

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN THE PROCESS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article substantiates the feasibility of the process of the development of critical thinking among University students, which includes two interrelated issues. The first question examines the effectiveness of the educational process as a whole through group activities that contribute to the development of critical thinking of students. On the other hand, the development of critical thinking is an important basis for training future specialists with professional competencies, namely the ability to work in a team and with a high culture of critical thinking.

The authors of the study emphasize the special role of teachers in the process of developing critical thinking skills among students of higher educational institutions. The introduction of special pedagogical tools, project methods, and the use of game activities in teams contribute to the students' critical thinking skills.

The relevance of the research lies in the fact that it reveals both theoretical and practical aspects aimed at developing the ability to think critically. As an example, the authors of the study consider the introduction of elements of critical thinking in the process of teaching foreign languages in higher education. The stages of the development of critical thinking skills described in detail are aimed at developing cognitive activity, internal motivation of students to speech-thinking activities.

Keywords: Development, students, critical thinking, collaboration skills, foreign language.

1 INTRODUCTION

Studying issues related to the formation of critical thinking as the basis of educational technologies of the 21st century can certainly be called one of the highest priorities, which originated at the intersection of psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and a number of other areas of scientific knowledge. One of the priorities of modern education is the development of constructive criticism and self-criticism as a means of effective thinking, self-knowledge and evaluation of the phenomenon of reality [1]. The formation of critical thinking is necessary for a graduate of a modern university, regardless of the specialty, but it is especially important for managers, teachers, psychologists, political scientists, doctors, marketers and engineers, because critical thinking contributes to the development of effective solutions, the generation of ideas and the creation of new technologies in the sphere of their professional activity [2].

However, the issues of university students' critical thinking formation are extremely poorly investigated and not specified in professional pedagogy. Due to that, future specialists cannot rationally formulate their thoughts and ideas, quickly navigate in the rapidly growing information flow and find required data, comprehend and apply the information obtained, as it requires the formation of special mental skills. They don't know how to make decisions whether to have children, whether to invest and whether to support any political proposal. They are not able to put forward probable solutions of their problems. In short, they do not know how to use their heads [3].

The formation of critical thinking, of course, depends on the natural abilities of man, the social environment, but still the main role in the process of formation belongs to teachers. Since the formation of critical thinking is the result of interaction between the teacher and the student, the level of its formation depends primarily on the correct choice of forms of training. The command form of the organization of training is the most effective form of the organization of training promoting formation of critical thinking of students.

2 METHODOLOGY

In the psychological dictionary [4, p.77] the following definition of thinking is proposed: Thinking is the process of reflecting objects as well as the creative transformation of their subjective images, notion and meaning in the conscience of a person for resolving real contradictions in the circumstances of vital human activity, for the formation of new goals, the discovery of new means and plans to achieve them.

Critical thinking is a way of thinking aimed at revealing the structural features of reasoning, checking the correlation between well-founded theses and the corresponding arguments, evaluating the theses put forward, characterizing the contexts of reasoning, taking into consideration the characteristics of the author and the reader, the opponent and the proponent [5].

Critical thinking is a mental ability aimed at finding the best way to solve problems. Training becomes effective only in case of self-learning which is the most lasting, persists for a long time and self-esteem serves as a support for it. Many authors define critical thinking as an evaluation based on certain criteria. It can be directed to the outside world and somebody's thoughts or to oneself and its thoughts. This is the content of criticality and self-criticality of thinking [6]. In M. Veksler's study [7] the concept of "critical thinking" is viewed as "the process of solving a problem that includes a various discussion of the process and results of labor, their evaluation. This evaluation can be expressed in the detection of an error, in establishing a positive, valuable quality of objects and phenomena, or in establishing the truth of the discussed fact or idea V.A. Popkov and A.V. Korzhuyev [8, p.7] define the concept of "critical thinking", as a person's comprehension of his actions, thinking about them, in the course of which, a person gives himself a full and clear account of what he does and how he does it, i.e. he is aware of those schemes and rules, in accordance with which he acts.

Formation of critical thinking skills requires a fairly long time and an extensive system of knowledge of students, including "knowledge that is given by formal education (school, university, advanced training courses, etc.) and knowledge obtained in the result of their own analytical work, reflection, critical attitude to their own experience and to themselves. Skill is the ability to consciously perform a certain action. Skill is the basis of craftsmanship" [9] and the professional competence of the future specialist. In pedagogy, skill is understood as the mastery of means of activity, the ability to apply knowledge [10].

The process of professional competence development involves teaching various kinds of expertise that can be considered identical to skills based on both knowledge and the experience of its application in different situations. "Skill is an ability to do a particular action consciously. Skills are the base of mastery" [14] and professional competence of future specialists. "Skill" is the term used in pedagogics to designate the possession of methods of activity, the faculty to apply knowledge [15].

An analysis of the corresponding literature sources demonstrates that the study of processes involved in critical thinking training, how to find a way out of difficult situations and how to apply these skills in practice is a theme of contemporary significance which attracts the attention of many researchers in our country and abroad [16,17]. In their opinion, students must possess interactive skills, ability to work in teams, think critically, as well as embody their ideas in a creative and innovative way.

As an example confirming this, we can mention the experimental study [18], performed by a group of scientists with the goal of assessing the efficiency of teamwork in the completion of students' projects and determining the primary skills necessary in students' team activities. A total of 165 respondents participated in the survey. Based on the outcome of the study, the authors of this paper gave the following list of skills ranked according to their efficiency in students' teamwork:

- leadership skills — 43%;
- critical thinking and problem-solving — 36%;
- communication skills — 34%;
- teamwork skills — 30%.

These results point to two fundamental conclusions. First, such integrative skills as critical thinking and teamwork should be included among the competencies of every future professional. Second, the development of these skills is only possible in a purposeful and system-based training process of students in special courses and seminars, using interactive technologies that teach thinking and working in practical situations. These conclusions have been confirmed, in particular, by our study, which has a more complex structure than the one described in the paper mentioned above.

3 RESULTS

Teachers working in line with critical thinking develop the content of all kinds of pedagogical situations, from the point of view of the possibility of strengthening the process of forming critical thinking of students, using methods of forming problem thinking, and special ways, methods and techniques. The productivity of students' activity, and, consequently, the effectiveness of the educational process itself, depends on the way a teacher can stimulate students' desire for tireless knowledge, teach students to think critically, provide perception, understanding, memorization, and other processes. Hence, the teacher's ability to think critically himself, involves the fulfillment of a number of important functions [11].

- 1 Control function includes such speech actions as control of understanding, comprehension, application, implementation, expansion of students' knowledge, skills and proficiency, organization of self- and mutual control.
- 2 The appraisal and corrective function is represented by the actions of the teacher in assessing and correcting students' learning activities. The teacher is able to influence the emotional sphere of the trainees, create a certain psychological climate in the class, and regulate the educational process. This group is also represented by value judgments, marks, and the organization of self and mutual evaluation.
- 3 The stimulatory function. The actions of the teacher are aimed at encouraging students to speech-cognitive activity through the formulation of problems, the question-answer form of interaction, the stimulation of internal motivation and cognitive interest.
- 4 The facilitative function is to provide meaningful teaching. It is aimed at coordinating actions with students, preventing errors, providing help and psychological mindset, stimulating the desire to learn and providing choices and freedom of actions in solving learning problems.
- 5 Informative function. By informing the trainees, the teacher organizes and stimulates their activities by means of the material presented. If the information is problematic, then it directly contains the stimulating moments that motivate the learners to find answers and solutions to the questions posed.

Foreign researchers [13,14], dealing with this problem, note the fact that teaching critical thinking to students allows them to use the theoretical knowledge obtained during seminars, trainings in real life, and distinguish the following stages in the realization of critical thinking:

- problem definition;
- systematic monitoring;
- brainstorm;
- the beginning of the solution of the problem;
- setting short-term goals;
- argumentation based on qualitative indicators;
- feedback and self-evaluation.

We agree with the point of view of foreign researchers and believe that the implementation of critical thinking and, consequently, its formation to a certain extent is possible at all stages, wherever there is an alternative - in analyzing the problem situation (analysis requires critical attitude).

Some researchers dealing with this issue (see [19,20,21]) note that teaching critical thinking to students, especially in teams, allows them to use theoretical knowledge gained in seminars and real life trainings. These authors distinguish the following stages of development of critical thinking [22]:

- problem identification;
- systematic observation;
- brainstorming;
- starting to solve the problem;
- setting short-term goals;
- justification based on qualitative indicators;
- feedback and self-evaluation.

Based on theoretical and practical knowledge obtained by some researchers [23,24] about the stages of development of critical thinking, the authors of the present study concluded that the implementation of critical thinking and, hence, its development are possible to some extent at any stage, wherever a problem situation arises. Ultimately, this vision of the problem allowed the authors [25] to design a training plan focused on the development of critical thinking of students working in teams, and build all the subsequent activities strictly in agreement with it (see Table 1).

Table1. Training plan aimed at developing critical thinking through teamwork

| 1. Active knowledge | |
|--|---|
| Tasks | Form of implementation |
| Discuss the advantages of obtaining information in an active way in the context of the solution of the problem. Update the knowledge that the students already have. Motivate their interest in the considered subject. Determine the goals of studying the material. | Various techniques are used: brainstorming, accumulation of different versions related to the studied material. |
| Implementation time | |
| Activities: 1. Divide the participants of the training into groups of 10 to 12 persons; 2. Highlight the benefits of such an approach to training when the students are actively involved in the teaching process of the subject. | |
| 2. Knowledge gained through experience | |
| Tasks | Form of implementation |
| Discussion, choosing activities. Planning the solution of the problem. Choosing a solution Analysis of alternative solutions. | The students perform the basic substantive work with text. Note that "text" must be understood widely enough: it can be a historical document or any other historical source, as well as teacher's speech, videos, etc. The students use the following techniques during their work with this new information: text reading with pauses, text marking with symbols, tabulation. |
| Implementation time | |
| Activities: 1. Hand out the materials and discuss the problem to solve. 2. Examine the information and choose what is needed to solve the problem. 3. Solve the problem and discuss alternative solutions. 4. Present the different solutions properly and include them in products of the training activity. | |
| 3. Thoughts and reflections | |
| Tasks | Form of implementation |
| Think about what was learned. | The students reflect on the material studied and shape their own opinion and attitude toward the studied material. At this stage, the following techniques may be applied: discussions, writing historical studies, essays, registering the material studied as personal findings, records in a notebook, schemes. |
| Implementation time | |
| Activities: 1. Each member of the team expresses her/his attitude toward the studied material. 2. Each member of the team describes the main things that she/he has learned, and that have a direct significance for her/his professional activities. The members of the team discuss the methods of competence development. | |

| 4. Generalization and evaluation | |
|--|---|
| Tasks | Form of implementation |
| Generalization of arguments and proofs. Evaluation, self-evaluation. | Generalization of arguments and proofs. Self-evaluation and open evaluation of ideas, knowledge, suggestions, in a friendly and polite manner. |
| Implementation time | |
| Activities: Generalize arguments and proofs. Self-evaluation and open evaluation. | |

All training sessions were productive, had a creative character, were built on purposeful communication and included elements of critical thinking, namely, the students were taught to suggest tasks properly and accomplish them, make good decisions, think critically about them, and solve problems.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Thus, critical thinking is definitely formed by the logics of life; it depends on natural abilities and inclinations, social environment and social education. But nevertheless the main role in the formation of critical thinking belongs to teachers. The main prerequisite for the inclusion of critical thinking in the curriculum is that education is not given by the teacher; it is achieved by the student himself.

Critical thinking allows students, as future professionals, to reflect critically on the surrounding world and become able to strengthen traditions and experience, to influence the course and results of social and economic reforms aimed at the progress of the country and society in general. The possession of critical thinking skills prepares students for their practical activity and their life as a whole, creates the ability to forecast and take into account economic changes, and also to see the changes occurring in technology and economic management.

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