

The Concept and Practice of Critical Thinking in Academic Writing: An Investigation of International Students' Perceptions and Writing Experiences

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Critical thinking is arguably one of the central requirements and desired outcomes in 'Western' universities. The international student population is expected to adopt an established Western academic discourse in order to be able to meet the requirements of successful writing at university and to be able to claim membership in that community. However, students are either unaware of the importance of argumentation in writing or lack understanding of what is meant by the concept of argument, evaluation and analysis.

Through a small-scale qualitative research project Vynk's study captures significant understandings, concerns and issues of a small group of participants in the context of a postgraduate degree programme at a British university. The focus of the investigation is on student perceptions and experiences rather than assessing or analyzing their critical thinking skills, or evaluating the success of university instruction of critical thinking. Vynke's role as both researcher and fellow student gives her an advantageous 'insider's' vantage point from which to foreground her fellow students' voices which might not otherwise be heard.

Vynke's findings offer some important insights into the experiences of international students learning the conventions of a new academic discourse with reference to acquiring and demonstrating critical thinking skills in their writing. Despite the dual challenges of language and adapting to new academic requirements, the international students interviewed seemed to have effectively acculturated to the changed context, either by assimilating, appropriating or transforming the academic textual conventions. Although they mentioned frustrations and difficulties, they all were willing, and even enthusiastic to engage in critical thinking.

Vyncke concludes, by presenting recommendations that could facilitate the expression of critical thinking. Firstly, students need clear and direct guidelines and instruction in terms of what is involved in adopting a critical thinking approach in their writing. This can be in the form of workshops in which both local and international students participate and where they are taught how to recognise, evaluate and construct arguments within a Western critical thinking approach. Secondly, to help students understand the expectations of the academic community, she stresses the importance of on-going dialogue between supervisor and student, and that students studying in the humanities and social sciences should be made aware that they do not need to use the impersonal voice in their writing and that first person pronouns are accepted and even encouraged. Finally, as one of the participants suggested, it would be helpful if students had the opportunity to write at least one piece of academic writing without being assessed. In such a way the students can feel more confident and prepared when tackling their first graded essay. These are all straightforward and practical implementations which could serve to directly benefit students in developing a critical approach, and thus help them to communicate effectively and confidently in the academic community.

Impact:

The findings are interesting and important for EAP practitioners as well as for academics who set writing tasks and assess student writing. It is important to know that although the cultural background has an influence on students' writing, it cannot be seen not as a barrier to critical thinking. This means that students from certain cultural backgrounds cannot be dismissed as incapable of criticality. Rather, more explicit information about the requirements of Western academic writing needs to be provided, as shown in Vynke's study by the fact that students were confused in relation to requirements and tutor expectations, tended to feel insecure in their epistemological understanding, and, in the case of one student, restricted in developing her voice by the essay genre.

These findings have obvious implications, such as that assessment formats should vary and not be restricted to essays. The author makes some clear recommendation for the teaching of academic writing and critical thinking, i.e. to provide clearer guidelines as well as workshops in which the Western critical thinking approach is analysed and explicitly taught to students. To increase their confidence, students should be given the opportunity to receive comments on an un-assessed piece of writing.

The proposed provision would also include an on-going dialogue between academic tutors and students. Furthermore, the findings showed that students' writing styles cannot be categorised in terms of their cultural background, but are complex, divergent and idiosyncratic. The impact of this finding is that there cannot be a uniform way of teaching critical thinking in EAP classes. Although the dissertation is based on small-scale research, much can be learned from it in terms of helping students to acculturate in their academic environment.