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## **Promoting Critical Thinking through Cultural Topics in Bangladeshi Tertiary EFL Context**

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### **Abstract**

*Promoting critical thinking among students has been a topic for extensive study for a long time. However, this is quite a new area of exploration and investigation in the Bangladeshi EFL context. This paper explores whether classroom activities on culture can work as effective incentives in promoting critical thinking in Bangladeshi tertiary level English language classes. Cultural topics were designed for the tertiary level English class and used accordingly for critical thinking in a class of 36 students in a private university of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Classwork and home assignments on different cultural topics were evaluated against a rubric of critical thinking, and at the end of the semester, an open-ended discussion-based interview was conducted. The gradual development of critical thinking among students was observed from the data gathered from both classes and interviews. Finally, the author presents implications for the EFL instructors, course designers, and book writers regarding the modifications required in the topics and teaching style to promote the development of critical thinking among the Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL students.*

***Keywords:** Critical thinking, Culture, Bangladeshi EFL students, tertiary level.*

### **Introduction**

In today's world, with all the advancements in communication and technology, thinking skills have become more significant in education than ever before. The sole idea of 'global village' entails tolerance, intercultural competence, and inter-community respect. With every technological step forward, critical careful evaluation has become more urgent. Critical thinking, as the name suggests, is reflecting critically on different aspects of a topic from many different points of view and angles. Paul and Elders (2002) define critical thinking as "the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: clearer, more accurate, more defensible" (p.316).

Amrous and Nejmaoui (2016) define critical thinking as:

being an intellectual activity of reasoning, critical thinking is the use of the cognitive skills of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information in order to get clear, precise, and consistent thinking.... Finally, it is the type of thinking used in decision-making and problem-solving. (p.144).

Siegel (1985) notes critical thinking as an “educational ideal” (p.71) and further states that critical thinking prepares a learner to be autonomous, self-sufficient, and responsible for his/her adult life and socio-cultural contexts which denotes that this is a skill significantly important for adult learners who are engaged in real-life problems; hence, this is an inevitably necessary skill to develop at tertiary educational contexts.

Ministry of Education of Bangladesh (2019) emphasizes that education needs to be “pragmatic, productive and creative with a view to bringing about changes” and that it should foster “tolerance of one another’s views and help develop life-oriented, realistic and positive attitude”. Although, there is no explicit mention of critical thinking in the 12 objectives of education, the components of critical thinking, as the ones mentioned above, can be found among them. However, in teaching, it is considered a new area of exploration in Bangladesh. It is even more so in the EFL context. Few studies have been conducted to evaluate the level of critical thinking of Bangladeshi EFL learners or to suggest ways or techniques to promote and improve critical thinking in English language classes.

For this reason, the author of the paper designed class materials for 36 students enrolled in a fundamental English language course in a private university in Bangladesh to practice and explore critical thinking. As these lessons were prepared for skill-based classes, it was possible to incorporate issues related to intercultural competence and cultural habits, biases, or practices due to the fluidity of topics to promote the four skills of English. The topics were contextualized and target culture topics were incorporated with native culture ones to enable students to analyze, compare-contrast, describe, and above all, explore culture from a critical point of view.

The author decided to use cultural topics like these have the potential to be used for debate, discussion, and reflection and will ensure spontaneous participation from students; thus, enhancing their motivation to work both in and out of the class which will not only ensure their continuous involvement and practice but also enable them to grow better at thinking critically.

## **Theoretical framework**

The author uses the revised version of Bloom’s Taxonomy by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) which is titled 21st century Bloom’s Taxonomy as the theoretical framework of this research. In this revised version, the six stages are as following:

Stage one: Remembering (instead of Knowledge) where students remember the topics learned

Stage two: Understanding (instead of comprehension) where students show a complete understanding of the concepts learned

Stage three: Applying (instead of Application) where students apply the concepts understood and recalled previously to new situations

Stage four: Analysing (instead of Analysis) where students analyse the small parts to understand the assumptions and grow the awareness towards patterns and theories

Stage five: Evaluation (instead of Synthesis) where students critically value something to provide opinions, recommendations or assessment

Stage six: Creating (instead of Evaluation) where students create new ideas by using the five previous stages together.

The rubric used was an adapted version of the ‘Depth of Reflection Rubric’ by McBride (2010). The following Table 1 shows the adapted rubric that was used to evaluate the students in this study-

**Table 1:**

***Rubric***

<b>Levels of rubric [adapted and abridged from McBride (2010)]</b>	<b>Name of the level</b>	<b>Actions evaluated</b>
1st-2nd level	(no name)	Only description or narration of events
3rd level	Technical Rationality	Describing/ labeling events with terminologies
4th level	Descriptive Rationality	Expressing personal perspective about a practice, product or perspective (3P)
5th level	Dialogic Reflection	Including multiple perspectives while describing a practice, product, or perspective (3P)
6th level	Critical Reflection	Showing changes in perspective or thinking; acknowledging the differences with respect and reason.

This rubric was personalized using Bloom’s Taxonomy. The first two stages in Bloom’s Taxonomy- Remembering and Understanding were conjoined and narrowed down into the activity of identifying the terminologies and the situations discussed in the class (the 3rd level in the rubric). This stage is titled ‘Technical Rationality’ which shows students’ awareness of the concepts discussed in the class and their ability to identify and label those with terminologies. Stage 3 Applying and Stage 4 Analyzing from Bloom’s Taxonomy were narrowed down to the activities of the 4th level of Descriptive Rationality and 5th level of Dialogic Reflection. These two stages were involved when students in the EFL classes incorporated multiple perspectives with their own interpretation of a situation in their classwork and homework. The Stage 5 Evaluation and the Stage 6 Creating are joined in the 6th level ‘Critical Reflection’ where students evaluate their present beliefs and create a new perception of their everyday realities. The rubric was adapted this way to make it appropriate for the 3rd semester

EFL students. The number of classes was another reason why the author needed to abridge the rubric since including all the levels and skills would be impractical for the class in question.

### **Critical thinking and its significance**

There have been a number of studies and debates on the importance of teaching critical thinking skills in the United States (US). For instance, Halpern & Riggio (2003) cite the National Commission on Excellence in Education which claims that the United States is in peril for being unable to teach thinking skills to its students which according to the commission is “the most essential component of education” (p. 1983). A substantial number of studies show that majority of the teachers, employers and general public in the US perceive critical thinking as one of the most important goals of education (DeAngelo, Hurtado, Pryor, Kelly, Santos, & Korn, 2009; Bok, 2006; Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), 2013; Northeastern University Survey, 2013)

Brookfield (1987) defines critical thinking with five primary themes which indicate that critical thinking entails innovation, productivity, and creativity in thinking. Brookfield (1987) further explains the main components of critical thinking among which the most important is recognizing and questioning the ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions. The other components are an awareness of the context and its influence on us, the application of multiple perspectives in our daily thinking, and lastly, ‘reflective skepticism’ which entails being dubious of any idea or fact which is strongly accepted and supported by the context in which the critical thinker is.

The definition by Paul and Elders (2002), which defines critical thinking as “the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking” (p.316) also points to the fact that critical thinking is a continuous conscious process; thus, is teachable and learnable with steady practice.

Critical thinking is, indeed, the most significant part of an education system irrespective of countries and communities. Multiple studies are demonstrating that students need critical thinking for real-world problem solving and to be more effective thinkers (Stein, Hynes, Redding, Harris, Tylka & Lisic, 2010; Bok, 2006; Halpern, 2001). However, in Bangladesh, critical thinking is still a quite new area of teaching and learning. Although this is a skill without which learners miss ‘the essential component of education’, there has been no government official study investigating the present level or scenario of critical thinking among Bangladeshi learners nor is it mentioned or emphasized explicitly in the educational objectives provided by the Ministry of Education in 2019. This condition largely suggests that without explicit teaching and emphasis on critical thinking, it is unlikely that Bangladeshi students would possess the competence of this skill. This situation indicates the importance of teaching critical thinking for enabling students to be better thinkers and able performers.

## **What is culture?**

Frank (2014) describes culture using a 3P model where the 3P's stand for 'Perspective', 'Practice' and 'Product'. The perspective stands for the thoughts, beliefs and values of members of a culture; practices stand for the ways these members connect, interact and share information with each other; and finally, products stand for all sorts of tangibles and intangibles created, distributed and inherited by the members (Frank, 2014). Frank's (2014) 3P division can be aided with Hall's (1976) analogy of 'cultural iceberg' in which the tip of the iceberg signifies the products of cultures which are readily visible or perceivable by the senses whereas the submerged part of the iceberg is the bigger, hidden and deeper part of the culture which embodies practices and perspectives that underlie every aspect of a culture.

Brooks (1969) divides culture into five types and the fourth type is titled 'patterns for living'. He defines the fourth type of culture as a model of living, acting and thinking for human being where the members are supposed to or "expected" to think, believe, say, do, eat, wear, pay, endure, resent, honor, laugh at, fight for, and worship, in typical situations' in a typical manner (Brooks, 1968).

## **Critical thinking and the relation of culture and language**

It is quite evident from the definitions that culture is an almost all-encompassing aspect of human life and language is the medium of expressing this culture. Several studies have demonstrated how language and communication portray not only the visible sides, but also the deeply rooted invisible sides of culture (Levinson, 2003; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Geng, 2010; Xiangyang, 2016). As culture is often embedded in our actions and thoughts, being aware of that actively needs practice and critical thinking is one way to develop this skill. In foreign language classes, foreign as well as the native culture of the learners can be good resources to exercise and improve critical thinking; thus, enabling learners to gain multi-fold benefits: the practice of the target language, being aware of the cultural bindings and above all, be a critical thinker which is a ubiquitous skill for continuous development of the self.

Martinez and Nino (2013) emphasized certain tasks that have the quality to enable students to exercise critical thinking, and they included topics related to socio-cultural issues like 'injustice, inequality, discrimination, manipulation, coercion, oppression, and exclusion, among others' (p.21). They further postulate that these issues make learners reflect, observe, examine, and posit solutions to the problem.

Lu (2013) investigates the teaching of critical thinking with intercultural topics in a Taiwanese Medical University and explores 'an intercultural approach, in which a 'Self' encounters an 'Other', and an understanding of 'the difference' between them emerges (p.8).' Brookfield (1987) argues that adult behavior, norms, values and beliefs change from culture to culture and while we take these norms and traditions for granted in our childhood, we start to question and analyze these with adulthood and the emerging critical sense with it. He further emphasized on learning about oneself labeling it as

the most significant learning which enables one to question those culturally embedded ideas that control and guide one's life. Thus, it is evident that Brookfield focused on the utilization of critical thinking in understanding and analyzing culture which, according to him, provides multiple opportunities to exercise critical thinking. Guo (2013) examines how deep culture influences thinking style and shapes or determines critical thinking in the Chinese EFL context.

There are many studies where researchers used critical thinking as a tool to teach different skills of English. For example, Bataineh & Alqatnani (2017) investigate the role of critical thinking maps to promote critical reading in Jordanian EFL classes. Xu (2011) also formulated a model for applying critical thinking to teach English reading in EFL classes. Mehta and Al-Mahrouqi (2014) explore how to teach critical thinking with contextualized discussions and subsequent writing. Asraf, Ahmed, and Eng (2018) described how guided and focused free-writing in the pre-writing stage can foster critical thinking and enable students to formulate ideas more proficiently.

This considerable amount of works linking critical thinking, culture, and ESL/EFL confirms that it is high time to conduct research like this in Bangladesh as well. To that end, this research work was undertaken to explore critical thinking in tertiary language classes.

## **Methodology**

This article follows a qualitative method. The research is conducted on 36 Bangladeshi tertiary-level 3rd semester students of the course 'ENG 102- Fundamentals of English-I' in a private university of Bangladesh. For data triangulation, multiple instruments were used: lesson-plans to promote critical thinking in-class activities and a semester-end focus group interview.

## **Sample**

The author conducted a purposive sampling to choose this course (ENG 102) as these students have completed the Essential English (ELL 099) and Basic English (ENG 101) courses before appearing for this course and now on an average, hold a quite homogenous and better competence (not all though) than the students of the two previously mentioned courses. There were 20 male and 16 female students all of whom are learning English as a foreign language and they are aged between 19-21 years. The sample size was kept small intentionally to gather insightful data and to conduct a rigorous study (Creswell, 2015, p. 208).

At the beginning of the semester, they were informed about the author's intention of conducting this research with adequate information and the fact that the author respected their right to not take part in it. It was also clarified that students who opt out would still have to take part in the classwork and homework designed for this research but those would be treated as regular classwork and not as the data for the research. With this knowledge, all 36 participants agreed to take part in the study and agreed

to be recorded without explicit mention of their actual names. Around the end of the semester, interviews were conducted with 15 students who volunteered to participate.

### **Instrument: The lesson plans and classes**

There were 22 classes in the selected semester among which critical thinking is utilized in 10 classes.

In the first class, students were familiarized with the notions of culture and critical thinking. There were lessons on the 3p model of culture, superstitions, stereotypes and description vs. assumption. They were familiarized with the rubric about to be used to assess their performance. It was imparted precisely to students with examples that they need to describe events with terminologies, show their own as well as multiple perspectives and at the end of the work, reflect on the total process and try to find changes (if any) in their previously held beliefs or perspectives.

These concepts were used as topics for brainstorming, writing, sharing an opinion, discussion, presentation, and debate in these classes. There were take-home assignments as well. For example, in 'Descriptive Writing' class, students, in groups of 4-5, performed a guided analysis and presentation on a 3P model of culture of the university they are studying and the take-home assignment was to describe a 3P model of culture of their own homes.

Cultural bumps and intercultural competence were utilized in the 'narrative paragraph' class where one incident of conflict was narrated by each student from two perspectives: one his/her own and the other - of the person/s with whom she/he had the conflict. In this case, the micro-intercultural context was the focus. Superstition and stereotypes were incorporated in both listening and writing tasks. Students wrote 'opinion paragraphs' on these two notions where both of these topics promoted debates and discussions in the class. On superstition, they watched two videos on Indian and American superstitious practices and utilized the information to write a compare-contrast paragraph. At the end of the class, some of them shared their experiences of being compelled by various factors to abide by superstitious practices despite their disbelief.

A similar lesson was planned with 'assumption versus description' class. Students were shown pictures and were asked to describe those. Students, while describing, included plenty of assumptions about the persons or places in the pictures that were identified later and were used to direct attention towards the conjectured assumptions surrounding us.

The lesson in a narrative writing class and the lesson of using pictures to test assumption- these two ideas were adopted and contextualized from an online course the author took in 2017 titled "Integrating Critical Thinking Skills into the Exploration of Culture in an EFL Setting" which was jointly organized by American English E-Teaching Program of the U.S. Department of State, FHI 360, and World Learning.

## **The Interview**

The interviews comprised of three questions which were open-ended and discussion-based. It was a focus-group interview with three groups, each comprising of 5 students. The author followed the approach of the focus group as it yields detailed information from all the participants and it is one of the best instruments to gather shared or collaborative information from similar participants such as students from the same class (Creswell, 2015, p. 217). Students were informed in the class about the interview and about voluntary participation. An appointment was made for each group for the focus-group interview. With due permission, their responses were recorded. Students of the first group were labeled as P1 to P5, the second group as P6 to P10, and the third group as P11 to P15. Questions for the focused group interview were:

- 1) How would you describe these classes in terms of content and class-work/home-work? Can you share your opinion?
- 2) Have you learned anything about your way of thinking and interpreting that shocked/surprised you? If it is so, can you share that with us?
- 3) Do you think these lessons changed your thinking in ways? If yes, how?

They used both Bangla and English while replying and frequent code-switching and code-mixing occurred. For this reason, those parts were translated into English while transcribing.

## **Findings**

The findings section is divided into two subsections to provide the information gathered through the two instruments: the course work (classwork, homework, etc.) and the focus group interview.

### **Findings from the classes**

The classwork and homework findings are presented below in separate sub-sections according to the topics utilized to promote critical thinking.

#### ***Classes on the 3P Model of culture***

The 'Descriptive Paragraph' on the 3p model of culture resulted in new insights for my students. One such example would be a paragraph from one student (S25) who wrote about a bronze spoon used every day in his house as a token of good luck and prosperity. Before this assignment on 3P Model, he claimed that he was unaware of this 'metaphysical or supernatural' quality of this spoon which is believed by most of his family members although he used it every day at the dining table. While presenting this, he also shared his own disbelief in such things but acknowledged that he would rather keep this spoon in the house than remove it. Findings from the written pieces and presentation show fulfillment of the following aspects of the rubric:



**Table 2***The Findings from 3P lesson*

Levels	Level name	Findings
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Technical Rationality	Students used terminologies of 3P: labeled actions at home and university as Cultural Practice, tangibles, and intangibles as Cultural Products and Cultural Perspectives
4 <sup>th</sup>	Descriptive Rationality	Students shared their own perspective behind the 3P's of their home.
5 <sup>th</sup>	Dialogic Reflection	Students brought in their family members' perspectives while explaining 3P and showed how their own perspectives sometimes differ from that of their families. They also talked about new realizations that occurred due to the labeling of the 3Ps.
6 <sup>th</sup>	Critical Reflection	Not found

**Classes on the cultural conflicts**

The narrative paragraph class on cultural bumps was deliberately designed to bring out the skill of utilizing multiple perspectives while thinking and forming opinions or judgments. Moreover, it also helped students to explore alternatives to what is already established. Here the classwork required them to describe a moment of conflict from the perspectives of both the parties involved.

S15 shared his argument with another man in the public bus regarding vacating his (man 2) seat for one old man and formulated the second man's viewpoint this way-

To him, the idea may be first come, first serve or he might have been very exhausted, well, he did look exhausted and cranky. It is possible, that he behaved the way he did because of how hot the day was. At that time, it felt very rude and inhuman. But I never thought from his point of view

The conflicts ranged from small conflicts at home to chaotic ones with strangers. This lesson resulted in the following findings:

**Table 3***Findings from Cultural Bump lesson*

Levels	Level name	Findings
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Technical Rationality	Students utilized terminologies like 'micro-culture', 'contextual/cultural differences' and 'cultural bumps and intercultural competence'.
4 <sup>th</sup>	Descriptive Rationality	Students described their 'version' of the story and explained their perspective

5 <sup>th</sup>	Dialogic Reflection	Here students tried to explore an alternative version of their story. Hence, they attempted to incorporate the perspective of the other person/s involved in the conflict. They ventured to find out what the other person/s found wrong in the situation and thus, presented a different construction of the situation
6 <sup>th</sup>	Critical Reflection	Students remarked about a changed understanding of the situation; shared that the cultural bumps can be reduced with intercultural understanding which can be fostered by being tolerant and by considering the alternative perspectives. Some of them also cautioned against the practice of judging a story/person from partial details.

***Classes on bias, prejudice, and assumptions***

The ‘Opinion paragraphs’ brought out some of the frequently found stereotypes and superstitions in our society. Two such stereotypes that the majority talked about are the gender-discriminatory stereotypes and the stereotyped identity of private university students in Bangladesh where public universities are the most coveted, admired and valued. Students tried to incorporate multiple perspectives while describing these incidents with terminologies and thus, attempted to evaluate the situation critically.

**Table 4**

***Findings from Stereotype lesson***

Levels	Level name	Findings
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Technical Rationality	Students labeled practices and perspectives as Stereotypes.
4 <sup>th</sup>	Descriptive Rationality	Students shared their own experiences of both stereotyping and being stereotyped.
5 <sup>th</sup>	Dialogic Reflection	They tried to bring the perspective of the prejudiced people and also, that of stereotyped people and the social consequences of such practice.
6 <sup>th</sup>	Critical Reflection	A few students expressed their cognizance of the situations when they stereotyped someone ‘just for fun’ and their realization of how that may have affected the victims negatively.

The compare-contrast writing on ‘superstitions’ and ‘assumption versus description’ sheds light on our everyday life as one quotation from S15’s paragraph shows: ‘Some superstitions are like a religion to the followers.’ Students shared their confusions regarding situations when they felt compelled to be part of a superstitious practice mainly because of their families. They spoke about the frustration and despair that followed from the tendency of blindly following many absurd/immoral practices without questioning it. The video (The New York Times, 2016) on Indian superstition of labeling women as witches and murdering them for the disguised intention of owning

their property provided one such example to them. In student11’s word:

‘According to me, superstition is at times just a lame excuse to capture property or land rights. Surprisingly, not even the police always help the victims in such a situation.’

The lesson on ‘assumption versus description’ followed interesting findings from the class. After realizing the number of assumptions and opinions mixed with fact, the first association that students made was with that of ‘yellow journalism’ found in online news portals or in social media which finds its way due to the lack of critical thinking among the readers.

Evaluation of the findings from these two lessons is presented below:

**Table 5**

*Findings from Superstition and Assumption vs. Description lessons*

<b>Levels</b>	<b>Level name</b>	<b>Findings</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Technical Rationality	Students used terminologies while describing actions and beliefs as Superstitions or Assumptions
4 <sup>th</sup>	Descriptive Rationality	Students expressed their opinions regarding superstitious practices and beliefs they know of or experienced themselves and how compelling the social pressure to conform to it can be. Students also identified different assumptions they make frequently.
5 <sup>th</sup>	Dialogic Reflection	They tried to bring the perspectives of the victims and discussed the harms inflicted on them. They also tried to bring the perspectives and deliberation of the people who formulate such practices intentionally. Additionally, students talked about the social consequence of assumption and amalgamation of facts and opinions.
6 <sup>th</sup>	Critical Reflection	Students shared their realization about the extent of opinion/assumption mixed in their description which, according to most of them, is a completely new finding. This is one of the note worthiest parts where Critical Reflection was observed among students.

Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 present four levels of critical thinking measured via the rubric in students’ class-work and homework which demonstrate a gradual development of the skills of critical thinking. The initial phase of critical thinking is found in students’ ability to identify the situations and to label those with terminologies introduced to them. Gradually, the practice improved their ‘Dialogic reflection’ which enabled them to bring alternative perspectives with their own to a situation and consequently, fostered tolerance and empathy. Finally, with further practice, students showed the final stage- ‘Critical Reflection’ in their speech and writing where they voiced their changed understanding and reasoning behind the situations in question. They acknowledged

the differences in their thoughts and (mis)behavior and talked about the importance of humane qualities to foster a peaceful world.

## **Findings from interview**

### ***Responses from the first question***

As is mentioned in the methodology part, my first question was-“How would you describe these classes in terms of the content (class-work/homework)? Can you share your opinion?”

All the participants here shared their perception of these classes and described the activities they learned to do. Regarding the content of the class, some of the most significant findings are connected with students’ expectations, satisfaction, and awareness. The replies demonstrated students’ satisfaction in learning both English skills and critical thinking from these lessons. Learning about their own thinking style was a surprising experience for them which they expressed recurrently throughout the study. This frequently emphasized observation demonstrated the latest growth of awareness regarding critical thinking among students.

According to P2-

We learned how to open up our minds, how to think critically and do brainstorming, how to gather knowledge; ..... We should bring critical thinking in all stages as when we critically think, we think about all the aspects. When we brainstorm we look at things from many different angles.

While talking about the activities, all 15 participants echoed their writing once again. They discussed the conflicts and biased discourse that they are part of and further opined that these classes have taught them more than English as they have learned to evaluate, think, weigh and reflect on the actions and words surrounding them.

Thus, interview responses, in general, here suggested that students found these topics to be different and helpful in multiple ways and better suited to practice the four English skills than the regular, usually de-contextualized topics.

### ***Responses from the second question***

The second question was, “Have you learned anything about your way of thinking and interpreting that surprised you? If it is so, can you share that with us?”- Almost all of them replied in the affirmative while answering the second question. For most of them, the most surprising lesson was the one with assumption and description lesson with pictures. That their description consisted of a good number of assumptions was a surprising yet interesting revelation for many of them. As P3 remarks, ‘It was a very interesting and new experience for me to realize that my thinking included such assumptions. It made me wonder about how often I do this without even realizing that.’ Replies from other students also had similar emphasis.

A second theme that surfaced from students is that they, at times, felt perplexed to

realize that they can be condemnatory subconsciously and confuse facts with opinions without possessing a slight cognizance regarding that. P13 shared her disappointment- 'I thought I am an open-minded prejudice-free individual which I am so not'.

A similar kind of reaction emerged with a cultural bump and intercultural competence lessons. The majority of the participants remarked that in conflicts they very seldom attempted to consider the other person's perspective. According to P5, 'this lesson taught me a way to be more considerate and tolerant, and I think, thinking critically in situations with conflicts or misunderstandings can help us understand others better and avoid cultural bumps.' The majority of the students opined that they are not accustomed to evaluating a situation, especially that of a conflict from the other party's perspective. They, further, shared that they believe it can also help them in being less judgmental and biased, thus, more respectful and tolerant of others' practice and perspective.

### *Responses from the third question*

Finally, all of the participants replied in the affirmative while answering the third question which asked them whether these classes have brought any change in their thinking style. The answers were congruent with those of question 2. They referred back to their realizations and awareness of these presumptions they hold. The theme here points towards students emerging awareness of their previous unsuspecting and unobservant thinking manner and thus, leads to the suggestion that students felt more in control of their thinking manner and more empowered with the newly learned skill of critical thinking. They concluded that they learned how to be more critical of the decisions they make, opinions, or judgments they form, or beliefs they hold. Students seemed very interested and enthusiastic in sharing these experiences and realizations.

### **Discussion**

The classroom output findings show a gradual development of critical thinking skills among students in four layers- firstly, they learned to differentiate and identify the situations used in the lessons in everyday life language use which shows their 'technical rationality'. Secondly, they learned to provide well-thought opinions and counter opinions on those events which align with the 4<sup>th</sup> level of the rubric - 'descriptive rationality'. Thirdly, they also tried to bring multiple perspectives to a situation that echoes the skill of 'dialogic reflection', and finally, they attempted to find changes in their previously hold beliefs which is the final level called 'critical reflection'. The rubric and the checklist used for each student's assignments showed a clear picture of this development.

The interview presents students' perspectives more clearly. They contrasted these contextualized, culture-based authentic lessons against the traditional lessons found in the various EFL books. They shared their appreciation and enthusiasm to work with topics that not only develop language skills, but also higher-order thinking skills. One important point here is that these lessons were definitely part of the course and hence, students were technically bound to do the assignments. However, being an

EFL teacher for three years, the author could quite easily differentiate between the interesting authentic information found in the student output from the monotonous write-ups mostly found in the assignments that students feel compelled to finish. The positive classroom attitude, the higher frequency, and willingness to share their opinions in the sessions, and the outspoken attitude with which even the meek students acknowledged their old prejudices and judgments presented a highly energized and engaged classroom.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> interview answers directed to mainly three findings regarding students' perception. The changes that students believe these lessons have induced in their thinking style are- firstly, an awareness of the assumptions in their description or opinion, greater control over their thinking which previously, according to most of them, they lacked, and finally, an ability to critically evaluate their as well as others' beliefs and decisions.

Although these 'changes' are provided by students explicitly which caution us against biased responses, their classwork and take-home assignments reiterated these responses and thus, support the findings to be authentic and not biased to a large extent.

From the above discussion, it can be posited that topics that are sensitive to biases and problems regarding culture, gender and race, should be the substitutes of the regular surface-culture-level lessons found in the international text-books of EFL teaching in Bangladesh. As we are yet to cross the threshold of critical thinking skills in our university EFL context, our EFL stakeholders must look into this domain.

## **Limitations**

As already mentioned in the findings section, there is a chance that students' responses were biased to provide the 'expected' response as the researcher was their teacher as well. However, data triangulation through the classroom findings that were evaluated with the rubric reduces this chance of having solely biased responses from the students.

Another limitation of this study is the various constraints present. There were only 10 lessons on critical thinking. Due to time constraints, it wasn't possible to continue with these lessons for the whole semester. Critical thinking, being a process, (Debelo & Fang, 2008; Brookfield, 1987) needs much practice which couldn't be fostered as needed due to the above-mentioned problems.

## **Conclusion and recommendation**

As is pointed out earlier in the paper that this is one of the inceptive works on critical thinking in the Bangladeshi tertiary EFL context, the author believes that Bangladeshi learners have a long way to go before being apt in critical thinking. This situation calls out fellow Bangladeshi EFL researchers to carry out further critical thinking researches and to formulate plans and strategies to develop more critical thinkers in Bangladeshi universities.

The findings from this study demonstrate that cultural topics are effective to bring out critical thinking from learners who are almost at the beginners' level of this skill. These issues make students question pre-hold beliefs and ideas, thus, bringing changes in their thinking and potentially making them more tolerant, considerate, and less prejudiced. Utilizing these topics also promotes spontaneous development of the four skills of English as more engagement means more participation and more participation translates into more practice of the four English language skills. It is also crucial for the instructors to 'design tasks in which the learners can bring forward their knowledge and expertise' (Báez, 2009, p. 74). In the Bangladeshi EFL context, this is a new development; hence, it is pertinent that instructors design the lessons keeping students' interest and ability in mind. Baez (2009) also emphasizes 'thought-provoking feedback' in the shape of questions and statements (p. 74) to help students guide towards the desired outcome.

Thus, this study has implications for EFL instructors as instructing students on English without enabling them to participate in an international domain successfully would be a futile wastage of time and resources. To ensure this participation and membership of a global village, critical thinking is imperative. The implication for the national education board, course designers and independent EFL textbook writers are massive too as we need a thorough revision of the EFL textbooks to incorporate contextualized topics that address such issues that promote and better the level of critical thinking among our students. Consequently, stakeholders are invited to consider the importance of the above-mentioned changes in the course-packs prepared for EFL contexts, especially in the tertiary contexts.

To conclude, the guided approach that the author adopted here can be fruitful if utilized properly. Scaffolding with its various techniques such as confirmation checks, clarification requests, reformulations, summaries of students' contributions, and completions, may be utilized in class (Baez, 2009). Educators need to revise techniques to promote language competence while developing criticality among learners. Utilizing pressing socio-cultural issues to practice the skills of English shows a higher probability of fostering the growth of critical thinking since it allows learners to examine and analyze the normalized malpractices and faulty perspectives in society; thus enabling them to make informed decisions and to face the challenges of the real-world as an autonomous, self-sustaining human being.

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