

MATERIALS SPOT

Thinking, reading and writing critically

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The project *Empowering Language Teachers and Learners in Uzbekistan: Opening Doors through Formal English Reading and Writing Development* was aimed at improving the levels of academic English reading and writing of students, teachers, and professionals in Uzbekistan, so that the country becomes better able to contribute to and benefit from English-medium professional and academic texts. The aims were achieved through developing an *Academic English Interactive Mentor (AIM) website* and designing a series of *teacher training workshops*. These pedagogical tools were expected to raise the standards of teaching and learning academic English in Uzbekistan.

The AIM website offers authentic academic resources to help students develop their academic reading and writing skills to become confident and successful independent learners. The materials on the website (<https://aem.co.uk>) are useful for university students at all levels of study, i.e., from foundation year to postgraduate.

An intensive interactive teacher training workshop on academic English was co-created with a small team of university teachers of English in Uzbekistan. The three-day workshop was conducted in the capital city of Uzbekistan, Tashkent. It was expected to provide instruction to teachers from different regions of Uzbekistan on aspects of academic reading and writing relevant to the Uzbek context. The workshop activities were organized around a set of challenges in the teaching and learning of reading and writing skills, identified through an online needs analysis survey which was conducted with more than 100 teachers of academic English in Uzbekistan. Importantly, the workshop was designed to be self-perpetuating: the initial workshop served to train attendees how to pass on their new knowledge to teachers in their home institutions. This was done to ensure that the impact of the project would continue well beyond its finishing date.

The teacher training materials in the manual were developed through collaboration between several teacher trainers from Uzbekistan. The themes

1. The website materials are open access and freely available.

of the sessions were identified via a needs analysis survey. The resulting *Academic English Teacher Training Manual* consists of eight self-contained sets of materials, each focusing on a particular aspect of academic reading and writing, and each corresponding with an individual workshop session.

In this article, we will share the materials developed for one of the sessions of the workshop: Session 4: Thinking, reading and writing critically.

The session addresses the following aims:

- to raise teachers' awareness of thinking, reading and writing critically and
- to encourage teachers to develop their learners' ability of thinking, reading and writing critically.

Time: 90 minutes

Procedure:

Lead-in (15 min)

1. Teacher (T) introduces the topic of the session and explains to Participants (Ps) that there are two approaches to learning: a surface approach and a deep approach.
2. T invites Ps to take the quiz, with the help of which they are able to check their ability to read critically and find out how they learn. T distributes the handout to every teacher and asks them to answer the questions individually by choosing either YES or NO option to every question (see Table 1).
3. When Ps finish taking the quiz, T asks them to read the interpretation of their scores and find the difference between the deep and the surface approach to learning:

Read the interpretation of your quiz score and identify the difference between the two approaches to learning. If you have answered 'Yes' to all or most of question

	YES	NO
<i>I read very little beyond what is required.</i>		
<i>I memorizing a good deal of what I read.</i>		
<i>I come across in other topics to what I read.</i>		
<i>I try to find out exactly what the author means.</i>		
<i>and</i>		

writing. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOGvwPmKOqQ>)

While watching, Ps should make notes about the following questions:

- What is 'critical thinking'? (Suggested answer: Critical thinking is a disciplined thinking that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence.)
- How many types of critical thinking have been mentioned in the video? (Suggested answer: Three types: reasoning, making judgments and problem-solving.)
- How do critical thinkers differ from other learners? (Suggested answer: Critical thinkers raise questions and problems; gather and assess relevant information; come up with well-reasoned conclusions and solutions; keep an open mind and challenge preconceived ideas; are self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective.)
- What does 'evaluation' mean according to the speaker? (Suggested answer: Evaluation means examining the information, asking questions, studying the evidence, checking if the facts are relevant and accurate and the opinions justifiable.)

T asks Ps to read the questions first, and then plays the video.

After watching the video, T asks Ps to work in pairs and compare their answers.

5. T elicits responses and comments from the whole group.

Activity 2. Grouping the writing characteristics statements (15 min)

1. T divides Ps into groups of three and distributes the handout, which contains a set of 30 strips with writing characteristics. The writing characteristics are mixed: some are typical of critical writing and some of critical-analytical writing (see Table 2).
2. Ps should decide which of the two groups: descriptive writing or critical-analytical writing each of the characteristics belongs. T asks Ps to underline the words/phrases that helped them to make a decision.

Suggested answers see Table 3.

Activity 3. Exercise on the quality of critical thinking (30 min)

1. T explains that since Ps have already seen some information on critical thinking, they can now practise thinking critically and evaluating.
2. T divides Ps into three groups and tells them each group is going to read two student accounts and evaluate how their thinking critically deepened. T asks the Ps to find evidence in the text. Group 1 is given Accounts 1 and 4, Group 2, Accounts 2 and 4, Group 3, Accounts 3 and 4.

...ces reasoned judgments	Identifies the significance
...ntifies why the timing is important	States the order in which thing happened
...tes the method used	Evaluates the relative significance of details
...ghs up the importance of component parts	Explains what a theory says
...ctures information in order of importance	Says how to do something
...es reasons for selecting each option	States the different components
...ghs one piece of information against another	Explains how something works
...ntifies the significance	Indicates why something will work
...s details	States what something is like
...ws why something is relevant or suitable	Shows why something is relevant or suitable
...luates the value, strengths and weaknesses	Lists in any order
...ws the relevance of links between pieces of information	Indicates whether something is appropriate or suitable
...tes what happened	Gives information
...ws conclusions	Says when something occurred
...ues a case according to evidence	States links between items
...tes options	Gives the story so far

Source: Study guide 8: 'Critical Thinking' summary version, Learning Development, University of Plymouth (2009)

Table 2

Descriptive writing	Critical-analytical writing
States what happened	Identifies the significance
States what something is like	Evaluates the value, strengths and weaknesses
Lives the story so far	Weighs one piece of information against another
States the order in which thing happened	Makes reasoned judgments
Says how to do something	Argues a case according to evidence
Explains what a theory says	Shows why something is relevant or suitable
Explains how something works	Indicates why something will work
States the method used	Indicates whether something is appropriate or suitable
Says when something occurred	Identifies why the timing is important
States the different components	Weighs up the importance of component parts
States options	Gives reasons for selecting each option
Lists details	Evaluates the relative significance of details
Lists in any order	Structures information in order of importance
States links between items	Shows the relevance of links between pieces of information
States information	Draws conclusions

le 3

Account 1

I have been asked to think about what I mean by 'good learning'. A programme in higher education is made up of a number of modules. In the average undergraduate programme of three years, the marks for the modules at level 2 (i) and 3(h) are usually counted towards the degree grade and there is a formula used to determine which students get firsts, upper seconds and so on and which are the failures. Firsts and upper seconds are usually taken to be good degrees, although an upper second is also the average degree. It used to be that lower seconds were average.

Good learners usually get good degrees, though this is not always the case. A good learner might be ill or just have a bad time for a while and get lower marks and therefore not do so well on some modules. There are mechanisms of compensation and condonement that allow their better marks make up for their less good marks.

Sometimes learners seem to be really good in the first year of higher education and then something happens to them and they do not do well. Perhaps it is that they have really chosen the wrong subject or they get lazy and go out too much or they drink too much. Some students are not good at learning because they are out so much that they do not meet the deadlines that are set for their work. Some have jobs that take - possibly - too many hours of time and they do not come to all of the lectures.

I can illustrate that last point by reference to an Engineering student who I know. He did really well in his first year, getting good marks for practically all of the modules that he studied. He found that he was getting short of cash and decided to get a job at the local pub. The landlord would only take him on if he would work five evenings a week, so he agreed. He started to get bad marks because he missed the first lectures in the morning quite often and did not have time to catch up by writing up notes. He would have been a good student though - and by that I mean a good learner.

Thinking critically about the statement, then, I would agree that good learning in higher education is about getting good marks in the modules of the programme because students who get good marks usually get good degrees.

Account 2

I have been asked to think critically about the following statement: 'Good learning in higher education is simply all about getting good marks in the modules of the programme'. What is the statement asserting? It asserts that students who are good at learning get good marks in modules. In general I would agree with that statement, though I need to look at it further because there are some ideas in it that need to be explored more. For example, what is meant by 'good' here?

the statement that 'good' is a similar quality in relation to learning in both uses of the word. 'Good' in relation to marks means that there are high marks. That is a different meaning from 'good' in relation to learning – which might mean that the learning is effective, or quick or thorough or it can be applied and so on.

The use of good in relation to good marks depends on the process of assessment. Some learners are good at assessment and others are less good. A student could be a good learner in one sense, but he is poor at the assessment and in the sense of the statement, we cannot say that he is a good learner – but equally it does not work the other way around. He is not a poor learner because he got poor marks.

In my experience, it is very possible for there to be students who I would say were 'good learners', who do not get very good degrees. The fact that they do not get good degrees is related to the fact that they have not got good marks for their modules. Some of these students make excellent professionals – sometimes they have more of the skills that are actually required for the profession – but they certainly could not be defined as good learners at the time of their graduation or on the basis of their actual marks.

So, in conclusion, I would say that the statement could be said to hold in a narrow sense – it is not untrue. However, there are many assumptions and distortions in it and I could not agree with it as it stands. In particular there is the issue of the use of the word 'good' in relation to assessment and its use in relation to the word learning. They are different uses and confuse the statement.

learner has achieved well in the context of the modules of the programme and it may mean therefore that the learner does well in the overall degree. This may be true, but there is another issue hidden here. Good marks are defined as 'good' in relation to the assessment process which involves an assessment method and assessment criteria. Some students have great difficulties with some assessment methods (e.g. dyslexics may have difficulties with written work). The assessment criteria may reward particular kinds of learning - perhaps they reward those who just learn facts easily and not those who can reason but are not so efficient in factual recall. In other words, being successful in the degree does not define a person as good at all learning because 'good' in the sense of the degree is relative to assessment methods and criteria.

I need also to question what is meant by 'good learning'. Firstly, is there one thing called good learning? Different people might construe 'good learning' in different ways. In research by XYZ, in which the meaning of 'good' learning was examined in different contexts (school, further, adult, professional and higher education), different concepts of 'good' learning were evident in different contexts (XYZ, date - i.e. the student gives a reference) - so the interpretation of the word may differ. In the literature of learning, there are even different theoretical bases associated with the different sectors of education. Secondly, from my own and colleagues' experience of working in professional education, it is not necessarily those students with good marks who are most successful in the profession. Those who get high marks often lack the personal skills to start with.

Indeed, we can take it further. Some who turn out to be the wisest or most clever in society had poor results in their higher education programme or were not in higher education. In this respect, there is a time scale that needs to be taken into account for this judgment. Are we talking about 'good learners' now or over their lifetimes?

In the time available for this critique, I have started to examine the statement that 'Good learning in higher education is simply all about getting good marks in the modules of the programme'. While the wording of the statement tries to persuade me of the case, I cannot agree with it, though in restricted senses it could be meaningful. As I have indicated above, the word, 'good' can be interpreted differently in different contexts and by different people, and additionally, the notion of 'good marks' is relative to local assessment issues that define what 'good' means in that context of assessment.

Source: Moon, J. *Resources for Critical Thinking*. Retrieved from <https://cemp.ac.uk/people/jennymoon.ph>

- When Ps finish reading their accounts, T elicits responses from each group, and after that, gives them Handout H (available to download from the AIM website at <https://acim.co.uk/workshops/>) with ready comments for all four accounts and evidence of how the writing changed as thinking critically deepened. Ps compare the given comments with their own answers.

Activity 4. Matching and summarising (10 min)

- T gives them the handout (Handout H) and asks Ps to work individually and match the critical thinking concepts with their definitions:

Questioning	examining and explaining how parts fit into a whole; comparing and contrasting different elements; understanding relationships
Describing	reconsidering a topic to take account of new information or experience in practice; considering other viewpoints; recognizing underlying principles
Analysing	identifying and examining faults and weaknesses in arguments, as well as acknowledging strengths and merits
Reflecting	whatever it is that you are studying; asking <i>what, who, where, when, how, why, what if, what next, so what?</i> ... and so on. Attempting to answer the questions leads you to fulfil functions - or do things - that are vital in scientific, academic and social life
Reasoning	demonstrating logical thinking about causes and effects; presenting evidence to provide sound arguments and refuting unsound ones
Evaluating	defining clearly what it is you are talking about, saying exactly what is involved, where it takes place, or under what circumstances
Criticising or critiquing	commenting on degrees of success or failure, or judging the implications, ultimate use or value of something

Source: Study guide 8: 'Critical Thinking' summary version, Learning Development, University of Plymouth (2009).

Table 4

asks Ps to compare their answers in pairs.
elicits random responses from the whole group
and corrects where necessary.
tested answers:

tioning	whatever it is that you are studying: asking what, who, where, when, how, why, what if, what next, so what? ... and so on. Attempting to answer these questions leads you to fulfil functions - or do things - that are vital in scientific, academic and social life.
ribing	defining clearly what it is you are talking about, saying exactly what is involved, where it takes place, or under what circumstances
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ising or uing	identifying and examining faults and weaknesses in arguments, as well as acknowledging strengths and merits

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Activity 5. Reflection (5 min)

ites Ps to ask questions they might have on the
n and summarises the key points on the Power
slide.

References

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