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TEACHING CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ACADEMIC TEXTS IN NON-LINGUISTIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

In the article, the author analyses the results of the study undertaken in a non-linguistic institute where the students, after completing their special course of study involving the application of skills in critical analysis of academic writing, were asked a number of questions for evaluating both the course itself and their newly acquired skills, in particular: 1) What is critical analysis/critical evaluation of a writing (a text)? 2) What did you find difficult about doing your critical analysis/critical evaluation of a writing (a text)? 3) What do you think is the most important thing in completing the special course 'Academic Writing'? 4) Do you think your acquired critical analysis and evaluation skills may be useful for your future professional activity? 5) What would you recommend to change or add in the Academic Writing course programme? After summarising the results of the study, the author concludes that special courses aimed at the development of skills in critical analysis and critical evaluation of academic texts should be offered both in Bachelor's and in Master's programmes, as well as in postgraduate studies. The author also gives a number of recommendations for overcoming the difficulties that are likely to be encountered by the students in completing the course.

1. Introduction

Today's super-fast-paced world, while filling the space around a person with rapidly changing information, and hence forcing to adapt to the changes and also to think about the consequences of such changes, challenges a person to develop skills in critical thinking, critical analysis and evaluation of different developments in today's reality. Without such skills, a modern person is very unlikely to become successful in his or her chosen profession and be marketable in the labour market.

A great role in the development of critical analysis/evaluation skills is played by all kinds of education institutions, the major part in this process being, however, played by higher education providers. According to Halpern (2000), "education, designed for the future, should be based on two inseparable principles: the ability to quickly navigate the rapidly growing flow of information and find the right facts about the objects of interest; and the ability to interpret and apply the information" (p. 20). Indeed, the higher education system today is and will be undergoing fundamental changes, transforming students from passive learners acquiring information from their teacher or from the teacher's chosen sources, into specialists who are capable to find and select necessary information on their own. To do so, students need skills and abilities to think critically, analyse and evaluate information.

The term 'critical thinking' is defined in the works of philosopher Dewey (1997) as "active, persistent, careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 16). Halpern (2000) understands critical thinking as "the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions" (p. 11), with the use of such specific knowledge and skills that are required in the particular situation for its effective solving.

The attributes of critical thinking are defined by Klooster (2005) in 'What is critical thinking?'. They are: independence, i.e. individual nature of critical thinking; considering information as the starting point of critical thinking, not the end point; aiming at answering questions and solving problems arising out of a person's own interests and needs; seeking reasoned arguments; and considering critical thinking as a social process.

Critical thinking skills are highly appreciated in different spheres of professional activities. Ahuna et al. (2014) indicate that critical thinking skills are necessary for success in the modern workplace. This is in line with Dimitru (2017) who says that critical thinking dispositions are much valued by the business world and organizations. Nold (2017) incorporated special cognitive tasks encouraging critical thinking in three business courses. Melles (2009) describes qualitative feedback from teaching critical appraisal skills to postgraduate engineering students.

Critical thinking has also been and continues to be in the focus of attention of many Russian scientists. For example, Zagashev and Zair-Bek (2003) take the view that critical thinking is "reasonable focused reflective thinking in the process of acquiring one's own knowledge that includes the search for ways of efficient problem-solving, analysis and synthesis, evaluation of information – both one's own and that of other people, and finding useful aspects" (p. 31).

Popkov and Korzhuyev (2004) define critical thinking as comprehension by a person of his or her actions, such reflection on these actions in which a person becomes fully and clearly aware of what and in

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what way he or she is doing, in other words a person realizes the patterns and rules which govern these actions.

2. Problem Statement

Critical thinking is necessary at every stage of the learning process but, above all, it is necessary during analysing, comparing, generalizing, contrasting and, finally, summarising and evaluating the results. "Exercising critical thinking and, consequently, its development is practicable, to a certain extent, at every stage, anywhere where there is an alternative: during the analysis of a problematic situation (analysis requires critical attitude); in verbal formulation of a problem; in hypothesizing, as long as critical thinking is linked to proving and disproving, affirmation and denial' (Plotnikova, 2015, p. 9).

According to Pierce (2004), teachers who want to develop their students' critical thinking skills should improve students' metacognitive abilities, use effective questioning strategies, design thought provoking tasks, and create special classroom environment that promotes speculative thinking. Tsiplakides (2011) considers that in order to promote critical thinking teachers "should encourage students to make inferences, … to think intuitively and spontaneously, and use inquiry-discovery teaching techniques, should also encourage students to make educated guesses (based on the evidence, data and information they have available" (p. 83).

Development of skills and abilities in critical thinking, critical analysis and evaluation is a long process requiring that the teaching staff had not only knowledge in this field, but also the mastery of transferring this knowledge to students for them to be able to use the acquired knowledge and skills in practice. A European review on critical thinking educational practices in higher education institutions (2018) covers the most used strategies in fostering critical thinking and detects different difficulties in relation to assessing students' critical thinking progression. R. Ennis describes two basic teaching methods for promoting critical thinking, the Lecture-Discussion Teaching and the Problem-Based Learning which contrast with each other (Ennis, 2016). Changwong et al. (2018) tried to conceptualize a learning management model of the factors important for the enhancement of development and evaluating critical thinking skills, they called this *PUCSC* Model (*P*reparation for learning management, *U*nderstanding and practice, *C*ooperative solutions, *S*haring new knowledge, *C*reation of new knowledge).

In order to monitor the progress of students' critical skills, to develop, improve and rationalize teaching strategies teachers should know the feedback and related issues from their students. This can result in creating new techniques, new approaches to teaching and evaluation of critical thinking and critical appraisal skills.

3. Research Questions

Let us focus our attention on the chapter 'The review of literature in research subject', which directly requires the use of skills in critical analysis and critical evaluation of writings read by the students on the research topic.

In the course of the study the students had to answer five questions:

1.What is critical analysis/critical evaluation of a writing (a text)?

2. What did you find difficult about doing your critical analysis/critical evaluation of a writing (a text)?

3. What do you think is the most important thing in completing the Academic Writing course?

4. Do you think your acquired skills in critical analysis and evaluation may be useful for your future professional activity?

5. What would you recommend to change or add in the Academic Writing course program?

4. Purpose of the Study

In this article the author attempts to summarise the results of the study undertaken in one of the higher education institutions in Moscow, where the students in their final year of Bachelor's degree tuition, after completing the Academic Writing course, were pre-defending their thesis in English language for the following specializations: Logistics and Supply Chain Management (23 students), Communication Technologies and Communication Systems (25 students), Management (21 students). They had to make an overview of their thesis in English, including its every chapter: the review of literature in research subject, methodology, research subject and materials, conclusions, etc.

5. Research Methods

For the purpose of the study the author employed the student survey method.

6. Findings

When answering **the first question**, the students had to choose one out of six suggested definitions which, in their opinion, was the closest to their understanding of critical analysis/critical evaluation of a writing (a text). The following answers were received:

- objective evaluation of all research stages described in the text with the possibility to use it in one's future works (supported by 52% of the respondents);
- development of the criteria for the evaluation of the text and the evaluation of the writing based on the developed criteria (23%);
- understanding main ideas expressed by the author (11%);
- evaluation of the author's conclusions and determining the relevance of the writing for further development of the research topic (8%);
- comparing and contrasting conclusions in several writings with the same research topic (5%);
- evaluation of the author's methodology (1%).

When answering **the second question**, the students had to prioritise the suggested answers in descending order of difficulty. The results were the following:

- the biggest difficulty for the students was to compare and contrast the ideas from several of the analysed works (63% of the students chose this answer as specifying their biggest problem during analysis/evaluation of a text);

- difficulty in expressing their point of view because of insufficient knowledge about the research subject (this caused difficulties for 15% of the students);
- difficulty in summarising the main ideas of the analysed writing/text was encountered by 11% of the students;
- difficulty in the text rephrasing was encountered by 7% of the students;
- difficulty to express their thoughts in English was mentioned by 4 % of the students.

When answering the third question, the students defined their priorities in the Academic Writing course in the following way:

1. develop skills in making literature review when writing a research article;
2. develop basic skills in writing a research article in English;
3. improve academic English.

When answering **the fourth question**, the students first were requested to write whether they intended to continue their studies for Master's degree (and, possibly, postgraduate degree), and then they were supposed to answer the question itself. The analysis of the answers given by those students who intended to continue their studies for Master's degree (postgraduates studies) (their percentage was 81%) showed that 98% of such students confirmed that the skills in critical analysis/evaluation of an academic writing (a text) were necessary and that they would like to develop such skills in future. 2% of the students gave no answer to this question. The students who didn't plan to continue their studies for Master's degree (postgraduate studies) (they made up 19%) gave their answers as follows:

- 38% think that the acquired skills in critical analysis/evaluation of an academic writing (a text) are useful for their future work;
- 27% do not consider these skills as useful;
- 26% think that these skills are not useful for their work but they are useful for their overall personal development;
- 9% didn't provide their opinion.

For the **fifth question** the students were not suggested any response options, so they had to give their own answer. The bigger part of the students were satisfied with the course programme and suggested no changes or improvements (79%), 18% of the students would like to have more academic hours for this course, 2% of the students gave no answer, whereas 1% suggested that the course should be transferred from Bachelor's to Master's programme.

7. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Academic Writing course which is aimed at the development of skills in critical analysis/evaluation of an academic writing (a text) in English was seen and understood by all respondents from among the higher education graduates in accordance with the suggested programme; the majority of the graduates consider this course useful both for their future studies

and for application in their future profession. It would be desirable to develop, in future studies, recommendations for practical application of the course for those students who are not going to continue their studies for Master's degree (postgraduate degree);

2. The lecturers in Academic Writing should focus their attention on the difficulties described in the article and choose such system of practical tasks that would help to eliminate these difficulties, with special attention given to comparative analysis and contrastive analysis of several works causing the biggest difficulty for the majority of the students.

3. The best result of the course could be offering the students an opportunity to have their articles in English published in the Students' Collection of Research Papers.

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