Chapter 1
Promoting Critical Thinking Skills in Language Education through Online Discussions

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ABSTRACT
Online discussion has become one of the most effective teaching tools in recent years in terms of its power to promote students’ critical thinking skills in educational contexts. This chapter aims at presenting an overview of recently conducted research studies on critical thinking and online discussions, explaining online discussion as a pedagogical vehicle for maximizing language learning and teaching, identifying problems related to online discussions, as well as some suggested solutions, describing application activities that promote critical thinking skills, illustrating how language teachers and learners can use meta-communication in creating successful online discussions, and stressing the importance of the teacher’s role in designing an effective online discussion environment for students.

INTRODUCTION
Learning via discussions or conversations is a crucial aspect of teaching and learning, especially in higher education contexts. Modern communication technologies enable discussions to be conducted online as well as in the classroom. These discussions may constitute a part of a totally online distance education class or be deployed as a supplement to a traditional face-to-face class (Maurino, 2006). In an online context, the discussions can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous discussions involve that the participants of the discussion all meet at the same time to talk about the issue at hand, whereas asynchronous
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discussions are discussions that students can join at any time (Benson, 2003).

From a social constructivist viewpoint, online discussions provide opportunities for students to form meanings together and infuse new knowledge into their prior experiences (Rourke & Anderson, 2002). Online discussions can constitute a platform for students and teachers to communicate in a social context with no boundaries of time and distance, enhancing students’ critical thinking and assisting students in reflecting on their ideas (Brooks & Jeong, 2006; Hew & Cheung, 2008; Wang, 2008).

Despite being employed as a powerful pedagogical tool for maximizing students’ critical thinking skills, online discussions have given rise to the emergence of several problems such as inadequate critical analysis of peers’ ideas (Rourke & Anderson, 2002), limited student involvement (Hewitt, 2005) and lack of motivation, commitment, and time, and failure to interact powerfully (Brooks & Jeong, 2006). To overcome some of these problems, a variety of facilitation strategies, mostly concentrating on the teacher as facilitator or moderator, have been described in the literature (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Tutors and teachers play a pivotal role in online discussion contexts. However, their domination may give rise to a teacher-centered discussion, suppressing students’ active involvement (Rovai, 2007).

The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of recently conducted research studies on critical thinking and online discussions, expound online discussion as a pedagogical tool for enhancing language learning and teaching, describe problems relevant to online discussions as well as some suggested solutions, describe application activities that enhance critical thinking skills, exemplify how language teachers and learners can utilize meta-communication in creating effective online discussions and emphasize the prominence of the teacher’s role in creating an ideal online discussion environment for students.

DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING

The term critical thinking has been defined by a number of researchers. According to Angelo (1995:6), critical thinking is “the intentional application of rational, higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, problem recognition and problem solving, inference, and evaluation”. Scriven & Paul (1996) defined critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”. Facione (1998) described 6 main skills of critical thinking self-regulation, interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation and evaluation as exhibited in Figure 1. Facione (1998) categorized these 6 main skills of critical thinking from the experts’ consensus concerning critical thinking and the optimal critical thinker in the APA Delphi Report, Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational, 1992. As a consequence, Facione (1998:12) stressed that “critical thinking is the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. This process reasoned consideration to evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria.”

From a practical prospect, Haskins (2006:2) stated that critical thinking is “a process by which we use our knowledge and intelligence to effectively arrive at the most reasonable and justifiable positions on issues, and which endeavors to identify and overcome the numerous hindrances to rational thinking.”

In the light of the definitions given above, a critical thinker, according to Birjandi & Bagherkazemi (2010:137), is someone who among other characteristics:

- has a strong inclination to notice the prominence of good thinking;
- describes problems and concentrates on related topics and issues;
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