

# **Critical thinking: what is it and how do we teach it in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs?**

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*Until the 1990s discussion of critical thinking has tended to focus on first language speaking contexts (eg. Ennis, 1962; McPeck, 1981). More recently however, especially as a result of increases in international student enrolments in the tertiary sector, what critical thinking means and how it might be taught have become highly debated questions for second language learning theorists and practitioners, not only in Australia, but also in the US and in the UK (eg. Benesch 1993a; Gieve, 1998). This paper provides an overview of a range of theoretical approaches to critical thinking followed by discussion of the implications of these perspectives for the theory and practice of tertiary level English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Finally, an example of a critical thinking classroom activity for EAP university students will be presented.*

## **Background**

Over the last ten years in particular there has been considerable growth in the number of international students enrolling in Australian universities. Some may have experienced many years of education with English as the medium of instruction (for example those from Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka) while others will be experiencing the presentation of discipline-specific subject material in English for the first time.

Differences in the amount of English language medium instruction notwithstanding, for many international students studying at an Australian university at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, this will be the first time that they will have experienced learning within a different cultural, social and economic environment. In order to successfully complete their studies these students are required to make many educational, linguistic, cultural, social and often economic adjustments (see for example Ballard and Clanchy, 1993). For a significant number of these students this may include encountering the term 'critical thinking' for the first time. For such students, the shift from viewing learning primarily as the work of memory and repetition of the words and ideas of one's lecturers' (see Pennycook 1996, for example) to conceptualising learning as a constantly evolving process of discovery, questioning and reformulating of hypotheses, can be an extremely disconcerting and confusing experience.

## **Approaches to critical thinking**

While educators in countries such as Australia, North America and the UK in particular, might place great importance on students' ability to think critically, the complexities of the term need to be acknowledged and very carefully addressed. Some educationalists have referred to it as "reflective skepticism" (McPeck, 1981) and "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis 1992, p. 22). Rather than attempting to define critical thinking as an explicit concept, skill or rational response that can be easily taught, Atkinson (1997) describes critical thinking as a kind of *social practice* that has its origins in culturally determined sets of behaviours that cannot easily be defined by its users (p. 72). Benesch however, refutes the notion of critical thinking as tacit and unquestioned social practice, describing it as "a democratic learning process examining power relations and social inequities" (1993a, p. 547).

## **Critical thinking in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP)**

Once connections are made between critical thinking, social practice and political action our understanding of the term in an EAP context and our roles as educators complexify. Viewing academic English language teaching/learning as a form of political practice is central to the work of educationalists such as Auerbach (1995), Benesch (1993a; 1993b; 1996) and Pennycook (1989; 1997). According to Auerbach (1995), instructors' pedagogical approaches and choices of teaching materials both influence and are influenced by the nature of the socioeconomic and political forces that exist beyond the classroom. To deny the political nature of language education, argues Pennycook (1989) can be equated with "articulating an ideological position in favour of the status quo" (p. 591).

The ideological positioning of EAP courses is an issue that Benesch (1993b; 1996) and Pennycook (1994; 1997) explore in some depth. If EAP programs simply aim to provide students with the academic language skills and content-knowledge required to perform successfully in their chosen disciplines, then such a 'pragmatic' approach, claims Benesch (1993b) constitutes "an accommodationist ideology, an endorsement of traditional academic teaching and of current power relations in academia and in society" (p.711). Both writers stress the need to adopt an approach to learning that encourages critical questioning not only of all pedagogical approaches and materials but also of the society of which instructors and students form a part.

### **Exploring critical thinking in the EAP classroom**

In pre-university bridging programs and university level EAP courses I have used writings by both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians on colonial and post-colonial Australian society to develop students' abilities to think critically. For example they may be asked to compare the kinds of values and opinions of the author of the statement "As other peoples made the transition from barbarism to civilization, chance protected the Aborigines from such (changes)" (Clark, 1986, p.9), with those of the writer who asserts that :

Governments and institutions need to see and to find ways of working with different knowledges. Part of this is beginning to see European-type knowledge as just one sort of knowledge among many (Yunupingu,1994, p. 119).

In-class discussions about such texts have resulted in students exploring the connections between what they are studying in the classroom to the broader social and political issues facing contemporary Australian society. For instance, in more recent times students have been keen to find out more about the current movement towards reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and to reflect on the roles they themselves might play in this process.

An extended activity I have used in a number of EAP workshops with undergraduate and postgraduate students to explore the notion of critical thinking runs as follows. After eliciting from students what they understand 'critical thinking' to mean in an academic context, I give them a working definition of the term by Gieve (1998), who states that for students to think critically at university level they need to:

examine the reasons for their actions, their beliefs, and their knowledge claims, requiring them to defend themselves and question themselves, their peers, their teachers, experts, and authoritative texts, both in class and in writing (p. 126).

I proceed by suggesting that such critical questioning can be applied to the work of others (as well as to our own) for instance, by carefully examining an author's assumptions and being aware of the type of publication a work appears in. Next, I would elicit or provide students with examples of the kinds of questions that might be important to pursue (eg. Who is the author? Are they male or female? What are their ethnic origins, their educational or political backgrounds? What kind of information is useful and/or important to find out about the author? In what kind of publication does the work appear? What does this reveal about the readership? What kind of perspective is the author taking in relation to the subject matter? What kind of language is used in the publication? When was the work published?). In addition, I would mention the importance of checking that the evidence or supporting information given substantiates the main points being made. I would then suggest that when students are researching a topic that sources are consulted that represent a variety of perspectives on the question being explored.

On completion of the above activity, students are divided into groups of four and asked to write a paragraph in response to the question: *Discuss the origins of Australia's Aborigines*. Students are told they will be give four different texts as possible resources and given the option of either attempting to synthesise the information found in the four text extracts, or focussing on the ideas presented in only one or two of the texts.

Next, the groups are given time to brainstorm any ideas or information they may already have on the topic. They are then given four text extracts from very different perspectives and source types (see Appendix 1) to read 'critically'. Extract one, by Manning Clark, has become a very controversial text with regard to its representation of indigenous Australians in terms akin to those used by nineteenth century believers in social Darwinism. Extracts two and four are by indigenous Australians. The former was selected because it highlights the difficulties inherent in attempting to formulate a clearcut response to the focus question within terms of reference that are meaningful from both indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives; the latter because it does not conform to a traditional academic text type: it is a written version of a 'Dreamtime' story that would have been originally delivered in spoken form. Extract three comes from a reference book which has turned periods of Australia's history into a series of easy-to-define events that are described in quite simple prose.

Once students have had time to read the text extracts, they are asked to write their paragraphs on overhead transparency sheets which they then present to the class. Appendix 2 shows four paragraphs written by undergraduate and postgraduate students who attended one of my pre-session workshops. Although these examples are few in number, they provide some insights into the kinds of issues raised by this class activity. (They also provide a rich source of material for follow-up sessions, for example on paraphrasing, synthesising and appropriate use of in-text citation conventions).

Firstly, most students seem to rely more on the Elder text (Extract 3) as the basis for their responses. Secondly, there is a tendency to attempt a clear-cut answer to the question posed. Example 4 is notable in that it does not do this. Although, once again, Elder is the only source cited, the group acknowledges that there is disagreement about the origins of the Aborigines and that more research into the topic may be required.

The next stage of the activity involves students orally evaluating the perspectives of the authors and the nature of the sources from which the extracts have been taken, followed by a discussion about their reasons for favouring the arguments found in certain extracts over those in others. Most comment that the Elder extract is easier to understand and

that the evidence used to support the claims made in this text is more substantial than that in the other texts. Extracts 1 and 2 (not surprisingly) seem to pose comprehension difficulties for many students, while Extract 4 tends to be dismissed as "only a story" and "not academic".

Finally, I present students with a sample response to the question posed that is designed to show how such disparate perspectives represented in the four text extracts might be synthesised within a single paragraph (see Appendix 3). We then discuss the importance of purpose and context in any assigned piece of academic writing, including for example, the role played by academic discipline in influencing the selection of appropriate sources and the pursuit of certain research directions. Students of Archaeology would be required to follow up on quite different resources to those studying Anthropology or Linguistics, for instance. We also discuss the implications of non-indigenous authors writing about issues concerning indigenous people and the need for the knowledge claims of the latter to be represented in forms of their own choosing.

### **Concluding comments**

In this paper I consider a number of different approaches to critical thinking in the context of teaching and learning English for academic purposes at university level. I suggest that for many international students who have studied in very different educational cultures to those found in Australia, that the need to develop the ability to 'think critically' may challenge the very foundations upon which their previous learning experiences have been based.

By approaching critical thinking as a form of social and political practice I highlight the interconnections between pedagogical processes and the realities of the worlds that lie beyond the confines of the classroom walls. Finally, I present a specific writing task for EAP students about the origins of Australia's indigenous people that aims to address ways in which a 'critical thinking' approach may assist students not only to complete their academic assignments effectively, but also to gain insight into some of the issues surrounding the politics of self-representation experienced by indigenous people in Australian society today.

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## Appendix 1: Selection of texts

### Extract 1

So far there have been two cultures in Australia – one Aboriginal and the other European. Like the Americas, Australia was probably first colonized by *homo sapiens*, ...during the last ice age...During the passage of time between the coming of the Aborigine just about thirty thousand years ago and the coming of the white man in 1788, the changes in the appearance of Australia were caused probably more by changes in climate than by human activity. For apart from fire, the stone implements he used for hunting and food gathering, and the rock paintings on which he portrayed his vision of the world, the Aborigine handed on to posterity few other memorials of his encounter with the weird and harsh land his people had occupied since time immemorial.  
(Clark, 1986, p. 9).

### Extract 2

Aboriginal being and history until now, the last period, has been dominated by *Anglo-Celts*. *The Time of the Dreaming*, is called *prehistory* and a whole theoretical structure has been erected with little recourse to the Aboriginal communities... Different scholars argue different things from the evidence they collect and often their accounts and theories seem more fantastic than the myths they seek to replace.  
(Narogin, 1990, p. 5).

### Extract 3

It has been long accepted that Aborigines arrived in Australia some 40,000 years ago. However, recent evidence has tended to dispute this and some experts put the date of arrival as early as 55,000 before present... For a long time archaeologists believed that the Aborigines simply walked across from the Malay Archipelago across to the Australian mainland. It is now known that this was not the case. Australia's first inhabitants arrived by sea, probably by raft or canoe. No one knows where they came from; theories about their origins range from the Indian subcontinent all the way across Asia to the islands of the Philippines.  
(Elder, 1988, p. 80).

### Extract 4

But here now you fullas.  
You come sit down by my  
Fire. Warm yourselves and I  
Will tell you the story of how  
This world began.

In the time of Alcheringa  
The land lay flat and cold.  
The world, she empty.  
The Rainbow Serpent, she  
Asleep under the ground  
With all the animal tribes in  
Her belly waiting to be born.....

Then she throw good spirit  
Biame high in the sky.....  
He jump high in the sky and  
Smile down on the land.  
The sky lit up from his smile  
And we, his children, saw  
Colour and shadow.  
(Noonuccal and Noonuccal, 1988, pp. 20-23).

## **Appendix 2: Students' paragraphs**

### **Example 1**

They came from South-East Asia because:

- \_ Australia is closest to South-East Asia
- \_ Their physical appearance is much like people in Indian subcontinent
- \_ Their population is mostly found in Northern Australia at the present time

### **Example 2**

In our opinion, the origins of Australia's Aborigines are probably from a part of South-East Asia as suggested in Extract 3. According to Elder (1988), there are theories stating that the early Aborigines arrived by sea from the Indian sub-continent or other parts across Asia including the islands of the Philippines.

### **Example 3**

Our notion of the origins of Australia's Aborigines is they first came to Australia as early as 55, 000 BP (acc. to extract 3) by raft or canoe from South East Asia and spread out throughout Australia (as mentioned by Elder, 1988)

### **Example 4**

So far scientists are still arguing about the origins of the aborigins. One thesis stated by Elder B (ed.) (1988) is that they possibly came from South-East Asia, by raft or canoes. He showed where Aborigines came from quite specifically. However, in regards to the way they immigrated, Elder, B just mentioned seatravel, and did not give any idea about other ways such as by land bridge between Asia and Australia continent before they were separated. Thus, this issue might require more research.

**Appendix 3: Sample paragraph**

There are a number of quite different versions about the origins of Australia's Aborigines. These versions reflect the particular perspectives or world-views of their authors. For example, Noonuccal and Noonuccal (1988: 20-23) describe how all people originate from the Rainbow Serpent during the "Time of the Dreaming" (Narogin, 1990: 5). Some historians, however, refer to archaeological findings to support claims that indigenous Australians arrived here between 30,000 (Clark, 1986: 9) and 55,000 years ago from the Indian subcontinent, Asia and the Philippines (Elder, 1988: 8). In order to address this topic comprehensively, research into the oral records of different Aboriginal communities also needs to be undertaken (Narogin, 1990: 5).