

# Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom

John Hughes 2014



---

# Critical Thinking in the Language Classroom

John Hughes 2014

---

## Contents

### Section 1

What is Critical Thinking?

### Section 2

Why teach critical thinking in the classroom?

### Section 3

Practical activities for integrating Critical Thinking into your language classrooms

### Section 4

References and further reading

## About the author

John Hughes is an English language teacher, teacher trainer and author with over 20 titles. He has taught in many different countries and managed a teacher training company. Nowadays he runs workshops for teachers and is regularly invited to speak at teaching conferences around the world. He has written numerous articles for journals and news media including the Guardian newspaper and website. He is a well-known ELT author with a wide range of titles including series titles such *Business Result* (Oxford University Press) and *Practical Grammar* (Heinle). Most recently he worked as one of three authors on a new six-level general English course series called *Life* (National Geographic Learning) which integrates critical thinking skills with language learning. He also writes a blog at [www.elteachertrainer.com](http://www.elteachertrainer.com). John lives with his family near Oxford.

## The aim of this booklet

The term 'Critical Thinking' increasingly appears in the world of education and language teaching. It's considered to be one of key skills for any 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. Even presidents are talking about it: "...Don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21<sup>st</sup> century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking." – President Barack Obama (1)

So what is it, why do we need it and how do we integrate it into the classroom? The aim of this booklet is to help you answer those questions and to start integrating critical thinking into your language teaching.

# What is critical thinking?

## Definitions of critical thinking

When you ask people to define 'Critical Thinking', there is no shortage of definitions. In a recent online webinar (2) for English Language Teachers, the lecturer started the webinar by asking participants to share their own definition of the term, Critical Thinking. With around 100 teachers from various backgrounds, there was a wide range of ideas and suggestions. Here is a selection of the responses:

- *ask questions and avoid making assumptions*
- *being able to evaluate information and choose relevant bits and pieces*
- *ability to question opinions, research, arguments and ideas*
- *reflective reasoning*
- *analyse material, formulate your opinion about it and be able to support your opinion.*
- *making students autonomous and independent*
- *identify your own bias and others' bias and interests*
- *looking at a problem from a wider/different angle*
- *ask the right questions and weigh up different points of view*

The fact that no one response succeeds in defining Critical Thinking illustrates the fact that it's a term that often defies simple definition. And yet all the responses add to the growing picture of what critical thinking is. I say a 'growing picture' because in recent years 'Critical Thinking' has become somewhat of a buzzword in the world of education and, in particular, in language teaching. More and more is being said and written on the subject. Type the term in Google and you will have a choice of over 121 million results to search through.

## Origins of the term

The term 'Critical Thinking' first started emerging in academic circles and literature in the mid-twentieth century. In 1941, the academic Edward M. Glaser stressed that critical thinking referred to the search for evidence to support (or discredit) a belief or argument (3). Even before Glaser used the term, there are signs of critical thinking in action throughout human history. The Greek philosopher Socrates proposed a system of enquiry which set out to question everyday beliefs and to arrive at the truth on the basis of real evidence. 'Socratic questioning' as it is known still heavily influences many approaches to education to this day and is certainly one skill required of effective critical thinkers. So, at a very basic level, critical thinking is about finding out whether something is true, partly true or not true at all. However, finding this out is not necessarily as easy as it sounds. The writer of an article, for example, can present information as factual or true. Through sophisticated use of language, a writer can disguise his or her bias, offer facts when in reality they are opinion, or use emotive words that will appeal to a reader's own feelings or inclinations. In order to deal with these more complex areas, we need a variety of sub-skills and abilities in order to think critically.

## Sub-skills of critical thinking

In 1956, a committee of educators chaired by the educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom worked towards developing a system of thinking that would go beyond traditional rote learning in education and encourage 'higher-order' thinking. Although the taxonomy they devised is named after Bloom, it is a concept that has been refined and adapted over the years. However, at the core of Bloom's Taxonomy (4) is a series of skills that teachers should develop in their learners in order to make their students learn more effectively.

Over the years, many other educators have built on Bloom's taxonomy, notably Anderson and Krathwohl (5). The following is a summary of these more recent attempts to provide a set of sub-skills which take the learner from lower level thinking to a higher level thinking.

---

## 1. Understanding

When we read or listen to a text, we process it and then try to understand it. In our native language this is simply a case of knowing what we are reading, seeing or listening to. For the language learner doing this in a foreign language, this stage will of course take longer. The teacher might need to ask questions such as 'What kind of text is it? Is it from a newspaper? Where would you read it?'.

## 2. Applying

Having studied a text, we take the new information and apply it to something. In the language classroom this often means answering some comprehension questions or filling in a table with some facts or figures in the text. In other words, it is about task completion with the new information that we have understood.

## 3. Analysing

The analysis stage is where we return to the text and start to question how the author's information is presented. For example, the students might have found information in the text but next we want them to find evidence supporting the main point(s). Often the task involves identifying how a text or its arguments are constructed. In other words, students are becoming more critical of the text and not accepting it at face value.

## 4. Evaluating

Evaluating is one of the key 'higher-order' critical thinking skills. It's the stage at which students have isolated the author's arguments and views and start to evaluate the validity and relevance of the information. This could involve asking students to assess how much of the text is fact supported by evidence and how much is the opinion of the author. If they are going to use the information in the text to support their own writing then they need to be sure it is both valid and relevant. Evaluating is probably the most complex stage for many language learners as it can require very high-level language skills.

## 5. Creating

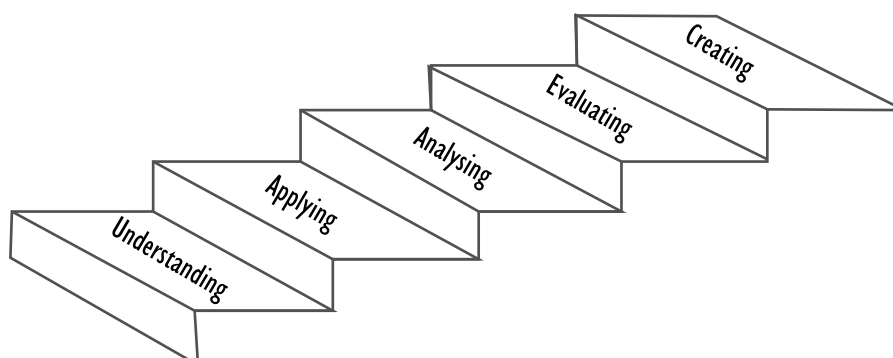
This is the last of the five sub-skills. Having studied a topic by drawing on a number of texts, students need to apply their new knowledge and to create something of their own out of it. For example, perhaps they are writing an essay expressing their own opinion but based on the facts and evidence they have researched. Or perhaps they do a group presentation with other students in which they present all the arguments for and against a view before then presenting their own conclusions.

### A stairway of critical thinking

The five sub-skills above can be represented as a set of linear steps or stairway progressing steadily upwards in order of difficulty and sophistication.

Such a model is helpful if we plan to design courses that will take students from one step to the next and so develop their critical thinking skills. However, it's important to remind ourselves that, in reality, learning – especially when

it involves learning a foreign language – never runs quite so smoothly. A student might read and understand a text, then start to apply or analyse, only to find that they have misunderstood something and have to return to the



---

beginning. Equally, when students start to create a presentation or complete a project, they might find they need more information in support of their own main idea and so they have to return to their sources and re-evaluate them. However, the idea that these sub-skills are like five steps going upwards does provide us with a scaffold on which to create a clearer practical image of what goes towards making a Critical Thinker.

# Why teach critical thinking in the language classroom?

Having established a working definition of Critical Thinking and outlined its main sub-skills, it's time to address this question: 'What has critical thinking got to do with language learning? Why should I include it in my classroom teaching?' Here are some reasons.

## **Communicative language tasks require critical thinking**

You can teach languages without giving any thought to including elements of critical thinking. For example, rote learning with its 'listen-and-repeat' patterns requires no critical thinking and at beginner levels the focus can only be on acquiring a basic vocabulary on which to build. However, as soon as students enter in any task using the target language which contains elements such as personalisation, investigation and problem solving then they must think critically. In modern language methodology these kinds of communicative task are commonplace because they engage the student in authentic communication. Success in such tasks – as in life - requires effective use of language along with some measure of critical thinking.

## **Using authentic meaningful texts**

The modern language classroom also makes use of either authentic texts or real texts which have been adapted for the language level but which still contain the writer's or speaker's original meaning. As soon as you present students with a text (spoken or written) in which the speaker or writer expresses facts and opinion (such as a news text or a blog post), students need to comprehend the meaning, analyse the fact from the opinion, match the argument to the supporting evidence, and then express their own view in response to the text. In other words, very soon into learning a language, students are also confronted by the need to approach texts critically.

## **Critical literacy**

Following the previous point about how we approach a text, we must also consider the source of the texts that students will deal with. In this digital age we are surrounded by texts full of so-called facts but which do not necessarily come from guaranteed sources. Take this conversation I recently had with my son:

*Son: Dad, did you hear about the man who was on his way to an airport in Australia and stopped off at the zoo. Later when he arrived back in England, he opened his bag and found a penguin inside!*

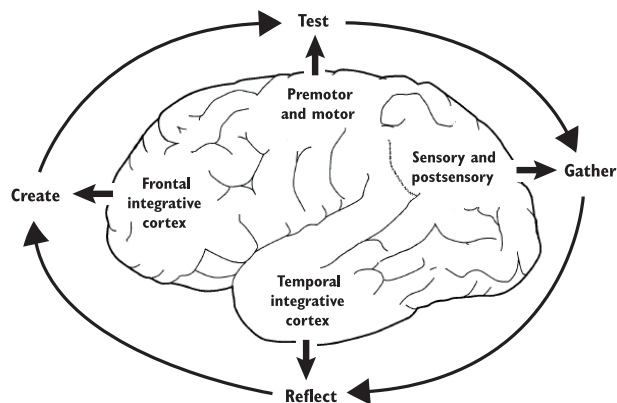
*Me: [laughs] Really? I'm not sure that can be true.*

*Son: It is! I found it on Google.*

Such conversations are widespread. Younger minds happily soak up the waves of information that is making its way through search engines to our screen without any question that it might be – even in part – untrue. The students we teach will need 'the ability to evaluate documents...by asking critical questions, assessing credibility, comparing sources, and tracking the origins of information' (6). A great deal of this critical literacy will be undertaken in English or other languages so the language teacher is therefore in a unique position to develop the skills needed in younger minds alongside their language skills.

## Whole-brain learning

The neuroscientist and educationalist James E. Zull (7) describes how the brain learns a new activity by using all four parts of the brain. He then relates this to Kolb's four-stage Learning Cycle. So, for example, when we read a text containing facts, the information arrives in the back of our brain (sensory and postsensory). If we start to reflect on what we have read, the lower part of our brain is used. Based on our observations and perhaps based also on reading other texts, we start to develop our own view or new hypotheses in the frontal cortex until, having come up with a new view, we test it – perhaps by presenting to and testing our view on others – in the premotor and motor cortex. If Zull is correct that the movement of external information into ideas around the brain runs parallel to the four stages of the learning cycle, then the role of Critical Thinking in that learning process is crucial. Let us consider for a moment how it might work in a language classroom. A student reads a text in English and the information is gathered at the back of the brain. It's likely that the student will memorise some of this new language but for whole-brain learning, we need the student to take that newly gathered language and reflect upon it, be creative with it, and finally to test or try it out; in other words, to make use of all parts of the brain in the language classroom. Activities that promote Critical Thinking will encourage this kind of whole-brain language learning.



## Critical thinking in exam preparation

In the real world of education where students must pass language exams, many teachers will feel that they do not have any time left over to go beyond the basic demands of the syllabus and examination requirements. However, many students with a good language level might perform better in some exams if they have developed their critical thinking. Let us consider the Cambridge English: First examination for example. It's a widely-taken exam that includes a speaking and writing paper. In both papers, students are expected to respond to prompts with opinions and supporting reasons. In the writing paper they are expected to write an essay in which they express their views on a title such as this:

*'Life was easier for our grandparents than it is for us. Do you agree?'*

In other words, students must demonstrate a level of English that receives marks for presenting an opinion based on three reasoned arguments in a clear and coherent structure; all skills that they will develop by learning critical thinking skills.

Similarly in the FCE speaking paper part 3, candidates discuss a problem in pairs and make a joint-decision. Then in part 4, the examiner asks candidates questions where 'the focus is on expressing and justifying opinions'. (8)

This is an exam then, like others, which will give marks for good English but also rewards students with ideas and reasoned opinions – the kind that come from a critical thinker.

## Critical thinking for future occupations

Many language-learning students will probably aim to continue their studies at university and this could include learning in the English language. Critical Thinking is a key study skill at university level. In a study skills guide called 'Thinking Critically' published by the Open University (2008) for its students, it stresses the need for undergraduates to be able 'to defend an argument against charges such as bias, lack of supporting evidence or incompleteness....Thinking critically will also help you to create strong arguments of your own.' The guide goes on to point out that: 'All universities encourage their students to be 'independent learners' and critical thinking is central to this.' (9). So developing CT skills early on will give students a head-start at university.

---

In addition to university success, students who enter a profession such as management will probably be using their foreign language skills and their critical thinking skills when it comes to, for example, assessing the ideas in a report or presenting an argument in order to convince an audience. Increasingly, the skills associated with critical thinking can be linked to business and career success.



# Practical activities for integrating Critical Thinking into language classrooms

This final – and longest - section contains a collection of twenty classroom activities that share the following aims:

- To develop a sub-skill or aspect of Critical Thinking.
- To teach and practise a particular language point.

Each activity requires little preparation. These activities can be used as presented with the suggested materials or, in most cases, they can be adapted to match the materials you are using in your language course, such as those in the course book or texts taken from other sources.

The early activities focus on developing your students' critical mindsets. In other words, they encourage students to consider ways in which they can approach texts more critically and to question assumptions. Then many of the activities in the middle part of this section focus on using reading and/or listening texts and ways of developing receptive critical thinking skills. The final activities encourage students to apply the arguments and opinions into their own views in either written or spoken forms.

## Activity 1 Developing a critical mindset

Critical thinking aim: To introduce basic awareness of critical thinking.

Language aim: To introduce the language for expressing opinion, agreeing and disagreeing.

Level: A2+

Rationale: This activity is a useful way to introduce students to the idea of becoming critical thinkers. It also introduces some of the language they might use to express their opinions in class discussions later in the course.

### Procedure

- 1 Write a statement on the board which is likely to provoke a reaction and an opinion either for or against the statement. For example, you could use this statement:  
'The internet is reducing young people's attention span and making them less intelligent.'
- 2 Ask students to work on their own and consider their own personal response to this statement. Do they agree or disagree with it? What's their opinion?
- 3 Now show them this list of possible responses to the statement. They must choose the response in the list which most matches their own:
  - 1 *I'm not interested in this topic.*
  - 2 *I agree. It's true.*
  - 3 *I disagree. It's false.*
  - 4 *I'm not sure.*
  - 5 *I agree up to a point but I also disagree.*
  - 6 *I agree / disagree because...*
  - 7 *I agree / disagree for a number of reasons but I'd also like more evidence.*

4 After they have chosen their corresponding response, show them this key to the meaning of their response in terms of their own critical thinking. For example, if their response corresponded to 3 in this list, then they have a strong opinion but need to support it with reasons and evidence in order to think critically:

1 *You don't need to be interested but have an opinion.*

2 *and 3 You have a strong opinion but can you give reasons for your opinion?*

4 *and 5 This is a safe response but critical thinkers need to be active in the discussion.*

6 *Good. You have a reason for your opinion.*

7 *Great! You have reasons for your opinion and you want more information.*

### Variation

To add an element of speaking to the procedure, after stage 2, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs and discuss their responses with their partner.

(Note: This activity was based on a similar activity in *Critical Thinking* by Debra Hills. See Further Reading.)

### Activity 2 Opinion and reason generator

Critical thinking aim: To develop the skill of supporting a viewpoint with reasons.

Language aim: To practise expressing opinion with opinion expressions and giving reasons with the conjunction 'because'.

Level: A2+

Rationale: Activity 1 introduced students to the importance of supporting an opinion with evidence or reasons. This simple activity continues this idea by introducing students to the need for supporting an opinion with reasons and providing the language they need to achieve this.

1 Write this table on the board.

I think that I agree that I don't agree that I'm not sure that	exercise is good for you social media sites waste our time politicians are under-paid travel broadens the mind our grandparents' lives were easier living in the country is better than the city the internet has improved communication	because...
---	--	------------

2 Students work in pairs and have to generate opinions followed by a reason. They can create their sentences by combining any of the opinion expressions in column 1 with the topic in column 2 and then, using 'because', they have to provide a supporting reason.

For example:

*I think that politicians are under-paid because people like bankers and rock stars earn more money but they have less responsibility.*

*I'm not sure that travel broadens the mind because I've met some people who come back from other countries and they criticise everything about it.*

---

### Activity 3 Critical questioning

Critical thinking aim: To develop students' critical questioning skills.

Language aim: To practise the language of asking closed and open questions.

Level: A2+

Rationale: Students need to develop the skill of asking searching questions if they are to become effective critical thinkers. This activity shows them how closed questions which only require yes/no answers do not help us to question critically and that open questions are much more effective. At the same time, students review the structures they need to ask questions.

#### Procedure

1 Write the following question words on the board:

What...?      Why...?      Who...?      How...?      When....?      Where....?

2 Put students in pairs. Give Student A a copy of these eight closed questions:

- 1 *Do you think meat is bad for you?*
- 2 *Do you believe that exercise is good for you?*
- 3 *Would you say that young children watch too much TV?*
- 4 *Are celebrities important in our lives?*
- 5 *Is the world a more dangerous place than fifty years ago?*
- 6 *Should most people recycle more than they do?*
- 7 *Can politicians make a difference to the world?*
- 8 *Is traditional family life disappearing?*

3 Explain that Student A asks the first question and Student A answers Yes or No. Then Student A changes the closed question into an open question using a question word on the board. Student B answers with a much longer and more reasoned answer. So their conversation might start like this:

A *Do you think meat is bad for you?*

B *Yes, I do.*

A *Why do you think meat is bad for you?*

B *Because I've read about the way meat is produced nowadays and I'm not happy about...*

4 The students work through all eight questions in the same way until they reach the end. So that everyone has an equal opportunity to ask and answer the questions, Student B can also ask all eight questions in the same way. Or, if time is short, Student A can ask questions 1, 3, 5 and 7 and Student B asks questions 2, 4, 6 and 8.

#### Variation

For higher level learners you can make the open questions on the board more focussed to the types of question that might be asked when thinking critically. These are:

- *What evidence is there that...?*
- *Why do you think that...?*
- *Who says that...?*
- *How do you know that...?*
- *When did people start believing that...?*
- *Where did you read that...?*

---

So a dialogue using these types of question phrases might sound like this:

*A Do you think meat is bad for you?*

*B Yes, I do.*

*A What evidence is there that meat is bad for you?*

*B Well, there are lots of cases in the newspapers these days about eating processed meat. There was even the case of horse meat in hamburgers...*

#### **Activity 4**    **Recognising context**

Critical thinking aim: To develop the skill of seeing things from another point of view.

Language aim: To speculate about a photograph in different contexts.

Level: A2+

Rationale: As part of developing a critical mindset, students need to develop the skill of seeing an argument from all sides. This simple activity will raise students' awareness of how the setting of an image or text can alter our perception or interpretation of something.

#### **Procedure**

- 1 Choose an interesting image. It can be a photograph, cartoon or any kind of graphic. Show it to the students and ask them:
  - What does it show?
  - Where do you think you might see it? For example, in a magazine with a text about something.
  - Did the person who made or took the image have a particular message?
- 2 Students work in group. Ask them to discuss using the image in these different ways:
  - a) If it was an image on a film poster, what is the name of the film and what is it about?
  - b) If it was the front cover of a book, what is the name of the book and what is it about?
  - c) If it was an advertisement for a product or service, what would it be and what advertising slogan would be on the advert?Afterwards, as an extra option, ask each group to think of one more new way to use the image. Where would we see it? How would it be used?
- 3 At the end, each group presents their ideas for the ways in which the image can be used. End the task by explaining that this exercise shows us how the meaning of an image or text can change according to the context. So when we read or hear an argument or opinion, it's important to understand its context.

#### **Activity 5**    **Making connections between topics**

Critical thinking aim: To make connections between the topic of a new subject and your prior knowledge.

Language aim: To talk about a topic and use topic vocabulary.

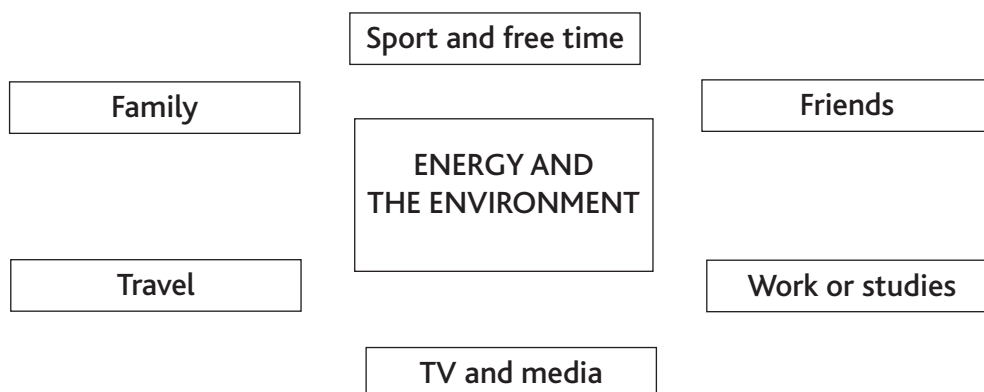
Level: A2+

Rationale: Sometimes students are required to talk about a topic with which they feel unfamiliar. For example, in an exam situation they may have to talk about a topic and express an opinion about it. For some students, especially younger teens, this is difficult because the topic they are discussing may seem distant from their own (sometimes limited) life experience. Use this activity to demonstrate how to relate a new topic to their life experience and as a mental warmer for students who may have to take a speaking or writing exam which requires them to comment on a topic.

---

### Procedure

- 1 Before the lesson, think of a topic which you think students will be unfamiliar with or feel that they have little to say about. You can also use this activity as a lead-in to a reading or listening activity, in which case, use the topic in the text.
- 2 At the beginning of the lesson, ask students to list five or six topics from your course that they are familiar with and feel they could talk or write about in, for example, an exam. As they make suggestions, write the topic words on the board in a circle. Then write the topic you chose in 1 in the middle, like this:



- 3 Explain to students that you want them to think of one connection between the middle topic and the topics on the outside. They work in pairs or groups and can either say or write down a sentence about the connection. Explain that the sentence can be simple or imaginative. (There should be no limits to their ideas in this exercise.) Do an example as a class to get them started. For example:  
*Sports like tennis and football are ok for the environment but motor sports use lots of fuel and so they are not so good for the environment.*
- 4 Afterwards, ask students to read out or say their ideas for connections between the topics. If you have students who are going to take speaking or writing exams which require their opinions on topics, explain that the approach of making connections is very useful if they need ideas. Similarly, it's a useful way into reading or listening to a text where you want students to make connections between different ideas. (See the next activity.)



### Activity 6 Evaluating the reliability of sources

Critical thinking aim: To evaluate the reliability of sources of information.

Language aim: To discuss the topic of news and media.

Level: B1+

Rationale: Before we accept information that is presented as fact in a reading or listening text, it's important to consider whether we trust the source of the information. The following activity is a short warmer into the topic of how much we can trust certain sources.

### Procedure

- 1 Ask the class to imagine they are gathering information for an essay they want to write. The topic of the essay is about whether families spend more or less time together than they did in the past. In order to research and write the essay, they will need to use and refer to different sources of

---

information.

Write the following sources of information on the board or give them a copy of the list. You can also elicit more suggestions from the class of sources which might be useful:

- *A journalist writing an article in a newspaper*
- *Members of your own family*
- *An infographic on Facebook*
- *A video by someone about the topic on YouTube*
- *A published book by a qualified specialist on the subject*
- *An entry on Wikipedia*
- *A survey about family life in a weekly magazine*
- *A documentary about family life on TV with interviews with real families*

2 Put students in pairs and ask them to evaluate each source using the following scoring between 1-3.

1 = Not a reliable source

2 = It might be credible but I'd have to check the information in another source as well

3 = A very credible source of information

3 At the end, the pairs report back their views on the different sources. Opinions may vary and there is not always a right/wrong answer. However, the task draws attention to the fact that students need to check sources and think about where they take information from.

### Follow on

When you use a reading or listening text that contains information quoting different sources, ask students to list the sources and use the 1-3 scoring system. You could also use a 0 score when facts and figures are given but with no apparent source.

### Activity 7 Stance

Critical thinking aim: To raise awareness of the importance of stance.

Language aim: Expressing opinion with reasons.

Rationale: In critical thinking, students need to be aware that a person's stance or position on a topic can greatly change the way they write or speak about it. For example, the way a person from a very hot climate close to the equator talks about the topic of weather will vary greatly from someone in a Scandinavian country. So this activity provides a simple role-play activity to introduce the idea of stance before students are then asked to read or listen to a text on a topic and identify the writer or speaker's stance.

### Procedure

1 Show students a photograph of Venice, such as this one:

Ask students what they already know about Venice and if they know about the city's problems. Make sure that all students are aware that Venice has problems of over-tourism, costs in maintaining all its ancient buildings and because it is slowly sinking.





- 
- 2 Put students into groups of four and give them each one of these roles. Students should not let each other know their roles. (If you have a group of three, do not use Student D.)

*Student A: You work on the Venice council which relies on local taxes and then gives money to projects to save Venice.*

*Student B: You are a local hotel owner with a five-star hotel in the city centre. Your family has owned it for three generations. You cannot imagine Venice without tourism!*

*Student C: You are a local historian who wants to preserve the ancient buildings. You think the city needs to limit the number of tourists entering the city.*

*Student D: You are a local tour guide who organises tours to the city. You run tours for over 100 customers every day.*

- 3 Explain to the students that Student A has organised the meeting or local people from Venice to discuss the problems of Venice and how to solve them. Allow five minutes for the role-play discussion.
- 4 At the end of the meeting, ask the students to guess what was written on each other's role card and summarise each other's stance. How was it different from their own?

### Variation

Instead of Venice as a context for the discussion, you could choose other locations around the world with problems related to over-crowding and tourism, such as Machu Picchu or Mount Everest. Follow up this activity by giving students different texts and asking them to identify the author's stance. (See the next activity.)

### Activity 8 Identifying main arguments and supporting evidence

Critical thinking aim: To develop the skill of identifying the main argument in a paragraph and the supporting evidence.

Language aim: To identify discourse markers used to structure a paragraph.

Rationale: When students read a text with an opinion or viewpoint, they need to be able to read for the main argument in the text and decide if the writer has provided supporting evidence. This activity introduces this in the context of a single paragraph before asking students to approach much longer texts containing more than one argument.

### Procedure

- 1 Take a paragraph from a text with a clear main argument and sentences with supporting evidence. Cut up the different parts or rewrite the sentences so they are jumbled. For example, here are sentences taken from a paragraph in a text about immigration in the United Kingdom. However, they are in the wrong order and students need to reorder them:
- a) Latest figures for the last twelve months show that 153,000 people migrated to the UK.
  - b) In fact the reverse is true according to figures from the Office of National Statistics.
  - c) The commonly-held belief that immigration into the United Kingdom is on the increase is not supported by the facts.
  - d) The current government aims to continue this downward trend and reduce the number to 100,000 in the next two years.
  - e) That figure is down by one third compared to this time last year when net migration stood at 242,000 people.

- 
- 2 Students reorder the sentences and underline any words or phrases which helped them to decide what the main argument was and what was the correct order for the supporting sentences. The answer for this example, sentences a-e above, is as follows: 1c, 2b, 3a, 4e, 5d
  - 3 Give students a longer text and ask them to study the paragraphs. They should underline the main arguments in the text and circle any sentences with supporting evidence.

### Activity 9 Fact or opinion

Critical thinking aim: To contrast fact with the writer's opinion.  
Language aim: Expressing opinion with reasons.

#### Rationale

Sometimes we read texts or listen to people claiming to present some kind of factually true content. However, when this is the case, it's important to approach the text critically for information that pretends to be factual when it is in fact the author or speaker's opinion. By analysing texts in this way, students can learn to identify opinion through the language used and in turn they will learn the language they need to express opinion in their own writing.

#### Procedure

- 1 Take between six and eight sentences from a text which contains fact and author's opinion. Ideally, they will be from a text you have already been reading in class and so the activity can form part of a longer reading lesson. So, for example, the following six sentences come from a longer listening text in which an expert in a radio programme is talking about language extinction.

- 1) *About eighty percent of the world's population speaks one percent of its languages.*
- 2) *Every two weeks another language disappears from the planet because the last remaining speaker dies.*
- 3) *The good news is that some minority communities are trying to save their language by setting up special schools to teach their children.*
- 4) *The official language in India is Hindi but speakers of a minority language called Aka are going to preserve the language through the public performance of wonderful songs and storytelling, hopefully.*
- 5) *With an estimated 830 different languages, the islands of Papua New Guinea have the largest concentration of linguistic diversity in the world.*
- 6) *Local indigenous languages often have words for local plants with medicinal qualities which don't exist in other languages so I don't think we can afford to let them die out.*

- 2 Students read the sentences and decide which sentences are factual (F) and which contain elements of the speaker's opinion (O). Ask them to underline the key words which indicate an opinion. These will be useful for students to learn and use in their own writing.  
Here are the answers for the sentences above with the opinion words and phrases from the sentences written in brackets.

1 F, 2 F, 3 O (*The good news is that...*) 4 O (*wonderful / hopefully*) 5 F, 6 O (*I don't think*)

Notice in particular how expressions like 'the good news is...' and adjectives and adverbs can quickly make something that is factual into something that also shows the writer's personal viewpoint.



---

**Activity 10** Vague or accurate?

Critical thinking aim: To identify vague or accurate language.

Language aim: Using vague and accurate language.

**Rationale**

This exercise has some similarities to the previous activity looking at fact and the writer's opinion. It asks the student to assess sentences in terms of whether a statement is too vague or imprecise and to raise awareness that language, especially in academic writing, should be accurate and detailed.

**Procedure**

- 1 Write these pairs of sentences from different kinds of text on the board or give students a copy. Ask them to identify which sentence is vague and which sentence presents more accurate information.

- 1  
a This film is extraordinarily long.  
b This film is 210 minutes long.
- 2  
a Two out of every three people in the survey said they can't speak a second language.  
b The vast majority of people in the survey said they can't speak a second language.
- 3  
a All our customers love our latest model.  
b Customers that we have spoken to say that they love our latest model.
- 4  
a It's well-known that elephants communicate with each other through infrasounds which are inaudible to humans.  
b Scientists have measured elephants' infrasounds (under 16 Hz and inaudible to humans) which can signal to other elephants up to 20 km away.
- 5  
a The Harry Potter books by JK Rowling are loved by millions of readers all over the world.  
b The Harry Potter books by JK Rowling have been translated into over 70 different languages.

Answers 1 a vague b accurate, 2 a accurate b vague, 3 a vague b accurate, 4 a vague b accurate, 5 a vague b accurate.

- 2 In each case, discuss what type of language makes a sentence vague or accurate.

Vague language tends to:

- use generalised adverbs and adjectives ('extraordinarily long')
- make generalisations without supporting evidence ('All our customers...')
- makes assumptions (It is well-known that..)

Accurate language tends to provide:

- exact detail ('210 minutes long')
- evidence based on research ('two out of every three')
- defining clauses ('customers that we have spoken to')

- 3 Point out that there is nothing wrong with vague language in certain contexts. Ask students what type of text types the vague sentences probably came from. The answer is sources such as a daily newspaper, magazines or informal conversation with people. However, when reading or writing academic or work-based texts, the information should have the features of accurate language.

### Follow up

Students could look at other texts and underline examples of vague or accurate language to establish where the text provides a useful source of accurate information.

### Activity11 Where's it from?

Critical thinking aim: Identifying features of different text types on the same topic, selecting relevant information and synthesising it.

Language aim: To recognise features of written discourse.

Level: B1+

### Rationale

Students need to develop the skill of researching a topic. They will draw their information from different sources and have to decide whether certain text types are credible sources. In order to do this, they need to be able to recognise the text type from the writing style.

### Procedure

1 Give students three texts on the same subject but written in entirely different ways. Ask them to identify what kind of text each one is. Here are three example texts which you could use for this activity. They are all on the same subject of online shopping. Ask students to identify the text type and say what it was about the language in the text that told them this. For example: Was it formal or informal? Who was it written to (one person or many)?

#### Text A

Online shopping is a form of electronic commerce which allows consumers to directly buy goods or services using a web browser. An online shop creates the same experience of buying products or services from a shopping centre or retailer in the high street but the buyer doesn't have to leave his or her house. The two largest online retailing companies in the world are eBay and Amazon.

#### Text B

Dear Susie

I'm writing to thank you for my birthday present. I have to admit that I was worried about buying things on the internet but after only two days I have already downloaded three books!

Buying them online like this is so much easier than having to leave the house! It's so convenient.

All my love

Grandmother

#### Text C

Tips for safe shopping online

- Make sure your computer's security software is up-to-date.
- Reputable websites include information on how your personal information will be used.
- Find out what other shoppers say about a company.
- When paying by credit card, look for the letter **s** after **http** on the web address.

Answers for Text A-C: Text A comes from Wikipedia so the language is purely informational. Text B is a short correspondence between two people so it's informal and chatty. Text C is from a text giving advice and warnings about shopping online.

- 
- 2 Ask students to imagine they are going to write the following for and against essay: *Some people prefer online shopping to face-to-face shopping. Give reasons for and against this view.*

Which of the texts do they think provides them with useful information and ideas for their essay?

Possible answer: In fact all three texts provide ideas to help students with their writing. Text A might help them with a basic introduction to the topic. Text B suggests possible advantages of online shopping, especially for older people. Text C draws attention to some of disadvantages of online shopping.

### Variation

Students could go in search of other texts and sources on this topic and select relevant information and ideas before they finally write the essay in 2 above.

### Activity 12 Reading between the lines

Critical thinking aim: To develop the skill of identifying hidden assumptions or implicit meaning.

Language aim: To identify connotation and denotation.

Level: B1+

### Rationale

When students start to read higher level or more authentic texts they will need to develop the ability to read between the lines. In other words, to understand the implicit meaning of the writer's words as well as the explicit meaning. In some cases, a writer will choose a word with connotations or certain associations. So instead of choosing the word for its denotation, or literal meaning, the writer uses it to evoke a different kind of meaning. Students need to develop the skill of identifying this language use in order to understand the writer's position or stance. Language with connotation can also be more persuasive to the reader because it appeals to our emotions. This exercise introduces students to the idea of connotation and denotation in texts.

### Procedure

These eight sentences all have a negative meaning because the word in bold has negative connotations. Make the sentences positive by replacing the word in bold with a word in the box which has a similar denotation but a positive connotation.

thrifty	passion	challenging	slim	classic	confident	unique	responsible
---------	---------	-------------	------	---------	-----------	--------	-------------

- 1 'My brother's so **cheap** with his money!'
- 2 'The climb up the mountain is **difficult**.'
- 3 'My older sister is very **bossy**!'
- 4 'This type of design is **ancient**.'
- 5 'His sense of style is **unfashionable**.'
- 6 'Fashion models in magazines always look so **thin**.'
- 7 Stamp collecting is his **obsession**.'

---

8 'There's a student in my class who's so **big-headed**.'

(Answer: 1 thrifty 2 challenging 3 responsible 4 classic 5 unique 6 slim 7 passion 8 confident)

### Activity 13 False conclusions

Critical thinking aim: To evaluate the supporting evidence for a conclusion.

Language aim: To practise the language of concluding and summarising.

Level: B1+

#### Rationale

When a text ends with the writer's conclusion or final opinion, it should be as a result of a considered assessment of all the arguments and evidence in the rest of the article. Students will also need to arrive at conclusions in a similar way. The following activity draws attention to conclusions which are not based on correct reasoning and acts as a useful lead-in to looking at conclusions in longer texts.

#### Procedure

- 1 Write one or all of the following sets of three sentences on the board. Ask students what is wrong with the conclusion in each case. What mistake is the speaker making?

*Dogs have four legs. Cats have four legs. All cats are dogs.*

*Oranges are the colour orange. Your shirt is orange. Your shirt is an orange.*

*Cars have an engine. Motorbikes have an engine. Motorbikes are cars.*

- 2 Put students in pairs or groups and ask them to write a similar set of three sentences with an incorrect conclusion. This should be a fun activity which allows students to use their imagination. Afterwards, they read out their false conclusions.

#### Follow on

Give students a longer text with a conclusion at the end. Ask students to read the conclusion and say what it is. Then ask students to study the text and underline supporting reasons or evidence for the conclusion. As a class, discuss if the conclusion is logical, based on the arguments given.

### Activity 14 Writing headlines

Critical thinking aim: To analyse a text for its essential meaning.

Language aim: To practise summary writing.

Level: B1+

#### Rationale

After students have read or listened to a text, they need to analyse it for its main meaning. One way to do this is to encourage them to summarise the text in a few words. It's also a useful way to develop their note-taking skills. A fun way to do this is to have students read or listen to short texts from a newspaper or radio or TV news and write a headline.

---

### Procedure

- 1 Show students some headlines from different newspapers or news websites. For each one, ask them to say what they think the news story was about. Afterwards ask them to say what the purpose of a headline is. (Possible answer: To summarise the story and attract the reader's interest)
- 2 Give out some short news stories or play three or four short recordings of different news items on the radio. For each one, students try to write a news headline which summarises the main meaning of the text. If you are playing recordings, then play them at least twice.
- 3 Put students in groups and let them compare their headlines to see if they summarised similar information or used similar words from the text.

### Activity 15 Find the expression

Critical thinking aim: To analyse the structure of a text.

Language aim: To introduce useful expressions for structuring a text.

Level: B1+

### Rationale

Understanding how a written text is structured will help students to understand and evaluate a writer's argument and will also help them to write their own essays.

### Procedure

- 1 Give students copies of the following and ask them to match the functional heading (1-8) to the expression (a-h).

- 1 Introducing an argument
- 2 Sequencing information
- 3 Giving supporting evidence
- 4 Adding information or evidence
- 5 Comparing information or evidence
- 6 Showing cause and effect
- 7 Summing up
- 8 Concluding

- a) As a result of this...
- b) Firstly..., Secondly...
- c) Taking everything in consideration, I think that...
- d) To sum up...
- e) This is proved by the fact that...
- f) In addition to this...
- g) On the one hand...on the other...
- h) One argument for this is...

(Answers: 1h, 2b, 3e, 4f, 5g, 6a, 7d, 8c)

- 2 Now give students a text with arguments and supporting evidence in it. Ask them to find more examples of words and expressions for each of the functional headings in 1-8. They should make a note of any new ones and try to use them in their own writing.

---

## **Activity 16** Predicting the content of the text

**Critical thinking aim:** To compare your prior knowledge and expectations of the content of a text and to evaluate the relevance of arguments.

**Language aim:** To prepare students' schema before listening or reading.

**Level:** A1+

### **Rationale**

In order to help understand a reading or listening text, we often ask students to predict what information or arguments the text might include. This is also a useful exercise to help students who are researching ideas for a presentation or essay. They can predict the content and then consider why some information was not included in the text.

### **Procedure**

- 1 With a reading text you can show students the title of the text, or ask them to look at a photograph or image that accompanies it. If you are going to play a recording, then write a title for it on the board. Ask students to work in groups and list six or seven items of information they expect to read or hear. For example, if the text is an opinion piece then they can predict the kinds of argument they expect to read or hear.
- 2 Students read or listen to the text and tick the items they predicted correctly and put a cross next to those that were not in the text.
- 3 In their groups, students discuss the ideas which were not included. Was it because they weren't relevant or didn't support the main argument? Or are they still relevant and could be used in another text on this topic? For example, if students are going to give a presentation on the topic they should discuss if they can still include these other ideas.

---

**Activity 17** Practising the language for expressing critical thinking

Critical thinking aim: To express your view of a topic based on your reading.

Language aim: To practise functional language for discussions.

Level: B1+

**Rationale**

Sometimes teachers think their students have no opinions because they are unable to express their opinions. In fact, students often do have strong and thoughtful opinions but they are not confident with the language they need to express themselves. This activity provides input and practice with the language they will need.

**Procedure**

1 Before the lesson, you need to make copies of expressions below and cut them into slips of paper.

The main point is....	On the one hand...
One argument for it is that...	I agree because...
One argument against it is that...	I disagree because...
It's because...	In my opinion...
As a result of this...	Evidence shows that...
...is similar because...	What do you mean by that?
...is different because...	Why do you think that?
There are a number of reasons. Firstly...	How did you come to that conclusion?
Another reason is...	In conclusion...
Also...	What evidence do you have for that?
Because...	I know because...

- 2 Make groups of three or four students and sit them in a circle around a table. Give each group one set of the cut-up expressions. They deal out the slips of paper so each player has the same amount. Put any extra slips to one side.
- 3 Write a topic for debate on the board. It could be something you have been discussing recently or a topic which doesn't need too much specialised knowledge. For example: 'It's important to spend 30 minutes a day doing physical exercise'.
- 4 Explain that the groups must discuss the topic but that they can only speak by using the words on one of their slips of paper and placing it in the middle of the table. One player begins and then the player on the left must continue with a logical comment. Then the next player on the left speaks so that the discussion moves anti-clockwise around the circle. The aim is for a player to use all his/her expressions and to get rid of all the slips of paper. If the group thinks that a player uses an expression incorrectly, they can challenge the player and make him/her miss a turn.
- 5 When the groups finish, repeat the activity by writing a new discussion topic on the board and dealing the slips of paper again.

**Follow up**

Once the students become more confident with the game, you can change the rules so that any player can speak in order to use up the expressions first. This version is more chaotic but it's a lot of fun.

## Activity 18 A for-and-against essay

Critical thinking aim: To analyse the arguments for and against and to draw a conclusion.

Language aim: To write a four or five paragraph for-and-against essay.

### Rationale

After students have read or listened to texts on a topic and analysed the relevant points, they can synthesize their findings into an essay. Writing a for-and-against essay is the obvious choice and it reflects the kind of writing task that is found nowadays in examinations such Cambridge English and IELTS.

### Procedure

- 1 Think of a topic you have been studying in class recently and write a statement that will generate arguments both for and against. Here are some possible suggestions:

*Sport: Sport in schools should be more competitive so that children learn about real life. Do you agree?*

*Jobs and money: Parents should only pay pocket money if their children do jobs. Do you agree?*

*Technology: The Internet is having a negative effect on people's social lives. Do you agree?*

*Education: Living in another country is the best education you can receive. Do you agree?*

*Places: The countryside is a better place for young children to grow up in than a city. Do you agree?*

*Animals: We should close down zoos and let animals go free. Do you agree?*

- 2 Put students in groups and ask them to brainstorm lists of reasons or evidence supporting the arguments for or against the statement. On the board write this table and ask them to list their arguments below the + (for) and – (against):

+	-

Groups should find a minimum of three arguments for both sides. You can also collect ideas from each group at the end and write them on the board.

- 3 Next, students need to write their essays using the ideas in stage 2. They could write this alone or in groups. In order to ensure students follow a logical structure in their essay and that they learn to use phrases for structuring it, you could give them a copy of the page below with the essay structure laid out. In paragraph one, students restate the statement. In paragraph two, they list their three arguments for and their three arguments against in paragraph three. Then in the final paragraph, they write their concluding opinion.

There are various arguments for and against the view that \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



---

One argument for is that \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Another reason is that \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thirdly \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

On the other hand, there are arguments against. Firstly, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

In addition to that, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Finally, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

So, on balance, I think that \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Activity 19** Preparing a group presentation

Critical thinking aim: To bring together all the stages in critical thinking and apply relevant ideas into a presentation.

Language aim: To input the language of presenting.

Level: A2+

#### **Rationale**

After students have read or listened to texts on a topic and analysed the relevant points, they can apply their new knowledge and understanding by preparing a presentation. For example, perhaps they have been reading arguments for and against an opinion. Next, you can ask students to present the main arguments either for or against or you can ask one group to present the arguments for a point of view and another group to present the arguments against.

#### **Procedure**

Students can present on their own, but working in groups is also a valuable learning process, so it is highly recommended. If students use slides to support their presentation, then make sure they summarise their main points in bullet form but without using too many words. As a general rule, have three bullet points per slide with no more than five words per line.

Students need time to prepare their presentations and to ensure that their presentations have a clear structure, you need to introduce some language for giving presentations. You could photocopy this checklist of useful phrases for students to follow. By using many of the expressions from each section, students will ensure that their presentation is planned and organised with a clear structure.

### **Introductions**

Good morning/afternoon everyone and thank you for coming.  
Today we're going to present.... / We're going to talk about the topic of...  
My name's.... / Let me introduce everyone in our group. My name's... and this is...  
We're each going to talk about different parts of the topic.

### **The structure of the presentation**

First we'll talk about...  
Then, we're going to present...  
Next, we'll look at...  
And finally,...  
The presentation will last about ... minutes.  
There'll be time for questions and comments at the end.

### **Moving from one point to the next**

Point one is about...  
So let's start by looking at...  
That brings us to the end of this first point.  
Now I'm going to hand over to my colleague who will talk about the second point.  
Moving on to the next point...  
That's everything I want to say about...  
And now for the final part of our presentation...

### **Balancing arguments for and against**

First of all, here are some of the arguments for...  
Next we'd like to present some of the arguments against...  
One argument for... is that...  
However, the argument against is that...

### **Summing up and concluding**

To sum up, we've looked at three main points.  
We've considered the arguments for and against...  
In conclusion... / On balance, we think...

### **Ending the presentation and inviting questions**

That's the end of our presentation.  
Thank you for listening. / Are there any questions?  
We'd be happy to take your questions.

## **Activity 20** Assessing a presentation

Critical thinking aim: To assess the arguments and opinions presented.

Language aim: To assess the language used in the presentation.

Level: A2+

### **Rationale**

When students give their presentations, you want other students in the class to participate actively as an audience and to consider the effectiveness of the arguments. One way to do this is to give students who are listening a feedback form to fill in as they do so.

---

**Procedure**

Give students in the audience a copy of this feedback form (or adapt it according to your needs and context) or you could use such a form to give your own feedback.

**Feedback form****The structure of presentation**

The group used language to:

introduce themselves

introduce the structure of presentation

move from one point to the next

give arguments for and against

sum up and conclude

end the presentation and invite questions

**The content of the presentation**

(Answer Yes or No and give examples from the presentation of how each was/wasn't achieved)

Did the group include all the main arguments for and against?

Did they include evidence to support their arguments?

Was their conclusion logical and clear?

**Overall**

One thing I really liked about your presentation was...

One thing you could improve next time is...

# Reference and Further Reading

## References

- (1) Obama quotation from Trilling, B. & Fadel, C. (2009) *21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills* Jossey-Bass
- (2) Webinar by Louis Rogers, *Critical Thinking in EAP*, (Oxford University Press) 1 February, 2013.
- (3) Edward M. Glaser (1941) *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* New York: Colombia University. Teachers College)
- (4) Bloom B. S (ed). (1956) *A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman
- (5) Anderson, L.W. & Krathwohl, D.R. (Eds) (2000) *A taxonomy for learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman
- (6) Dudeney G., Hockly N., Pegrum M. (2013) *Digital Literacies* Pearson, page 22
- (7) James E Zull (2006) *Key Aspects of How the Brain Learns, Chapter 1 in New Directions for adult and continuing Education, no 110*, Wiley Periodicals Summer (Free to download)
- (8) Cambridge ESOL Cambridge English First Specifications for exams January 2015, page 35. (Free to download)
- (9) Open University (2008) *Thinking Critically*  
(Free to download from [www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy](http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy))

## Further reading

Stella Cottrell (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills* Palgrave Macmillan

Paul Dummett (2013) *How to Write Critical Thinking Activities* ELT Teacher 2 Writer

Debra Hill (2011) *Student Essentials: Critical Thinking* Trotman Publishing

Kate Williams (2009) *Getting Critical* Palgrave Macmillan, page 13

Worldwide Centre for Organisational Development (2008) *Critical Thinking* (Free to download)