

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - The Significance Of Effective Communication In Critical Thinking



1. Brief background to English in Namibia

Article 3(1) of *The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia* (1990, 3) declares that “the official language of Namibia shall be English”. This, clearly, is a pragmatic response to a situation before independence where the South African Administration in place before 21 March 1990 had established Afrikaans as lingua franca. It was also the medium of all official administration and instruction in most schools. Independence changed all that since there was now a desire to learn and use English in schools and in the place of work. The choice of English, a language for international business and effectiveness in our dot.com age, was appropriate and timeous.

For education, however, this declaration meant a tall order and several implications. Policies and strategies by means of which they could be achieved were to be framed within a short time if the declaration were to meet with success. Personnel to implement it were to be produced within an equally short time and, above all, the preparation of basic teaching and learning materials was to be undertaken with the seriousness that both the task at hand and reality posed. However appropriate these actions might be, given the context within which they were to be accomplished, any planner would be wary of the extent to which the declared ideal would be achieved.

But the responsible ministry, then that of Basic Education and Culture(MBEC), took on this declaration head on. Its first task was to frame an appropriate policy directive that English be the medium of instruction from Grade 4 upwards. In Grades 1-3, the policy recommended that mother tongues be used as a medium of instruction. Implicit in this directive was the hope and truth that teachers who had hitherto used Afrikaans as a lingua franca in most schools would be prepared to implement the said policy directive. To achieve this ideal, one needed adequate and aggressive training sessions, workshops, and seminars side by side with the

production of instructive teaching and learning materials. The reality on the ground is that teachers could have done with more of these sessions, for quite a lot of them are not confident in the use of English in a number of contexts and in various scenarios.

The policy by MBEC directed further that English be both a subject and a medium of instruction from Grade 4 to university/ tertiary levels. This is still so with but interesting results.

This is the watershed of achievement or not in English Language in all levels of Education in Namibia since independence. This is the also the context that has a significant bearing on the achievement of higher education learners in critical thinking. As can be appreciated, clarity and precision in the use of language are the hallmark of meaningful critical thinking whether in the specific domain of critical thinking, or, indeed, in the case of critical thinking across the curriculum. If confidence in the use of language is lacking, achievement in a field such as Critical Thinking will beg serious questions.

2. The problem

It seems, as it was the logical thing to do at the time, that a number of workshops and short courses meant to give teachers the content of English and confidence to both use and teach it were organized, but it is clear that they were not enough and were not followed up. As a result, up to now, “amongst some teachers, particularly those less qualified and older; there [is] anxiety about the effects on them of the implementation of an English medium policy” (Harlech-Jones, 1990, 203). This behaviour is common even amongst younger graduate teachers today. Their mastery of the content and use of English is still wanting. It is little surprising, therefore, that attempts to use English are accompanied by anxiety. For the learner of English at any educational level in Namibia, this position is both serious and challenging.

This is why teaching Critical Thinking at the Polytechnic of Namibia, in a situation in which learners’ achievement and preparedness prior to taking up tertiary education beg questions, poses several challenges. One wonders whether, in this situation, teaching critical thinking is worth its while and whether, if one teaches it painstakingly, there will be any achievement at all. Another thing; how would one deal with the language issue given the above scenario? Would critical thinking refine the language of learners? If it does, what would be its future at the Polytechnic? If it succeeded here, would the effect be felt in schools as well?

It is possible, however, to master critical thinking skills even in this context if

creative approaches to teaching critical thinking are used. This approach could be used in schools and colleges as well.

3. The case of the Polytechnic of Namibia

In so far as fluency and confidence in the use of English is concerned, the Polytechnic receives inadequately qualified students. This is why a majority of them enroll in the Basic English Module (Module 1) and even then, really struggle through it. The minimum a student needs in English to be admitted to the Polytechnic is an E symbol or roughly 35-40% at the Grade 12 /IGCSE examination. To expect these students to graduate after three years with fluency and competence in English is a tall order.

It could be done if the programmes in the Department of Communication/English were refined so as to give particular attention to the weak student and, at the same time, grant the stronger candidate opportunity to grapple with language issues at the level of his capacity.

At the moment, the department above teaches six modules, one Communication Skills course for Engineering Students, and one Communication and Critical Thinking course. Four of these modules, that is, 1 to 4, deal with issues from basic grammar and usage to writing and research. Critical Thinking is a minor component of each of these four modules. The attention it deserves in these modules is wanting. It is also so in the Communication Skills course. Modules 5 and 6 are really a Business Communication course divided into two parts.

What is disturbing is that students complete these modules but still remain incompetent in the use of English and the stakeholders are not quite happy. There is thus need to re-examine this position with a view to addressing not only the issues of relevance, mastery, fluency, and competence, but the place of critical thinking in the Department of Communication if our department is to take its place in the community of departments grappling with the teaching of Critical Thinking.

4. Introduction of Critical Thinking

This is one of the reasons why Ms Marietjie de Klerk, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at the Poltechnic, initiated the introduction of Critical Thinking at the Polytechnic of Namibia. Her insight was gained from her research into this subject for her Masters dissertation. The Department of Communication took this course on board at the beginning of 2001 and has so far produced three crops of graduates totaling 60.

The ability of these students in the use of English has improved to a certain extent. One hopes that they will continue the habit, started while taking Critical Thinking as a course, of reading various texts critically well after leaving the Polytechnic and in their places of work.

5. Critical Thinking at the Polytechnic of Namibia

Teaching Critical Thinking at the Polytechnic of Namibia given the above scenario presents interesting challenges and the teacher needs to be a man or woman of unflinching courage, stamina, warmth, and vision.

We do not require any prerequisites for admission to the course at the moment for we believe that through hard work we can produce a useful graduate. The course is called "Communication and Critical Thinking" because we try to foster competence in both English Language and Critical Thinking.

As a one semester course at the Polytechnic, *Communication and Critical Thinking* exposes learners to the skills of critical thinking, language communication, and information literacy. The course is taught *practically* throughout the semester and, in the course of this period, substantially gets learners to grips with critical thinking, language mastery, and information literacy. Suitable texts drawn from a wide range of disciplines and walks of life are often used. To attain the practical nature of the course and realize the force of creative and critical thinking, every aspect of content is often augmented by several oral and written exercises, role plays, discussions, problem-solving, case studies, project work, research, hands-on sessions/activities, and self-criticism.

By the end of the course, learners will not only have practically mastered various critical thinking skills and understood how to apply them to their disciplines, world of work, and lives; understood the use of common and various language features for clear, accurate, logical, and powerful communication; and appreciated and validated the importance of information literacy competencies; but will also have grasped the reality and use of life-long learning skills.

Throughout each week, the three aspects of the course are covered. The first of these, *Critical Thinking*, introduces the subject of critical thinking by a brief examination of its historical context and then goes on to give the distinction between Critical Thinking and Reasoning and ends by asking learners to participate in the fundamentals of Critical Thinking. Thereafter, this aspect of the course covers argument, evidence, fallacies, and value judgements. The second aspect of this course, *Information Literacy*, practically exposes students to the

conceptualization, gathering, evaluation, synthesization, and use of information; notemaking; summary writing; citations and style of presentation in books and journals; and the use of notes and the bibliography. The third aspect of the course, Language and Critical Thinking, treats the significance of effective language in Critical Thinking; reading strategies; the mastery of the Word; sentence structure; paragraph structure; and grammar and usage.

It is commendable that in the course of our work, even weak students manage to attain a degree of mastery and effective use of such language aspects as diction, syntax, punctuation, and spelling. In addition, they begin to appreciate the use of correct language in different contexts. They also master the importance of accuracy in the choice of language in such aspects of communication as the relationship between sender and receiver, and, how the resulting play of barriers to communication and feedback influence the force and achievement of creative and critical thinking.

6. Teaching and Learning Strategies

Some of the teaching and learning strategies that have helped us to equip students with competence and confidence in the use of the English Language include:

1. The use of the Socratic approach to teaching and Learning. It has been useful to demand that students give the correct answer before moving to the next issue. This has worked quite well. We have learnt, even in our infancy, that Critical Thinking thrives well in a context of unrelenting questioning. Through this approach, the students grasped such terms and concepts as probing, questioning, interpretation, conceptualizing, analysis, and passing judgement.
2. Use of local Namibian cases taken from real life and local newspapers. Such issues as HIV Aids, rape, child abuse, conflict management, poverty, and ignorance made useful subjects for discussion.
3. Use of student/pupil teachers. Asking one of the students to act as the Critical Thinker teacher of the day is useful. As we know, to “teach is to learn twice” or “to teach is to be automatically involved in learning...” This approach produced interesting results. It is reported, for example, that one day when I was away on duty, one student stood up and conducted the class for a full hour.
4. Use of cases that relate to the students’ job experiences, subject knowledge, or class excursions is instructive.
5. Critical Reading. In our case students read five novels in a semester and comment on them in writing. The nose-in-the-text analysis of prose, different

contexts, and different language features helps our students to master such issues as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. We noticed that obsessive reading and immersion into what is read could help students to gain skills in the mastery of language.

6. Use of Silence. This allows a lot of reflection. Simply get to the class and announce a controversy or a topic and keep quiet. Wait for some time and ask questions on the material given. The range of possibility and the response are great.

7. Word, Sentence, Paragraph, and discourse comprehension and analysis followed by critical writing.

8. Summary of key issues, note taking and making, extracting information from short critical texts.

7. Student Views on the Course

The involvement, enthusiasm, and range of students' views below indicates that our approaches to teaching Communication and Critical Thinking at the Polytechnic of Namibia are effective to a certain extent thus far. It is fitting that I allow the students themselves to speak.

1. Asked the question, "What did you like most about this course?", the answers were interesting to read. Some of them were:

- * ... Critical Thinking itself and especially the reading of books ... was... challenging yet exciting.
- * I liked the critical reading assignments because they improved my English.
- * I was a lazy reader especially of novels, but after reading novels [on this course] my brain was made wide open to think about the writer was trying to say. My problem solving was improved by using critical thinking skills.
- * Makes me aware how bad my English is. I now know what areas I should concentrate on to improve my reading, understanding, writing, and thinking critically.
- * Critical thinking by reading and summarizing novels.

2. To the June 2002 examination question, "What is the use of Critical Thinking to you?", there were equally such interesting answers as the following:

- * Critical Thinking improved my thinking and reasoning. Critical thinking helped me to look and react to instructions and arguments from a different perspective. Critical thinking made me develop a state of broadmindedness.
- * I think that Critical Thinking will play a vital role in my studies and later in my

career.... Where you use critical thinking you don't jump to conclusions and you listen and think before you react.

* Critical Thinking equips me with every day decision making. It helps me with my every day life. By now I know that I do not need to rush when making decisions. I have to wait and be calm and look into the variety of ideas, so that my decision can allow judgement to be made with certainty. It allows me to play around with my mind.

* Critical Thinking is very useful to me in a way that it has prepared me to be a person who not only thinks about my thinking, but be able to think critically on my thinking and evaluating why I'm thinking the way I do. To be able to give valid reasons to a given statement and give conclusions. To be able to give argument on both sides "fairmindedly".

3. To the June 2002 examination question, "How do Critical Thinkers often react to problems and controversial issues?" the following answer was interesting:

* Critical Thinkers regard problems and controversial issues as exciting challenges while uncritical thinkers regard problems and controversy as rubbish and the hardest part of life.

* Critical thinkers know that problems are part of life, so they won't hesitate to face problems and controversy. If you have never faced a problem in your life, you have never lived life at its best. "Err is human" by Alexander Pope.

4. The following selections from student critical analysis of prose texts (arising from their Critical Reading assignments) make relieving reading:

* I therefore conclude on the above mentioned activities under discussion that the objective of critical thinking was met. The exercise was important because it provided students with relevant applicable skills and knowledge of speaking and writing good English.

* I would not recommend this book for soft-hearted critical thinking students. It is very scary, worse than Stephen King's horror novels.

* I personally have taken an enormous amount from this book.

* I like the way the author communicated to the readers like using punctuation and good English.

* Shakespeare's English is very difficult to read and understand and there were a lot of characters involved, which was discouraging, but I managed to figure out what the play [*The Merchant of Venice*] was all about.

* I learnt a few things in Critical Reading. In reading novels I learned about the

use of tenses ... the way the author puts a sentence to me as a reader... In a novel you can gain a lot of reading experience... In future I will continue to read novels to upgrade my reading, writing, and speaking skills.

8. Re-statement of the argument/thesis

It is clear from the above picture that with concerted effort, even poor students can learn and learn to learn. The improvement within one semester is considerable. All we require is country, institutional, and individual efforts and collaboration.

It is clear that a programme that is sensitively framed or constructed will produce not only effective communicators, but also equally effective critical thinkers.

9. Recommendations

The way forward for critical thinking at the Polytechnic of Namibia will be attained by attending to the following recommendations:

1. There is need for a comprehensive philosophy of language, language teaching, and research in the Department of Communication.
2. The department should determine its specialisms and place in Namibia and in the SADC region by refining its offerings. In doing this, it should also determine the place of "Remedial English" in the department.
3. The department should refine the offerings of English in the department so that the Communication and Critical Thinking course can be taken by students who have completed module 4 or equivalent or a higher English content module in view of the need for competence in English and the expectations of the employer.
4. The Polytechnic should consider the offering of Critical Thinking for all staff and students.
5. The institution should enforce the idea and practice of English and Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum.
6. Practical workshops for school teachers on an ongoing basis should be encouraged. Creative and Critical Reading is one area that could be considered in these workshops.
7. The department should consider obligatory literature component (or extensive reading of good English texts).
8. The department should bring about the re-examination of the IGCSE/HIGCSE English Examination.
9. Interventions into the teaching of English in schools by the Polytechnic are necessary.

10. The department should introduce a Student Journal of Creative and Critical Thinking.

If these recommendations were considered there would be marked improvement in English Communication at the Polytechnic of Namibia. This would have some positive effects on the use of English in various contexts in Namibia as well. Above all, Critical Thinking would find a fertile ground here and would be an aid in the refinement of English Language at all levels of education in Namibia.

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