

## The Cultural Aspects of Developing Critical Thinking in an ELT Classroom

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**Abstract:** The article covers the problem of the cultural aspect in the process of developing critical thinking within the framework of the intercultural competence in an ELT classroom. Learning a foreign language requires familiarity and acceptance of the culture of the language studied. To build a clear paradigm for understanding culture, it is necessary to provide cultural awareness along with a higher level of critical thinking, critical rethinking of the cultural context and cultural experience. Cultural awareness is regarded as the awareness of the differences between personalities, as subjects of a certain culture or various cultures, and representatives of other macro- and microcultures with different views, cultural practices, and values. The article establishes the relationship between the culturological aspect of the development of a linguistic and cultural personality and directly critical thinking, which acts as the main object of the analysis. Enhancing critical thinking prevents cultural disputes and misunderstandings and aids in the effective implementation of intercultural communication. The article concludes that enhancing critical thinking is integral to the acculturation process.

Learning a foreign language takes familiarity and acceptance of the culture of the language studied. A natural question arises before teachers about how it is possible to integrate into the target culture in their lessons, excluding natural familiarization with the main systems of the target language, as well as with some conventional and stereotyped elements of the national cultural component of the representatives of the object language.

For the successful implementation of the given task, it is necessary to build a clear paradigm for understanding culture in a specific and broadest sense for oneself, as well as for students' understanding. Such clarity in the paradigmatic plan will provide the necessary level of cultural awareness, intercultural competence along with a higher level of critical thinking, critical rethinking of the cultural context and cultural experience.

First, let's define the concepts of "cultural awareness" and "intercultural competence". Speaking of cultural awareness, it is worth referring to the works of Russian culturologist I. G. Belyakova, who defines the term in question primarily as a fundamental component of intercultural competence, which includes the following important features: "awareness of one's own culture"

along with “awareness of another or different culture” (Belyakova, p.194). In the context of this study, it seems appropriate to distinguish between "cultural recognition" and "cultural awareness", since the first term can be attributed to the sensory or neurolinguistic level of perception, while awareness rather belongs to the cognitive level.

Thus, speaking of "cultural awareness", we will mean the awareness of the differences between ourselves, as a subject of a certain culture or many cultures, and representatives of other macro- and microcultures with different views, cultural practices, and values.

Let us turn to the concept of the British specialist M. Bayram, who combines the concept of communicative competence with the ability to use the language in the process of diverse cultural interaction, that is, with intercultural communication. In the theory of M. Bayram, the linguistic personality acts as a kind of intermediary that crosses cultural boundaries and can interact with representatives of a diverse multicultural identity (Byram, p. 5). From the above statements we can conclude that a respectful, tolerant attitude towards a different culture, as well as the awareness of oneself and others as separate cultural personalities, is the fundamental principle of intercultural competence and intercultural communication.

It seems possible to describe in more detail the essence of the considered theoretical model of successful intercultural communication. Such a model has the possibility of existence in the presence of the following necessary abilities or skills:

- interaction between different macro- and micro-cultures.
- mediation of cultures, otherwise interpreting one culture in terms of another or others (cultural awareness).
- critical and analytical understanding of one's own culture and the culture of another (cultural recognition).
- awareness of one's picture of the world and the fact that individual thinking is culturally determined.

The above perspective of considering intercultural competence allows us to establish the relationship between the culturological aspect of the development of a linguistic and cultural personality and directly critical thinking.

At this stage, it is advisable to introduce the concept of critical thinking, which acts as the principal object of the analysis. There is a wide variety of definitions of critical thinking, but a single universal one still does not exist. The term 'critical thinking' has been explored by several researchers,

including Bloom B., John Hughes, Stella Cottrell, Anderson, L.W., and Krathwohl, D.R. These researchers have provided valuable insights into the subject, based on their extensive experience in the field. Therefore, drawing upon their expertise, it is possible to derive the following working definition of critical thinking.

Critical thinking within this cultural context is a special mental and cognitive skill aimed at qualitatively transforming the human mind in terms of flexibility, accuracy, consistency, impartiality, reflectivity, and aimed at forming a unique multidimensional polyphonic view of the objective reality. Polyphonic here will directly mean diverse, multimodal, multicultural. Borrowing the term “polyphony” from M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, an attempt is made to emphasize the multilateral and multidimensional nature of intercultural communication, in which “individual voices and their worlds are opposed as indivisible” (Bakhtin, p. 163).

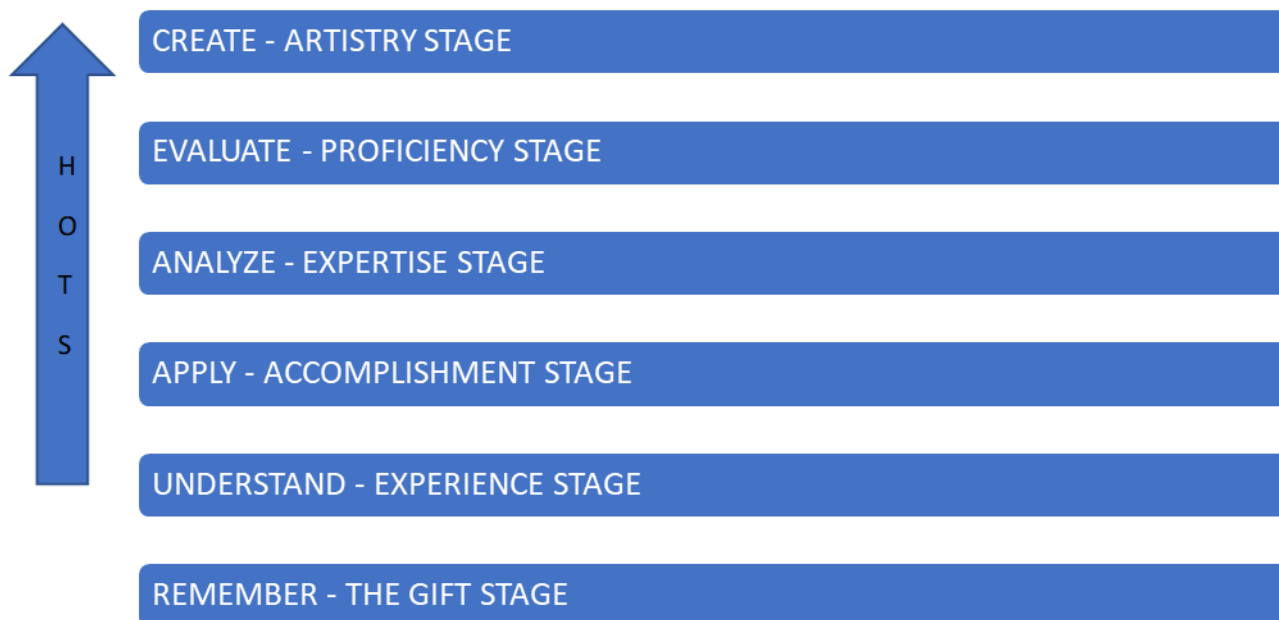
The studies of M. M. Bakhtin perfectly reflect all the specifics of the correlation of critical and intercultural worldview. Instead of emphasizing the identification of differences, limitations in cultural products, practices, values, traditions of each cultural personality, the possibility of coexistence in the context of macro- and microculture, the possibility of polyphonic mutual renewal and replenishment within the limits of the objective reality is considered, as well as in the collective cultural consciousness, in the sphere of intellect and thinking.

Since critical thinking is essentially an acquired ability, a skill, it is possible to propose a paradigm of collocations with the term "critical thinking" that are appropriate for use in the context of further research and practical implementation of the main methods and principles for the development of critical thinking:

- **have** critical thinking
- **learn** or acquire critical thinking
- **develop** critical thinking
- **use** critical thinking
- **require** critical thinking
- **lack** critical thinking

Provided that the acquisition, development, and improvement of critical thinking is a permanent process, it seems possible to single out certain functional stages of this cognitive concept. It is advisable to synthesize the stages of the evolution of critical thinking with the basic concepts of B. Bloom's taxonomy, in which LOTS (lower order thinking skills) and HOTS (higher order thinking

skills) can be distinguished. The following figure clearly depicts the correlation and relationship of the above stages with the categories of B. Bloom's taxonomy:



Picture 1. Stages of the evolution of critical thinking in accordance with the levels of B. Bloom's taxonomy

For the formation and transformation of traditional thinking into critical thinking, the human mind must be able to go through all the above stages to be able to interact with objective reality, give and receive appropriate feedback from the surrounding world.

At the same time, it is necessary to synthesize the desired results for changing critical thinking with the cultural aspects of cognitive and practical experience, both individual and collective. In this context, the initial stage of cultural awareness is connected to the 'level of memorization.' This means that cultural awareness begins with the basic acquisition and memorization of cultural facts, such as historical events, cultural practices, and traditions. It forms the foundation upon which higher levels of cultural understanding and awareness can be built. As individuals progress through the stages of critical thinking, they can leverage their knowledge and understanding of cultural aspects to engage with the surrounding world in a more meaningful and contextually appropriate manner. In other words, cultural awareness enhances critical thinking by providing a broader perspective and facilitating the interpretation and evaluation of information within a cultural context.

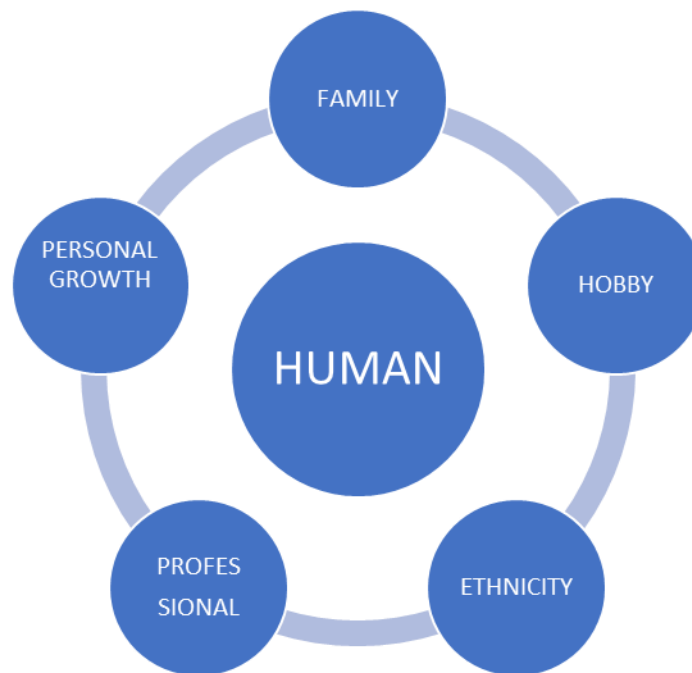
It is important to notice, that work on practical aspects of increasing cultural awareness should begin with the level of memorization and understanding where each focus group participant is considered a “cultural being”.

At this point, it's crucial to define "microculture." According to the definition provided by James Neuliep, it can be regarded as an identifiable group of individuals who share a common history, linguistic and nonverbal symbol system, and set of values, beliefs, and behaviors, but who systematically deviate from the larger, frequently dominant cultural background (Neuliep, p. 16).

It seems interesting to consider some aspects of this definition. An extremely important point is precisely the fact of the possibility of identifying a microculture according to certain characteristics. It can be assumed that if, objectively, by external signs, we cannot recognize representatives of a culture precisely as a group, perhaps the signs of microculture are not sufficiently formed. It also follows from the above definition that members of a single community share common values, beliefs, and behavior patterns.

The next criterion that needs to be singled out for the representatives of a single microculture is the presence of a common history. The presence of a common information system is also a prerequisite for the existence of such a community. First, we are talking about the verbal system (special terminology, slang, or jargon), and we also include extralinguistic means or symbols here. Examples include such microcultures as a classroom, a work team, a group of friends, an interest group (hobby) and others.

As a practical implementation, students are invited to realize various aspects of themselves as a cultural being - an object and a subject of culture. This includes presenting graphically possible microcultures, of which they are representatives. An example of such a graphical representation can be seen in Picture 2, which showcases separate cultural personalities in the context of microcultures:



Picture 2. Separate cultural personality in the context of microcultures

It should be noted that the figure presented is just one of many options. Each person daily becomes part of a variety of microcultures, so identical options for the graphic expression of individual cultural characteristics are unlikely to exist.

The practical tasks mentioned aim to increase cultural awareness and align with the stages of critical thinking development as described in the article. Let's explore how each task corresponds to a certain stage.

In the 'gift' stage, the emphasis is on natural abilities and lower order thinking skills, particularly at the level of remembering. Tasks such as identifying cultural personality may fit into this stage, as they involve recognizing and recalling one's cultural characteristics.

The 'experience' stage focuses on learning, comprehending, and sharing previously acquired knowledge. Tasks like creating microcultures can be associated with this stage, as they require understanding and applying what one has learned about different cultural aspects.

Moving to the 'accomplishment' stage signifies the transition to a higher order critical thinking level of applying previously learned knowledge to practice. This stage may correspond to tasks that involve applying cultural understanding to real-world situations, such as analyzing information related to microcultures.

The 'expertise' stage represents a crucial point where the mind reaches a level of analyzing the data it receives from the world. Tasks related to analyzing information, exploring cultural dynamics, and critically evaluating cultural aspects align with this stage.

The 'proficiency' stage indicates an advanced level of critical development and emphasizes the ability to evaluate. Tasks that involve evaluating cultural practices, norms, and behaviors could correspond to this stage.

The 'artistry' stage represents the highest complex stage where individuals are competent enough to generate new ideas and create new products. Tasks that encourage students to think creatively, propose innovative cultural concepts, or contribute to the development of new cultural practices may be relevant to this stage.

By engaging in these practical tasks, students can progress through the stages of critical thinking development, gradually enhancing their cultural awareness, and involving higher order thinking skills. These tasks provide opportunities for students to demonstrate different levels of critical thinking and cultural understanding.

Considering the aforementioned factors, it is reasonable to assert that enhancing cultural awareness has a direct and significant impact on the development and improvement of students' critical thinking skills. The increase in critical thinking abilities is closely intertwined with the process of acculturation, which helps prevent cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, while fostering successful intercultural communication.

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