Critical Thinking and EFL at University: Towards a Trans-Disciplinary Classroom

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This essay characterizes the trend of incorporating critical thinking and content instruction into EFL courses as part of a broader process of integration within the humanities and social sciences that I refer to as a *trans-disciplinary* approach to knowledge. In the first section, I expand the definition of critical thinking and illustrate the concept of trans-disciplinarity, claiming that both are essential aspects of university education. In the second section, I describe how contemporary foreign language classrooms already contain these aspects and thus serve as ideal places to develop students' social engagement and critical thinking skills. In the third section, I describe my efforts at creating content-based courses that explicitly recognize and exploit this potential.

　本論文では、日本における英語教師が大学教育において積極的に貢献できる点について議論する。最近主流となっている内容重視と批判的思考による英語教育が、人文学・社会学の統合過程のひとつであるととらえ、これを知識への学際的アプローチ（trans-disciplinary approach）であると言及する。まず、批判的思考の定義を拡張し、学際的思考概念について説明した上で、双方が大学教育において不可欠な側面であることを指摘する。次に、現代の英語教育がすでにこれらの側面を有しており、それゆえに、学習者の社会的参加と批判的思考技術を身につける理想的な環境を提供していると述べる。最後に外国語教育の可能性を最大に活かすべく、筆者が実践した内容重視の英語教育コースについて紹介する。

THE IDEA of incorporating critical thinking into EFL instruction is not a new one. A sizable amount of research and practice has gone into demonstrating how language teaching can also develop students' critical thinking skills. This trend is but one example of how EFL is broadening its scope to participate in cultural, occupational, and cognitive instruction. In this essay, I attempt to situate this movement within the context of the university itself. I want to demonstrate that EFL's integrative tendency reflects a larger movement in both scholarship and society toward what I characterize as *trans-disciplinary thinking*, a critical thinking skill that enables synthesis across disciplinary boundaries. By demonstrating the connections between contemporary language instruction and the broader humanities and social sciences and also by providing examples from my own teaching, I hope to offer support and encouragement for those university instructors who are pushing the traditional boundaries of language education in order to contribute to students' intellectual development.

Critical Thinking Paradigms and the University

I begin with a conceptualization of critical thinking, while noting that no single definition is possible. Indeed, Christopher Long (2003) urged instructors to pay closer attention to critical thinking's "multiplicity" (p. 230). Although in its broadest usage, critical thinking functions simply as a synonym for "good thinking," the term often seems to undergo a degree of specification. EFL circles tend to favor a *logical-scientific* usage of the term. This approach informed Davidson and Dunham's (1996) use of the Ennis-Weir test, which focuses on the ability to identify flawed reasoning, as a method for evaluating critical thinking ability in the language classroom. Similarly, Vdovina and Gaibisso (2013) cited Elder's definition of critical thinking as "self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way" (pp. 55-56) in their development of a lesson plan that improved students' awareness of "the science of logic" (p. 61). Without disputing the value of the logical-scientific paradigm, I want to add a different interpretation that will help account for the integrative push in language teaching. This alternative view of critical thinking was concisely summarized by Cohen (1998) as "when we can explain how and why symbols and people come together in ways that effectively, truthfully, or ethically shape meaning" (p. 16). In this definition, which we might call a *cultural-semiotic* usage, critical thinking does not seek truth or falsity so much as an understanding of the ways in which beliefs and conditions are made to seem true or untrue, good or evil, acceptable or unacceptable, within a given culture.

Although they differ in focus, these two interpretations share an emphasis on activity over passivity. They both enable students to reject the face value of things and strive for deeper understanding. This common point allows us to flexibly define critical thinking as *active thinking*. It empowers the learner to become an active contributor instead of a passive consumer. With this in mind, I believe we can position these two broad patterns of critical thinking—logical-scientific and cultural-semiotic—as the ultimate goals of university

education. We find them in the top three categories of Bloom's taxonomy of educational goals (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) as well as in Krathwohl's (2002) revised taxonomy (analyze, evaluate, create). By training both forms through general curriculum requirements, the ideal graduate obtains the reflective and investigative tools necessary to evaluate and synthesize information, leading to fuller participation in society. This broad-minded view forms the substance of the liberal view of education.

However, the liberal view of education, and with it the development of critical thinking, suffers from the dominance of disciplines. It is generally acknowledged that the academic departments partitioning the modern university are historically dependent entities. Although one cannot utterly reject them as sources of knowledge, their deficits have come to be well recognized over the last half-century. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1976) described them as "ready-made syntheses":

> We must also question those divisions and groupings with which we have become so familiar. Can one accept, as such, the distinction between the major types of discourse, or that between such forms or genres as science, literature, philosophy, religion, history, fiction, etc. . . . We are not even sure ourselves when we use these distinctions in our own world of discourse." (p. 22)

The disciplines, when misconceived as natural categories, obscure underlying realities. Foucault (1976) suggested that we accept them contingently, "only to subject them at once to interrogation; to break them up and then to see whether they can be legitimately reformed" (p. 22). Disciplines are not knowledge in themselves; they are tools in the creation of new knowledge. Nissani (1997) gave the example of a scholar attempting to understand the Cold War. The course of study begins with history, but must branch through political science and even philosophy before coming to a plausible understanding. Modern students of society examine phenomena in

their multiplicity, using the resources of any discipline that might provide valuable insight. I call this process trans-disciplinary thinking, the prefix "trans-" indicating the ability to move freely across disciplinary borders in order to achieve meaningful syntheses.

The need for trans-disciplinary thinking is punctuated by the rise of the global information society. Products of rational Eurocentrism, the disciplines are increasingly unfit to cope with the issues of an interconnected multicultural world. World systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) explained that in the development of this new field "the analysts were not recognizing the intellectual legitimacy of the disciplines" (p. 19). Nor does this necessity to break down barriers apply solely to academics. Describing his theory of the Network Society, Castells (2004) elaborated on the kind of working skills needed to survive in a fluid society based on knowledge and information. A subject must possess

> the autonomous capacity to focus on the goal assigned to it in the process of production, find the relevant information, recombine it into knowledge, using the available knowledge stock, and apply it in the form of tasks oriented towards the goals of the process. (p. 26)

Castells (2004) referred to this capacity as "self-programmable labor." These are not only academic skills but also thinking strategies for negotiating economic, political, and social life in an increasingly complex world. Tosaku (2013) gave a similar list of 21st century skills in *Nippon 3.0 no Shohōsen* (Prescription for Japan 3.0.). In both academics and society, trans-disciplinary thinking recognizes that any phenomenon is the manifestation of many currents of forces and that a thinker must have the flexibility to seek and combine the strands into something useful. I propose that trans-disciplinary thinking is the most necessary component of critical thinking for our age. Trans-disciplinary thinking can be understood as an updated vision of the liberal view of education. In the past, simply being familiar with a variety of subjects qualified as general knowledge.

This categorical attitude must be replaced with an understanding that learning even one subject actually entails learning *at a nexus of subjects.* It is the mindset that must be instilled in students, and the ethos that must inform university education. In the next section, I suggest that certain trends in EFL already share this approach to learning, making the language classroom an ideal setting for the development of trans-disciplinary critical thinking skills.

Broadening the Role of EFL Instruction

Mohan (1986) noted that "in the more traditional view that regards language in isolation, the language teacher's concern was with language only, and the chemistry teacher's concern was with chemistry. It was supposed that there was no overlap and no demarcation problem" (p. 7). This disciplinary view of a regimented difference between language teachers and content teachers still governs the structure of the university. Hiring processes, departmental politics, and standardized language test requirements further cement these divisions, limiting the way language teachers are allowed to conceive of themselves. However, against this disciplinary backdrop the actual methods of EFL instruction have become increasingly more integrative. Kramsch (1993) explained how teaching language has become "a social, cultural, historical adventure, because it is the study of language as a social practice" (p. 204). Kramsch's characterization illustrates how instructors have come to actively engage with the intercultural issues inherent in teaching a new language to people of different backgrounds. The concern with meaning and representation within lived experience, present in nearly every kind of language lesson, implies that the foreign language enterprise shares the essence of Cohen's cultural-semiotic definition of critical thinking. When we teach language, we are teaching the way meaning is created in the world. In other words, EFL instruction has entered into the greater enterprise of the humanities and social sciences.

This change can be seen as a part of the trans-disciplinary movement that I have described. Language permeates all human

activity; human activity permeates language. This realization, which allowed scholars to begin mixing and ignoring disciplines in the second half of the last century, is also what motivates language teachers to develop integrative activities that encourage meaningful use and socially grounded competence. Let us take the examples of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). ESP anticipates how learners will use the language in their academic or professional lives and borrows content to suit that purpose. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) explained how ESP operates from "the need and willingness to engage with other disciplines" (p. 17). That is, language needs flow directly out of knowledge needs. However, ESP's distinction between carrier content and real content limits its role. Carrier content—in Dudley-Evans and St. John's example, the life cycle of a plant—is simply "a vehicle for the real content of the unit, the language of process" (p. 11-12). ESP is still perceived as traditional language instruction. CBI, defined by Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) as "the integration of language teaching aims with subject matter instruction" (p. vii), adopts a more synthetic approach. Stryker and Leaver (1997) explained how CBI's focus on meaningful practice leads instructors to use authentic materials, design lessons around real-world controversies, and, in the purest form of CBI, structure entire academic courses in the foreign language.

In these two examples, we notice that as the method becomes more integrative, the role of the language classroom expands. The philosophy of Languages across the Curriculum (LxC) exploits this potential to the fullest. LxC is in some ways a branch of CBI, but takes a far more radical stance. Straight (1997) explained the difference between LxC and CBI in this way:

> LxC might be better termed "language-based content instruction (LBCI). . . . both approaches focus on content. LBCI, however, uses the learners' existing language skills as a way of furthering the intercultural breadth and depth of their study in whatever subject matter they choose." (p. 242)

LxC can be seen as the culmination of a sociocultural understanding of language education. Language is treated as a means of thinking rather than an object of thought, which in turn positions the language classroom as a space to think about the world in a new way. This is a dramatic reconceptualization of the role of the language teacher. With this reorientation, EFL claims the right to fully participate in the university project, specifically in its linkage with the semiotic form of critical thinking I have described. The flexible organization of the language classroom, specifically through the integrative strategies of CBI, makes it a space where disciplinary rules can be broken down and ideas posed through multiple lenses. In addition, the language classroom is *a place of participation*. Students enter expecting to talk, anticipating new experiences. This active space presents the perfect opportunity to advance the process of thought. We can best capitalize on this potential through a kind of content-based course that adheres to the spirit of LxC and to the grand goal of university education, the development of critical consciousness, while utilizing the EFL classroom's potential for trans-disciplinary learning. The next section will describe my efforts in creating such a course.

In Practice: iCoToBa Advanced Courses

These examples are taken from my experiences at the Office for the Development of Global Human Resources at Aichi Prefectural University, formed in 2013 through a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Classes are open to all majors in the School of Foreign Languages. The goal of the program—nicknamed iCoToBa—is to nurture a "global" mindset in our students through special language courses and the promotion of study-abroad programs. The bulk of our students are preparing for or have just returned from studying abroad. Students join our courses to improve their active English ability, get accustomed to the styles of instruction found outside of Japan, and increase their awareness of other cultures and global issues. Standard gram-

mar and communication-based language instruction is conducted within the respective departments, leaving our office free to offer more experimental courses catering to outward-looking students' linguistic and intercultural needs.

As explained above, I see in EFL instruction a kinship with the kind of critical thinking that is concerned with the function of meaning in culture and society. To explore this potential, I have used my advanced-level courses as opportunities to treat critical analysis and discussion as primary goals. This type of course mimics as closely as possible the experience of a senior seminar in an American humanities program, both in materials taught and in educational focus, while retaining the relaxed atmosphere of an EFL classroom. In keeping with the principles of CBI, the readings are chosen from authentic, unedited academic sources. Selected passages form the core of the text's argument, allowing for a reading length appropriate for L2 learners (3-7 pages) without sacrificing content difficulty. All readings are supplemented by Japanese-language reading guides. Content is reiterated in class through short lectures supplemented by images and video clips, so that students absorb the content verbally and visually. Group comprehension checks place emphasis on skimming and general understanding of the text's main argument. Finally, a short set of working vocabulary—words already in the students' repertoire and applicable to the day's topic—is presented at the beginning of each class.

I drew from my background in media and cultural studies to design course content that would develop visual literacy, textual analysis, and argumentative skills. These courses were titled "Media and Culture" and "Society through Film." Their intellectual goals were the same as those that would drive a native-language version of the course: (a) to increase students' critical awareness of how social preconceptions and marketing imperatives shape the media they experience every day and (b) to train them to make and support relevant claims about cultural change. "Media and Culture" was structured along thematic lines developed through academic

readings. "Society through Film" focused on three films from three different English-speaking areas and combined film analysis with readings and lectures on the areas' histories and social issues. The benefits of using contemporary visual culture as content are numerous. First, the direct connection to students' lives leads to increased motivation. Second, the subject lends itself to issue-based instruction spanning a variety of disciplines. Third, it provides a field of investigation not wholly dependent on verbal comprehension. In these courses, I taught critical analysis as a *visual* process, which I simplified into three steps: (a) What do you *see*? (reading); (b) What does each thing *mean*? (analysis); and (c) Can we make a statement about the *message/purpose/function* of the whole thing? (argument). I have found that this visual approach empowers language learners who lack full confidence in their English ability.

The method of evaluation for these courses was the same as that in a native-language version of the class: the five-paragraph argumentative essay. For "Media and Culture," students were asked to analyze a media text of their choice from the standpoint of either marketing strategy or cultural ideology. For "Society through Film," students were asked to show how a film of their choice reflected the issues of its society. As Japanese students' level of familiarity with the five-paragraph format tends to be mixed, I included in each class's syllabus a unit that explained how to write the essay, focusing specifically on how the process of writing connects with the process of critical analysis. Students received supplemental handouts and sample essays to aid writing, and the final two classes were set aside as writing workshops. In evaluating essays, I followed the LxC principle of "language in the service of content" (Straight, 1997, p. 242), focusing on how well the students used their current English abilities to cogently express their claims. Thesis coherence, logical support, convincing textual analysis, and social relevance formed my primary criteria of evaluation. Spelling and grammar errors were ignored, except in cases where they severely impeded understanding of the arguments.

The results of these essays were overwhelmingly positive. Although the quality of argumentation varied, most students were able to make specific claims about their chosen texts. One positive difference between these classes and my experiences teaching native students was the level of effort put into writing. Japanese students took time to write and rewrite their thesis statements, frequently contacting me by email with questions. Here unfamiliarity with the concept actually aided the learning process. Whereas American students would simply assume they knew what an argument was, the Japanese students apprehended it as a new concept to learn. Similarly, the essay-writing units taught analysis and argumentation as novel practices, resulting in a heightened awareness of essay form and structure.

The students' care in selecting textual examples led to good results. In "Society through Film," for example, one student analyzed the grotesque mutations of the main character in the science fiction film *District 9* as positive images. She contended that scenes represented "the painful but appealing process of [a] privileged member's [of] society coming to understand how other people suffer." Many of the best papers integrated ideas from other classes and interests. In "Media and Culture," one student mounted a Freudian critique of a whiskey commercial in a paper titled "How to Sell a Product to [a] Mama's Boy." Though Freud did not feature in the class, her careful close reading enabled her to notice the Oedipal relations in the advertisement. In "Society through Film," one student saw the animated film *Summer Wars* as a critique of modern Japanese dependence on social networking sites. Another student praised the Indian film *My Name is Kahn* for its positive portrayal of modern Muslims. These simple examples should provide at least preliminary evidence that the language classroom can serve as a place of trans-disciplinary learning.

In the current semester, I am applying these ideas in the service of the Office's global imperative with a course titled "What is Global, Anyway?" This course examines the human aspects of globaliza-tion and what it means to be a global citizen. Having only a modest knowledge of the field of global studies, I embarked on a summer-long retraining program similar to that described by Vines (1997). Familiarizing myself with anthropological, sociological, business, and communication texts on globalization, I gained the proficiency in the subject needed to teach the course. The final evaluation for this course will be a theoretical application essay, where students will apply one or more of the concepts learned in class to a social phenomenon of their choice. The resulting student essays will be compiled into a printed volume. A mini-conference where students will present their essays to an audience of students and instructors in the School of Foreign Languages is also in the planning stages.

Conclusion

Through this essay, I hope I have broadened the understanding of critical thinking as it pertains to EFL instruction, first by adding a cultural-semiotic interpretation to the discussion and second by advocating a trans-disciplinary form of learning as opposed to one grounded in academic disciplines. Further, I have argued that contemporary EFL instruction shares key beliefs and methods with the whole span of the modern university, and that it offers a valuable space for the development of trans-disciplinary learning. I do not, of course, envision a whole department of courses like those described in the previous section. As Straight (1997) admits, LxC uses the learners' *existing* language skills, meaning that foundational language skills must already exist. These courses should be present alongside the traditional language classes, as hurdles and sources of motivation for students. Dupuy (1999) has shown how CBI courses can aid and stimulate students in making the transition to advanced foreign language instruction. Drawing language instruction closer to the greater goal of the university will also help guide students toward the social use of their language skills.

The question of *how* to teach something has always been as important as the question of *what* to teach. In their constant

attention to how understanding and practical ability develop in their students, language teachers offer a powerful example for the whole university. Expanding the concept of language teaching past its traditional borders to include culture and critical thinking will further increase our value as participants in the university project. It is my hope that the connections drawn in this essay will provide additional support for this endeavor.

Bio Data

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