

## Chapter 68

# The Critical Thinking Component in Language Learning: Promoting Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*Determined to find a way to keep course content interesting and her students engaged, the author researched past and current approaches to teaching languages during an academic sabbatical. The outcome of her research was the realization that culture is the driving force that propels communication in language learning. Cultural inquiry engages language learners intellectually, and the classroom provides the social environment needed for the exchange of knowledge and ideas within a learning community. The author presents teacher candidates with a systematic approach for the creation of learning tasks that incorporate critical thinking. These tasks are, furthermore, classified according to the role they play in the learning process, whether exploratory, formative, or functional in nature.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses primarily on learning environments that incorporate critical thinking and promote the exchange of ideas through the creation of socially and intellectually engaging learning communities. The result is a more interesting and interactive learning experience.

While the concept of learning environments and learning communities is not new, there has been a renewed interest recently in the relationship between learning environments and student engagement (Allan & Clark, 2007; Day, 2009; Hoidn, 2017; Opdenakker & Minnaert, 2011), as well as the impact of learning communities on improved student retention (Otto, Evins, Pennington & Brinthaupt, 2015; Weiss, Visher, Weissman & Wathington, 2016).

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## ***The Critical Thinking Component in Language Learning***

In a *New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* Thomas and Brown illustrate how today's interplay between two major learning environments makes the new culture of learning so powerful:

*The new culture of learning actually comprises two elements. The first is a massive information network that provides almost unlimited access and resources to learn about anything. The second is a bounded and structured environment that allows for unlimited agency to build and experiment with things within those boundaries (2011, p. 19).*

After unsuccessful attempts at engaging learners through traditional language teaching methods during her long teaching career, the author concluded that learners responded better when afforded more freedom to explore material on their own. This simple change in strategy, according to the author, appeals to learners' innate curiosity. Once learners have had the opportunity to reflect and reason individually about any given topic, they are more apt to want to share their knowledge and ideas with others. The classroom, under the supervision of a trained educator, provides the safe environment needed for such an exchange.

On that note the author introduces in this chapter a variety of activities to help teacher candidates cultivate both, reflective autonomy and communication skills. Teacher candidates will practice creating learning communities that work. They will deepen their appreciation for the power educators can have to influence learners by consistently posing critical questions and trusting the students' ability to produce the desired results.

Critical thinking, according to the author, can and should be imbedded in any learning environment. In this chapter the author introduces teacher candidates to three types of learning activities according to their function. *Advance Organizers* address cognitive processes, the *Skill Building Activities* are more formative in nature (they meet specific learning objectives) and, finally, *Functional Tasks* are summative (they meet final outcomes). The goal for organizing activities in this manner is to keep learners engaged and moving towards improved proficiency. A common element in all learning activities presented is a critical thinking component.

The chapter ends with a review of appropriate assessment techniques that measure, among other competencies, critical thinking.

## **BACKGROUND**

The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards in Foreign Languages Education Project (NSFLEP), 2006) published by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) cites five interconnected goal areas in language learning programs: Communication, Cultures, Communities, Comparisons and Connections. However, in their 2011 study "A Decade of Foreign Language Standards: Impact, Influence, and Future Directions" Phillips and Abbott state that:

*Teachers without experience in the target culture found it difficult to teach and did not express a way to use the Culture Framework to learn more themselves (p. 11).*

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