

David Byrne and Mark Heffernan

talk about critical thinking and student-led research.

A hhhhh, critical thinking. This is a big one for us. When we first started teaching, we both began with general English and at the time (too many moons ago to bother counting), critical thinking didn't feature heavily. The focus was more about checking comprehension. In fact our first encounter was probably when we moved into exam teaching and encountered our first IELTS books. One of our favourite had a page each unit entirely dedicated to criticality, which led us to a question: why are we so quick to adopt good practice in an exam class, leaving general English to follow years later? And our next question: has general English really caught up?

These days critical thinking is a term that gets thrown around a lot. There are very few courses or coursebooks that don't mention it as a focus. We know it's important, but are we doing enough? Is a page per unit enough? Well, if you're not new to our column, you may have heard us mention our approach of 'little and often'. Our approach to critical thinking is to drop it into any reading or listening lesson . . . you guessed it . . . little and often.

Before we explore some ideas for weaving it into your lessons, let's unpack what we mean by critical thinking. Here, we decided to offer our individual definitions:

- **Mark:** 'Thinking that isn't unchallenged, that then leads to a more complete understanding of the topic and hopefully to the student themselves having a more complete opinion'
- **David:** 'Critical thinking is asking questions of a text and its author in order to have a full understanding of what it is and why it was written.'

Some definite crossover there. Perhaps we both need to move outside our own echo chamber of two. Let's use these definitions to dig into two simple activities you can do to integrate critical thinking into your reading or listening lessons.

Going beyond comprehension

For many years now, we've struggled with comprehension-checking questions. The argument for them is that they prepare learners to take exams, and exam skills are crucial for students who will probably have to prove their level in one high-stakes test or another during their language-learning lifetime. And this is fair – but it shouldn't be the only thing we do with a text. We like to drop in questions that require learners to think, to ask their own questions and develop their own opinions. You could consider asking the following questions:

- What did you find interesting about the text? Why?
- Is there anything you'd like to fact check? Why?
- Who did you empathise with? Why?
- Is there anything you'd like to look up? Why?

The common thread here is of, course, 'why?'. By encouraging our learners to reflect on their reasoning, we lead them to ask questions of both themselves and their own context, as well as the text and its author.

Independent research

This leads us nicely to research. We believe strongly in encouraging learners to do their own research. After all, how can we truly think critically about a text if we don't have any (or only limited) context. This is incredibly important in EAP or ESP contexts. Mark will happily regale you with tales of lessons that end up with students deep inside rabbit holes of ancient history. But general English is where we should be beginning to develop these independent research skills. Coursebooks these days are rich in incredibly interesting real-life texts and people, perfect opportunities to do some independent research.

So, allow students control of what they research when you can. Encourage them to research the topic from different points

of view. This research can be carried out in their own language or in English, as long as they know they'll be reporting back in English. Once they have identified a good source, get them to take notes and really find things in the texts that interest, alarm, chime with existing knowledge or challenge it. Then we can encourage them to find yet another source on the same topic and, as they do so, look to see if it confirms or challenges the ideas that they first read.

It's important to note that this won't work for every topic. If a fact is uncontested, it's probably not worth finding multiple sources saying the same thing. But if you get the right topic, the benefits of allowing students the freedom to research it are plentiful. They are not just challenging ideas and thinking critically, they're working on notetaking, skimming, summarising and even mediation.

Final thoughts

The beauty of these activities is that they mirror how we read outside the classroom. We don't just read a text and then answer some true or false questions. We think about it and then share our opinions with others. Those discussions help us to think more deeply about our opinions and question them. Our algorithms serve us up multiple texts on the same subjects. And the more widely and varied we read, the more we can challenge our own viewpoints.

So, try them out with your students . . . little and often.

These Online Resources are available at https://pavilionelt.com/wp-content/uploads/MET-34.5-Online-Resources_CriticalThinking_Byrne_Heffernan2.pdf



David Byrne has worked in ELT for over a decade and in that time has taught all the ages, levels and exams he could find. He's worked in Ireland, England, Spain and South Korea, but the majority of his career has been spent in the UK where he currently works for EC English.



Mark Heffernan has taught English for over 18 years. From the very beginning, he shared lesson ideas and started to run CPD sessions. He spent many years focusing on exam teaching before moving to Queen Mary University of London in 2016, where he teaches EAP and is a module convenor.