Self-Nurturing and Learner Autonomy through Critical Thinking

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Abstract

Critical thinking is an essential skill that contributes to effective language acquisition and strengthens autonomous learning. Applying critical thinking enables learners to unfold the multiple layers of meaning hidden in discourse and leads to better comprehension. Besides, it equips learners with the necessary tools and techniques to facilitate uninhibited self-expression using the target language in speaking and writing. However, language instructors do not often tap this vital resource which is pivotal to successful education and career. Therefore, incorporating critical thinking skills in language education needs to be a regular and consistent process that underpins the approaches, methods and techniques of cognitive development and language acquisition. This paper highlights the importance of exploiting critical thinking in education in general and the English language pedagogy in particular. It confirms the hypothesis that activities that promote critical thinking can make language classrooms more interactive and learner centred as they help nurture students' intellectual capacities and foster learner autonomy. In addition to discussing the salient characteristics of a critical thinker, it also suggests certain classroom activities that could be fruitfully exploited to enhance the learners' critical thinking skills. Finally, this concept paper proposes that any teaching/learning material can be effectively used to teach critical thinking if appropriately adapted and finetuned to meet the purpose.

Key Words: critical thinking, independent learning, evaluate, analyze, self-nurturing

Introduction

Critical thinking or 'think outside the box' has recently become a buzz phrase in second language education. Most educationalists believe that it needs to be considered one of the second language learning skills. William and Burden (1997) argue that critical thinking is a cognitive process that actively engages learners to use the faculty of their minds to observe, think, critically analyze, and evaluate the given information. It develops in learners the potential to arrive at logical conclusions and make correct decisions independently. Various empirical research studies confirm the significance of critical thinking in second language acquisition. Liaw (2007) claims that critical thinking contributes significantly to language proficiency. Promoting critical thinking in the language classroom enable learners to take charge of their own thinking and encourage them to monitor and evaluate their learning process successfully. In addition, it enhances the learning experience and makes the language education process more meaningful for them.

Thinking is an innate capacity of man that has flourished even in societies that did not encourage free thinking. The emergence of democracy boosted this process as all democratic institutions value freedom of expression. Moreover, since the opposition is considered indispensable in a democratic system, critical thinking plays a crucial role in setting society on the right trajectory to achieve its goals. Critical thinking has also helped to revolutionize the overall education system, which, in turn, has led to the replacement of outdated methods and practices. The paradigm shift from the lecture method, which was teacher-centred and frontal, to the learner-centred approach, and the promotion of communicative skills are just two examples of the revolution brought about in the education system.

However, the communicative approach has attracted many a critique recently and has

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become an anathema to many English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners on the ground that it often does not take into consideration the learning culture of the learners. Yet another objection raised against the communicative approach to language teaching is its inadequacy in promoting the intellectual capacities of the learners. Kabilan (2000) claims that communicative language teaching does not help students become proficient in the target language as it does not emphasize the need to think creatively and critically when using the target language. This drawback is apparent, particularly in systems that adopt what Holliday (1994) calls the weak or the BANA (Britain, Australia and North America) version of ELT that overemphasizes listening and speaking to the detriment of other equally essential language skills.

Independent learning is the quintessence of communicative language teaching. However, learner independence does not mean that all the language learning tasks assigned to students should be done without the direct supervision or guidance of teachers. Instead, it is related to promoting independent and critical thinking among the learners and enabling them to perform the learning activities with greater responsibility. By implication, the learners' creative and reflective energy needs to be stimulated productively. Therefore, the teaching-learning process should aim at raising the learners from the status of language consumers to that of language producers. That is to say, it is unfair to stick to the weak version of the communicative approach, which focuses mainly on the receptive skills of listening and reading. If the learners are to become proficient in the productive skills of both speaking and writing, they need to unleash their intellectual energies. Moreover, though traditionally labelled as receptive skills, listening and reading are not merely receptive. It is for the listener or the reader to delve deep and come out with their meaning by applying all the analytical and creative skills.

Empirical research findings confirm the effectiveness of integrating higher-order thinking skills and creativity in second language acquisition (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Davidson, 1995). Language learners who possess higher-order thinking skills are creative and resourceful and show great efficiency in solving problems and making rational decisions (Mahyuddin et al., 2004). Critical thinking enables students to equip themselves with self-regulation skills to follow various goals and tasks with motivation, commitment, and effectiveness (Binu, 2021). Therefore, teaching critical thinking skills should be an integral part of language education. However, developing critical thinking in ESL learners requires tasks and activities that demand not only linguistic skills but also cognitive engagement. Even the teaching/learning of literature has now taken a U-turn today as literature is not dealt with in the classrooms as an object of study, but as a resource to develop linguistic competence and mental capabilities in the learners (Veettil, 2020). Incorporating authentic materials that encourage inquiry-based questions and a discovery-oriented approach will promote higher-order thinking skills and enhance creativity, social awareness, and learner autonomy.

What is Critical Thinking?

Thinking is a cognitive behavior- a unique capacity that qualifies man to be a social animal. It is a mental reaction to a situation that one encounters. However, critical thinking is a deeper form of thinking in which the mind is open to all assumptions to form an opinion or make a decision. It is a different way of looking at things as it involves both lateral and divergent thinking. It looks at all the aspects of an issue and analyses and evaluates them, culminating in creating something. In other words, critical thinking implies the ability to process information critically to form an opinion without mindlessly accepting others' opinions as truth and even questioning and challenging the one-time established 'truths' and beliefs (Bains, 2014). Dictionary .com defines critical thinking as "the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or a conclusion". As it is implicit, the various stages in the process of reaching a conclusion are what matters in critical thinking. When someone approaches a concept or an issue analytically and evaluatively, their opinions can vary from those of others.

According to Elder and Paul (1994), critical thinking is the ability individuals possess to take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria and standards for analyzing their own thinking. Maiorana (1992) argues that critical thinking skills empower learners to understand and evaluate different situations and solve problems. Thus, the core of critical thinking is thinking differently or thinking out of the box. As Joad (1931) points out, whatever humanity has achieved and whatever developments have happened in the world are the results of thinking differently. If all the people had thought like their predecessors, the world would always have remained the same, and we would not have been any different from the first-century man. For instance, if James Watt had not been inspired to different thoughts at the sight of steam lifting the lid of a teakettle or if he had not employed his lateral thinking skills appropriately, there would have been no steam engine. In fact, all the achievements man has made are the results of thinking differently. As Emerson (1936) puts it, conformity is for the feeble minds. To remain a mere thinker or the parrot of other men's thinking is to become the victim of society. Such victims are produced only in a degenerate state.

Characteristics of a Critical Thinker

Inquisitiveness, open-mindedness regarding divergent world views, flexibility in considering alternatives and other people's opinions, prudence in making judgments, and willingness to reconsider and revise one's thoughts are common characteristics of a critical thinker. All traditional societies and educational systems promote convergent thinking as they wish to perpetuate their established systems, beliefs and conventions. However, critical thinkers are seldom satisfied with such presumed truths and the singularity of perceptions transmitted to them. This ability to analyze before accepting or rejecting anything is one of the main characteristics of a critical thinker. They are not iconoclasts or nihilists for the fun of breaking and demolishing every social fabric irrationally. On the contrary, they are often incredibly flexible enough to renounce their rationally or scientifically debunked beliefs and embrace novel ones if required. The only prerequisites for them are analysis and evaluation. Furthermore, they are honest with themselves, as they need to

quench and satisfy only their own intellectual cravings. In short, as Lucartney (2014) suggests, logical communication, flexibility, inquisitiveness, being honest with oneself, the ability to analyze and evaluate, open-mindedness, striving for understanding and a desire to be well informed are the major characteristics of a critical thinker.

Blooms Taxonomy

The most prominent book on incorporating critical thinking into education is Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Objectives which classifies several skills that can teach critical thinking. In the first volume of the taxonomy titled 'Handbook 1: Cognitive' and published in 1956, Bloom dwells upon the different aspects of critical thinking that merit a significant place in the curriculum. He classifies them as lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). He suggests that the lower-order thinking skills must be acquired before the higher-order thinking skills can be developed. Depicted in the shape of an inverted pyramid, Bloom's taxonomy places the lower-order thinking skills of knowledge, comprehension, and application at the base and the higher-order thinking skills of analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating on the top.

Blooms taxonomy was later modified by Anderson in 2001 with the addition of 'creativity' to the HOTS. However, as Alan (2005) rightly observes, all the levels of critical thinking are of utmost importance. Therefore, there is a need to work at all levels as one builds on the other (p.5). Anderson's (2001) modified version of critical thinking starts with remembering, understanding and applying before moving to the higher-order thinking skills of analyzing, evaluating and creating. As contended earlier, all these elements are equally important because they are interdependent. For instance, to analyze something, one needs to remember it. Remembering refers to the retention and recalling of things learned such as names, dates, facts, definitions, theories etc. Unless it moves from mere recalling to real understanding, they are useless to the learner. In other words, the learner should be able to manifest their understanding of what they have learned by explaining, restating, translating,

discussing, comparing, contrasting and relating them to similar fields of knowledge. Further, they should also be able to apply them when and where necessary.

It is only common knowledge that a tool is useless unless one knows its use. As Brown (2004) argues, the objectives of language education should go beyond knowledge acquisition to develop critical thinking and creativity among learners. Therefore, the learner should exhibit their ability to apply their knowledge to solve problems, illustrate ideas and concepts, examine and classify them correctly, and complete tasks that demand the application of their knowledge. When it comes to analyzing the higher-order thinking skill, the learner is expected to identify the parts that make the whole, examine and identify causes, realize the roles of various parts, and categorize them on multiple bases. Having analyzed the worth of something, the learner should be able to evaluate and recommend it for the purpose it is suitable for. He should also be able to justify his recommendation and rate and prioritize whatever they have learned. This evaluating skill empowers the learner to place everything properly and acknowledge them for whatever they are good at. Finally, at the culminating point, the learner should contribute to the world by creating, planning, composing, designing, constructing, imagining, and thereby making their contributions to the world of knowledge from which he has had enough.

How does Critical Thinking Help Students?

Critical thinking enables learners to make sense of the world based on their personal observation and assessment. Moreover, it helps them understand different points of view expressed by others. Various studies have underlined the significance of critical thinking skills in the language classroom. For example, Rafi (2009), confirms that critical thinking plays a significant role in enhancing ESL wiring skills. Kusaka & Robertson (2006) claim that using higher-order thinking skills will help learners improve their oral communication skills. Lipman (2003) states that language teachers' role in the classroom is not limited to assisting the students to go from one educational level to the next. They are also responsible for promoting critical thinking skills

in the learners that will contribute to better language proficiency.

In a language classroom, the learners are often asked to write critical appreciations of poems. Some students find it a hard nut to crack because they fail to analyze and interpret the poem clearly from multiple perspectives. Critical thinking equips the learners with the adequate intellectual capacity to go beyond the fixed frames and decipher their meanings in what they read. For example, suppose a learner is not able to read between the lines and link the text to various aspects of human life such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, politics, religious concepts, economic factors etc. In that case, they may end up only with the word meanings of the text. This failure to penetrate deep into the layers of meaning is primarily due to the reader's ineptitude in approaching a text critically. Even a powerfully invocative image used in a poem may fail to serve its intended function if learners cannot discover what it stands for. However, a learner trained in critical thinking will be able to identify the local images and the global images used in a text and interpret them from their point of view.

Another essential factor required for the proper learning of literature is making causal and temporal connections. This helps the learner establish links between the various events in the whole plot, without which the story cannot reveal itself wholly to the reader. When one fails to chain the events either causally or temporally, the entire story may appear merely an amalgam of loose plots and hence meaningless to the reader. For example, if a student is to depict a character well, they need to analyze that character, identify the forces that work or worked behind the moulding of the character, evaluate the worth of their behaviour in various contexts, see if their behaviour follows a pattern and perhaps even predict how that character will behave in a given context.

Critical thinking also plays a significant role in project work and academic writing. Every kind of academic writing involves proper analysis, evaluation and organization of ideas presented in a specific format. For example, if a learner is attempting the description of a graph or a diagram, they are required to identify the major trends to be described, the similarities or differences in the trends, decide which ideas can be grouped together and choose the minor trends

to be ignored or rejected etc. Furthermore, while doing projects and assignments, the learner must extract and describe different points of view, recognize key points and arguments, evaluate and synthesize information from multiple sources, form opinions and arguments based on evidence so that they can express the intended ideas with cohesion and coherence and finally come out with the piece of writing (Lucartney, 2014). By implication, to produce an impressive piece of academic writing, the learner must possess both linguistic and critical thinking competence.

Language learners must be trained in critical reading to get at the truth of a text, distinguish facts from opinions and identify insidious bias and propaganda. In the words of Wallace (2003), critical thinking in reading is "the ability to critique the logic of texts, to note inconsistencies and lack of clarity" (p. 27). Critical thinkers do not just accept what an author presents in a text. Instead, they approach the text sceptically, questioning the author's ideas against their knowledge and experience. Hence, the readers' opinion does not necessarily align with an author's point of view. In a world relentlessly inundated with a plethora of propaganda and bias, a reader must exercise both caution and understanding to keep deception at bay. They should be wise enough to know that not all that is in circulation is necessarily true. In other words, a reader has to dissect and analyze a text to see if what is stated in the text can stand the test of authenticity outside it or it is merely the writer's personal opinion.

To distinguish between facts and opinions in a text, one needs to use critical thinking skills to verify the validity of the statement. A fact can be easily proved as it is supported by evidence or documentation. However, since opinion shows a personal view or what a person believes about something, it is likely to be biased, especially if it is not supported with examples, quotations or expert opinions that are accurate and relevant. It is often a subjective statement that reveals the writer's perception of something biased. In the absence of critical analysis, the reader can easily be beguiled and carried away by the persuasive biases of the writer. Moreover, a writer may try to win over the readers by deliberately employing emotionally charged language or references to things to appeal to the reader's sentiments. As Kirzner and Mandell (2007)

rightly observe, writers may tend to influence the readers by using emotionally charged language, highlighting or hiding certain facts, downplaying others point of view, or even using flawed logic (p.71). Such attempts to mislead the reader can at times be deliberate, or it can be ascribed to the inadequacy of the writer's pen. Whatever the case, critical thinking makes the reader cautious about accepting all they come across without critically analyzing and evaluating the worth of the words that meet their eyes and help them make appropriate and correct choices.

Being autonomous and self-responsible is fundamental to successful language education. Learner autonomy and learner responsibility are interrelated as both require active involvement and a high level of motivation. Yagcioglu (2015). believes that learner autonomy refers to the freedom and ability to manage one's affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well. Binu (2021) remarks that learning is an active and constructive process in which students work in purposeful ways to gather new information and relate it to what they already know. However, this act of intellectual processing of constructing meaning or creating something new can be achieved only when learners can work independently.

Success in language education largely depends on learners having a responsible attitude. Mercer (2018) states that creating a suitable environment and giving valuable input does not lead to successful language learning as it requires the active participation of learners who are self-responsible. All higher-education institutions expect their students to become autonomous learners who can independently pursue and produce knowledge. They are expected to be skilled, knowledgeable, articulate, and enterprising. These goals are achieved through their challenging learning experience, equipping them amply to contribute effectively to the changing world they work and live in. In addition, the learning experiences cannot be challenging if all that the students do is to mug up things or reduce themselves to servile imitation or repetition of books and teachers.

Developing critical thinking in the early stages of life enables students to build a successful career because the skills they acquire

in the classroom do not end at the university level; instead, it remains tenaciously supporting the learners throughout their lives. In the words of Hughes (2014), "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 to convince an audience. Increasingly, the skills associated with critical thinking can be linked to business and career success" (p. 7). Thus, critical thinking is inevitable to make effective and valuable contributions to society.

Critical Thinking in the Pedagogical Perspective

Whether critical thinking can be introduced in the language classroom or to what extent it can be taught is often open to discussion and debate. An oft-raised question is whether there was no critical thinking before it was incorporated into educational systems and the curriculum (Patil, 2015). Despite the relevance of these questions, the fact is that opportunities to think critically do foster the thinking potentialities, as they are intellectual exercises leading to cognitive development. This, in turn, eloquently states that there can be no dispute on encouraging the learners to actively interact using their cognitive abilities and critical faculties (Veettil and Bader, 2009, p. 188). As Alan (2005) rightly observes, "many teachers are seeking to change their practices to support reading and writing for critical thinking. They want to challenge their students not just to memorize but also to question, examine, create, solve, interpret, and debate the material in their courses. Such teaching is now widely recognized as best practice" (p.1).

As envisaged by eminent philosophers such as Vivekananda and Gandhi, education should focus on leading to the fullness of life by bringing out the innate potentialities in every human being. Thus, Gandhi thought of an educational system that would cater to the development of the three Hs, which stand for head, heart and hand. He wanted to create humanitarian intellectuals who would contribute productively to themselves and their community. Mere intellectuals with no sympathy for their fellow beings would be a disaster; likewise, sympathy unaccompanied by action is futile. As Fisher (2005) points out, "The most important resource any society has are the intellectual resources of its people. A successful society will be a thinking society in which the capacities for lifelong learning of its citizens are most fully realized" (p.8). A thinking society certainly means a community that can raise questions, think critically and differently, and make considerable contributions to society. Thus, it is the responsibility of every teacher to design activities and tasks that demand critical thinking.

Critical thinking can be incorporated into any curriculum, as it requires only some fine-tuning of the learning material and modifying the approaches to teaching. For example, the age-old topics like "my school", 'my hobbies", "a movie you have watched", "smoking" etc., which are monotonous to many learners, can be adapted on the lines of critical thinking. Questions such as what can schools teach that Nature cannot? Why should people have hobbies? Do movies influence or corrupt our culture? Do films promote violence? Why shouldn't people smoke? etc., undoubtedly encourage learners to use their critical thinking skills. Moreover, introducing tasks that require problem-solving skills will encourage learners to use critical thinking skills as they have to analyze the factors that caused the problem, come out with a possible solution, design an implementation plan and finally assess the effectiveness of the solution. When students go through the process mentioned above, it will enable them to develop original ideas instead of reproducing facts and figures from memory. As a result, memorization gives way to higher-order thinking skills and creativity.

Several activities can be incorporated into classroom teaching to facilitate and promote critical thinking from the pedagogical perspective. The following are a few of them: identifying facts and opinions, analyzing the source of information, expanding ideas with examples and reasons, predicting the content of the lesson, comparing and contrasting two news reports on the same event, identifying the writer's attitude, debating on crisis stories, discourse analysis, identifying causal and temporal connections, fostering conceptual understanding, asking and answering thinking questions, recognizing intent, attitude and tone,

recognizing bias and propaganda techniques, interpreting stories in terms of points of view, time and tone, critical analysis and interpretation of poems, etc.

In the current situation of COVID 19, where the mode of instruction has been shifted to online in most educational institutions, Nussbaum, Barahona, Rodriguez, Guentulle, Lopez, Uscanga & Cabezas (2020) suggest the adoption of more heuristic approaches to enhance critical thinking in learners. First, they propose that the learners be given a chance to self-evaluate and peer-evaluate their works based on their previously given rubrics. Then, drawing on this experience of giving and receiving feedback, they should develop new responses to the task. This will help build metacognition as they integrate various sources of knowledge when they create new responses (p.202).

Let us consider the exercise below aimed at developing critical thinking skills in the following areas:

- Predicting
- Reflecting
- Analyzing
- Synthesizing
- Personalizing

Task 1 - Predicting the content of the text

Read the title of the text and guess why the mother is so angry?

a.   The mother is angry because her daughter failed in the exam.
b.   The mother is angry because her daughter often fights with her siblings.
c.   The mother is angry because her daughter has a boyfriend.

An Agitated Mother

(An excerpt from Vikram Seth's novel, 'Suitable Boy')

Mrs Rupa Mehra, during her previous visit to a friend, was told she should be careful about her teenage daughter, Lata, as she was seen walking hand in hand with a young boy on the bank of a river the previous evening. The dialogue given blow is consequential to this.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Who is he? Come here. Come here at once.

Lata: Just a friend

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Just a friend! A friend! And friends are for holding hands with? Is this what I brought you up for…

Lata: Who told you? Hema's Taiji?

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Hema's Taiji? Hema's Taaji? Is she in this too?...she lets those girls run around all over the place with flowers in their hair in the evening. Who told me? The wretched girl asks me who told me. It's the talk of the town, everyone knows about it. Everyone thought you were a good girl with good reputation-and now it is too late. Too late.

Lata: Ma, you always say Malti is such a nice girl. And she has friends like that- you know that everyone knows that.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Be quiet! Don't answer me back! I'll give you two tight slaps. Roaming around shamelessly near the dhobi-ghat and having a gala time.

Lata: but Malti-

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Malti! Malti! I am talking about you not about Malti…Do you want to be like her? And lying to your mother. I'll never let you go for a walk again. You will stay in this house. Do you hear? Do you hear?

Lata: Yes, Ma…..

Mrs.   Rupa Mehra : What's his name?

Lata: Kabir

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Kabir what?... He has a name, doesn't he? What is he? Kabir Lal, Kabir Mehra? –or what? Are you waiting for tea to get cold? Or have you forgotten?

Lata: Kabir Durrani…

Mrs. Rupa Mehra: Is he a Parsi? a Muslim?...What did I do in my past life that I have brought this upon my beloved daughter? (Pp. 181-82)

Task 2 – Analyzing and reflecting on the text to identify key details related to the problem.

Reread the text again and answer the following questions.

a.   Why is the mother so furious?
b.   Who initiates and controls turn-taking and turn allocation in the dialogue? Why?
c.   Who do you think talks the most in the dialogue? Why?
d.   How do you think the mother and the daughter differ in their ideologies?
e.   What do you think about the speakers' tone, and what does it imply?
f.   Does the daughter feel guilty? Why? Why not?

Task 3 – Synthesizing the information for group discussion.

Discuss the following questions in small groups.

a.   How does the mother interpret the present situation of the daughter?
b.   Is it wrong to build a friendship with the opposite sex? Why? Why not?
c.   Should boys and girls enjoy equal rights in society?
d.   Is there any gender discrimination in your country?
e.   Is it fair to treat grown-up children the way her mother treated Lata?
f.   Is the society you live in very conservative?

Task 4 – Relating information to personal experience.

Think about one of the social issues given below and present your ideas to the class. Give reasons for your arguments and include any relevant examples from your own experience and knowledge.

a.   generation gap
b.   communal harmony
c.   gender relations

As it can be seen, the learning tasks given above are not mere language exercises to answer some comprehension questions, but they are clues that motivate the learners to identify the critical issues mentioned in the text. For example, the learners are expected to dig up the identities such as family identities, social identities, religious identities, gender identities, etc. They should also look into ideologies, dominance, role relationships and social practices presented in the text. As can be seen evidently, there is a shift from mere understanding and remembering to the higher-order thinking skills of analyzing, creating and drawing new inferences. The learners are encouraged to read between the lines and carry their thoughts into the world outside the classroom. In this way, it promotes social awareness and helps in moulding opinions that will invariably play a significant role in developing self-nurturing and critical thinking. As a follow-up activity, students can be asked to write a paragraph on some social practices in their society and then debate them.

Conclusion

The most significant advantage of critical thinking is its potential to enhance learner autonomy and social skills in addition to linguistic skills. Besides, it awakens the learners from within, makes them producers of knowledge and equips them with the tools and strategies to become lifelong independent learners. However, since critical thinking lies on the other side of the spectrum of conformity and is often diametrically opposed to it, it is likely to invite strong criticism from the advocates of conformity and age-old traditions. Hence, creating a conducive learning environment that augments higher-order thinking skills and adapting the instructional materials are challenging because of the social and political obstacles to critical thinking and the pressure to fulfil curricular demands. Moreover, a teacher's attitude is important in fostering critical thinking in learners. As William Blake rightly puts it, "How can a bird that is born for joy sit in a cage and sing?" An authoritative teacher with a conservative mindset will not be able to encourage critical thinking in students. On the

other hand, an ideal teacher is expected to take the students beyond the common puzzles and riddles to issues directly impacting society and their lives. Therefore, they must demonstrate exceptional skills and tactics to overcome their challenges in promoting critical thinking in class.

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