series, really, this idea that there has to be strong links between the outside world and the classroom. Good education systems are those that see the value of education for what it can do in society. And I think language learning is at the absolute centre of that.

We'am: Yeah, and it's also about approaches that encourage engagement with real-world issues, as you said, and using those as a catalyst for language learning and critical discussions not only helps students to find personal connection with their, with what they're studying, but it also increases their motivation and their agency and the likelihood of sustained kind of learning.

Chris: Just making them active citizens in their society so that they feel invested in that, that they can take a role, that their voice is heard.

We'am: Yeah, and it's, we should think of the class as a microzone for a bigger, wider world. So if students cannot discuss these things in class, then that means it's a mirror to their outside world. It's important that students have this at least inside the class to think and reflect.

Chris: Yeah, there may be no other places where they can actually say these things or share these things in a, in a safe way. And I think if teachers are progressive, and they feel that they want to encourage these sorts of discussions, then they should do that. That's something as language teachers, in most situations, we have the power to make happen.

We'am: You'd be surprised that students want to be, to voice their opinions on matters that they think are important for them.

Thank you for listening. And in our next episode we will be talking about 'How can we motivate our students?' Until then, goodbye!