Using Online Discussion in the English Language Classroom: An Opportunity to Develop Critical Thinking Skills among Thai Tertiary Students
การใช้อภิปรายออนไลน์ในชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ: โอกาสในการพัฒนาทักษะการคิดวิจารณญาณ สำหรับนักศึกษาไทย

กริช ราชประสิทธิ์

อาจารย์ประจำศูนย์ภาษา (สาขาภาษานานาชาติ)

วิทยาลัยนานาชาติเพื่อศึกษาความยั่งยืน

มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ

Krich Rajprasit

Lecturer, Language Center,

International College for Sustainability Studies

Srinakharinwirot University

E-mail: krich@g.swu.ac.th

บทคัดย่อ

พลเมืองของสังคมโลกจำเป็นต้องมีทักษะศตวรรษที่ 21 ซึ่งรวมถึงทักษะการคิดวิจารณญาณ เพื่อให้ สามารถดำรงชีวิตอยู่ได้ในโลกที่มีการเปลี่ยนแปลงตลอดเวลา พลเมืองจึงจำเป็นต้องพัฒนาทักษะ ดังกล่าวเพื่อตอบสนองต่อความต้องการของสังคมโลก โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งทักษะการคิดวิจารณญาณ ควรได้รับการฝึกฝน เพราะตามทฤษฎี ทักษะการคิดนี้ไม่ได้มีมาตั้งแต่กำเนิด ดังนั้นจึงควรได้รับ การพัฒนาและส่งเสริม วิธีการสอนโดยการอภิปรายออนไลน์ในชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ จึงได้รับการ

เสนอแนะสำหรับผู้เรียนที่จำเป็นต้องใช้ทักษะการคิดดังกล่าว บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อทบทวน
และอภิปรายบทบาทของทักษะการคิดวิจารณญาณ และความเป็นไปได้สำหรับการพัฒนาทักษะ
การคิดผ่านการอภิปรายออนไลน์สำหรับนักศึกษาไทย วิธีการที่นำเสนอในบทความนี้อาจให้แนวคิด
และแนวทางแก่ผู้ที่มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องกับการศึกษาด้านภาษาอังกฤษ และการนำไปประยุกต์ใช้ใน
ชั้นเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

คำสำคัญ: การอภิปรายออนไลน์ ทักษะการคิดวิจารณญาณ การสอนภาษาอังกฤษ

Abstract

The citizens of a global community need to be equipped with 21st Century skills, including
the ability to think critically, in order to survive in an ever-changing world. Global citizens
therefore need to develop skills in response to the requirements of the 'community'.
Specifically, critical thinking skills need to be cultivated, as theoretically these skills are
not considered inherent, and therefore need to be developed and enhanced. The teaching
method of applying online discussion in English language classrooms is recommended
for students who are required to use these skills. This article aims to review and discuss
the role of critical thinking skills, and the possibility of developing these skills among Thai
university students via English online discussion. The steps suggested below may provide
ideas and guidelines for English education stakeholders, as well as their application in
the language classroom.

Keywords: Online Discussion, Critical Thinking Skills, English Language Instruction

Introduction

Due to the rapid development of technology, together with the need to develop 21st century skills, educational institutions and stakeholders alike have been made aware of the current situations, and have made a concerted effort to respond to contemporary demands by attempting to produce well-qualified citizens for the global community. Through a variety of approaches such as 4MAT (Morris and McCarty, 1990: 31) and technology, the learning process should enhance the abilities of the students. Technology is well suited to a learning environment because it is able to support autonomous learning, whereby students can independently and actively develop their general and domain-specific knowledge, as well as their cognitive and language skills (Chomphuchart, 2012: 219-220). This leads to an enhancement in the quality of both learning and teaching. Critical thinking skills, which are in high demand, have recently been introduced at every educational level, and have also been prioritized as a key skill (Scott and Ryan, 2009). The value and importance of such skills have been well established in higher education for more than a decade. Most university lecturers and scholars are aware of the fact that the primary objective of their instruction is to promote critical thinking skills (MacKnight, 2000: 38; Schellens and Valcke, 2006: 349-350)

Online discussion has been introduced as a tool to develop critical thinking skills among students on an international basis. Even though some researchers have found that the use of online discussions in the language classroom may not enhance the critical thinking skills of learners as completely as some theorists have claimed (Mandernach et al, 2009: 49-50), other theorists have provided evidence that exposure to online discussion does lead to the development of critical thinking skills, if only at the most basic level (i.e. drawing conclusions without any justification, having a negative prejudice about a specific topic, stating that one shares the conclusions made by others without taking them further, and failing to state the advantages or disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment) (Cheung and Hew, 2005: 560). More significantly, these learners are more likely to be aware of contemporary trends, such as the need for individuals to keep themselves up to date through the use of online resources and social media from a variety of international sources (Leston-Bandeira, 2009: 2-3; Miyazoe and Anderson, 2010: 186; Peterson and Caverly, 2006: 40).

In this article the role of critical thinking skills and online discussion are reviewed. This review is then further discussed along with the development of guidelines to develop the critical thinking skills of Thai tertiary students in

the context of the English language classroom. As a result, English language teachers and other stakeholders, in particular the Thai Higher Education Commission, are under increased pressure to promote critical thinking skills. One such approach to this issue is suggested below.

Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills are a key educational issue, and a chief concern for scholars all over the world. Such skills have a direct impact on all forms of communication (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and can actually be practiced in everyday interactions. The collaborative learning process, involving the use of pairs or small groups of learners with goals and values that inform both their decisions and their actions, has been practiced in higher education for decades. This practice increases interest among learners, as well as enhancing their critical thinking skills. In a traditional classroom, critical thinking skills are stimulated when teachers throw open-ended questions to students who are provoked to apply their knowledge in order to think critically (Bruning, 2005: 24-25). To become a critical thinker, one who can analyze and reason, can be seen as the key to the door of the thinking world, since a learner can acquire, understand, and evaluate information instead of simply memorizing it. However, it has been reported

in some countries, such as Singapore, that students tended not to answer questions that required critical thinking skills, and preferred to remain silent. They also do not seem to want to challenge themselves, or voice their opinions firmly (Cheong and Cheung, 2008: 564-655). Such learning situations in Singapore are similar to the situation in Thailand, since Thai learners are typically passive in the language classroom. The main reason to explain the behavior is that those students are influenced by Thai social interaction in the classroom (Raktham, 2008: 3-5). Such social interaction appears in the form of relationships with teachers, peer pressure, or peer reaction. Thus, Thai students are strategically viewed and evaluated by their peers as the factors guiding their behavior, and may not perform wholeheartedly in their classroom.

Nevertheless, although children are theoretically not born with an inherent ability to think critically (Schafersman, 1991: 2-3); yet critical thinking skills can be taught through various approaches, one of which is online discussion. This approach is deemed to solve the problem of such interaction in the traditional classroom, and benefits Thai students in terms of developing critical thinking skills (Cheong and Cheung, 2008: 567; MacKnight, 2000: 41; Miyazoe and Anderson, 2010: 194; O'Neill, et al, 2006: 349-350).

Online Discussion

Characteristics of Online Discussion

Online discussion, which is an asynchronous form of discussion and also known as an online forum, or a bulletin board, is a computer-mediated form of communication. In terms of specific characteristics, online discussion is presented in the form of 'threads'- a series of messages posted as replies to each other, controlled by a moderator, and operated in both the past and the present. It does not allow contributors to edit previous posts and operates as an information exchange, and can be described as a collective work mediation, which requires cooperation from the online community (Miyazoe and Anderson, 2010: 186). In other words, individuals can communicate with others by posting written messages in order to exchange ideas. In an online community, members can read discussions regarding a particular topic, post their own opinions, or reply to previous posts by other members. In a learning environment, learners can engage in online discussions at different times of day, since, unlike face-to-face communication, online communication always records and stores discussions, or discussion threads, for later analysis (Sanchez-Sweatman, 2001: 311-313).

Advantages for Language Learners

Online discussion is employed to facilitate teaching and learning in many higher education institutions (Cheong and Cheung, 2008: 556) because online discussions can be advantageous for learners. The learners may appreciate the self-spaced and self-regulated nature of asynchronous discussions. Because an online discussion contains posts that can be read repeatedly, learners are allowed the time to actively research topic-related information, pose questions, and carefully consider their comments prior to responding to a post (O'Neill, et al, 2006: 349-350). Therefore, autonomous learning can be fully supported, and learners are given the individualized time to master the learning process (Mandernach, et al, 2009: 50). Additionally, both extroverted, and in particular introverted learners, can benefit from online discussion because it is a faceless, equal-opportunity environment in comparison with face-to-face communication. The rich store of knowledge and experience that the learners contribute are shared freely, and outside of the classroom setting; peer-pressure and self-consciousness are no longer an issue (Horton, 2000: 44-45). Therefore, students not only benefit from these posts, but also benefit from an opportunity to search for related information in their online community (Chinedu, 2008: 1). Student-teacher and student-student interaction in such an environment also enhance planned, meaningful and prepared discussions (MacKnight, 2000: 38). There has also been a significant improvement in the writing skills

of participating students (Gerbric, 2005: 247) as well as an improvement in their ability to communicate (Holmes, 2004: 9-10; Scott and Ryan, 2009: 112). Intellectual exchange, or learning new ideas, refining old ideas and keeping up-to-date with current affairs were also mostly found amongst participating students. In sum, online discussion should be part of the English language classroom because it is effectively supports the learning process as a result of the following benefits: 1) establishing a friendly and open environment; 2) emphasizing learner-centered instruction; 3) encouraging learners to give constructive feedback and suggestions; 4) allowing learners to experience, reflect, and share the benefits of using a threaded discussion; and 5) realistically presenting themselves and communicating with their own personality.

Outcomes of Applying Online Discussion

Previous studies have recently indicated that the use of online discussion to promote the critical thinking skills of learners have resulted in a variety of outcomes. In the UK, Leston-Bandeira (2009: 7) employed e-learning to enhance the critical thinking skills of undergraduates with two modules that were taught over a five year period to promote independent learning and reflection among students. The outcomes were that these students were able to produce excellent

work and received positive feedback. More significantly, the point that a key part of learning achievement is dependent on the active role of the instructor in managing the learning process was raised. According to Leston-Bandeira (2009: 9-12), scaffolding strategies for online discussion should be provided to learners, and guidelines for designing good questions are recommended by teachers. However, in the USA, Mandernach, et al. (2009: 51-52) examined how undergraduate students applied critical thinking skills and strategies in traditional or face-to-face learning in comparison with asynchronous or online learning. Surprisingly, asynchronous or online learning alone did not enhance the critical thinking skills of students. However, this approach uses the instructional materials to encourage a deeper level of learning engagement, and can also be used to practice critical thinking skills. In Singapore, Cheong and Cheung (2008: 557) studied how online discussion can be effectively used to teach critical thinking skills to secondary school students. The results revealed that during the online discussion phase, the students exhibited minimal critical thinking skills. However, they responded to this learning approach with positive feedback. Schuetze (2010: 10) compared online discussion interactions between undergraduate students in Canada and Germany. The findings of both studies revealed that the students who wrote more

in online discussions tended to become more active learners. Scott and Ryan (2009: 112) discovered that in the online community, students had more engagements in discussion, and effectively interacted when appropriate topics were set in relation to their prior experience. Also, Schellens and Valcke (2006: 349-350) maintained that a higher proportion of knowledge creation was identified in online discussion than in face-to-face discussions, because online discussions are more task-oriented.

According to the review of critical thinking skills and online discussion, the following section comprises guidelines that can be applied to English language instruction in the Thai Tertiary context and are likely to be beneficial to Thai learners.

Guidelines for Employing Online Discussion to Develop the Critical Thinking Skills of Thai Tertiary Students

The following steps can be considered a part of the planning process for teaching Thai students.

1. Setting Learning Objectives

Importantly, the ultimate goal of using online discussion is to develop the students' qualifications so that they conform to the needs within the global community. Therefore, teachers should design innovative pedagogical approaches with clear objectives in order to directly promote critical thinking among learners. For example, as part of the tertiary General English courses, instructors should design learning objectives as follows: after doing "online discussion" activity, learners are able to demonstrate skills in elementary reasoning, to identify and understand basic fallacies of thought, and to identify the components of arguments and demonstrate the ability to create complex argument structures in written forms.

2. Searching Online Sources

A variety of online sources are available for educational purposes, and free of cost to the users. The reasons for the selection of such sources may depend on individual institutional policies. For instance, offered as a means of support by the author's institution, a course web is selected because it is well designed with various features (i.e. announcement, content, assistants, student tools group, file storage, assignment, test & survey, links, polls, and forum) and perfect to be used as part of developing critical thinking skills through online discussion or forums (see Figure 1). Even though this web course may not utilize recent technological developments, it is definitely a useful resource and has all of the functions required for online discussion (i.e. forum creation, forum display, summary of threads and posts in each discussion topic, and first and last posts identified by date and time).
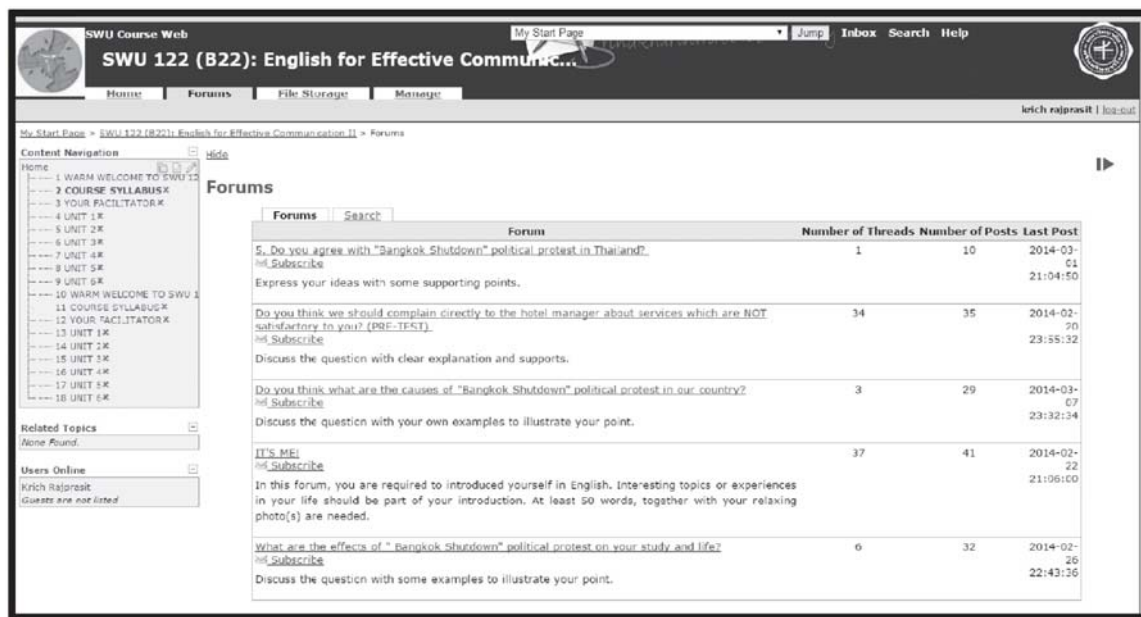
Figure 1 SWU Course Web

3. Designing Topics

The topics used in an online discussion should promote critical thinking skills as well as being realistic in terms of the life experiences of the students, such as academic life and current affairs. If the topics are familiar to students, it will allow them to access the information more easily and support their discussion with ease. Additionally, recent social issues, which have directly affected the lives of these students, may encourage them to think critically because they are able to apply their personal experiences to the expression of critical ideas. For instance, in Figure 2, political issues were raised in the online discussion. Since the students had all witnessed the events of the 'Bangkok Shutdown' in 2014, and their everyday lives had been affected by it either directly or indirectly, this was reflected in the thread.

Figure 2 A Topic Used to Encourage Critical Thinking

4. Focusing on Content, not Form

More attention should be paid to the content created by students to express their critical thinking, rather than grammatical errors, even though the correct usage of the English language structure is an integral part of effective communication. It is not unusual to find such errors in a thread discussion, since students, especially non-English majors, do not use the English language on a daily basis. However, the content should be prioritized and supplementary exercises on structure and grammar may be provided in order for students to develop their critical skills while also maintaining a competent written proficiency in English. Below is a sample about which students were asked to express their argumentative opinions: "Bangkok Shutdown" political protests in their own countries. Such samples show how students could think critically, even if their thinking does not seem to attain the in-depth level (more explanation is provided in the sixth step), and there are some minor grammatical errors that do not lead to miscommunication.

Excerpt 1.

"...I don't agree with "Bangkok Shutdown" cause it make our country decline. Even if people who came to protest think it's the best way to do but they didn't think of disadvantage. Our country have to confront with economic problem,

traffic problem and People's conflicting opinion. I don't like this government but I think we have another way that don't make our country was declined like this!!!!…"

Excerpt 2.

"…I don't agree with "Bangkok Shutdown" because it's not a right way.do "Bangkok Shutdown" don't make impact for a government it make an impact for us. and i think this is a just political game not good for anyone. just bring our country down. The people was exploited by who receives government benefits…."

Excerpt 3.

"…But I don't think so. I'm not agree with this government but I'm not agree with this protest too. It's not right way to solve this problem. If they don't want this government, they should do something better than this. I don't know the better way to solve this problem but this isn't good idea to make other people's life be inconvenient…."

According to the excerpts above, students in the General English course demonstrated their critical thinking skills based on their direct experiences, even though the thinking level was superficial (Cheung and Hew, 2005: 560);

they did not provide any evidence supporting their thoughts. Besides, comments included some grammatical errors (e.g. subject-verb agreement, punctuation). However, these samples were taken from online discussion of a SWU course web, and the students were in the pre-test. After the experimental study, the author is certain that they would develop their thinking skills at a deeper level.

5. Engaging in Learning Activities

Teachers should facilitate collaboration and knowledge building, encourage dialogue and make references to various student postings. They should also try to use humor for motivation, and even emoticons to help convey feelings and ideas (Lim and Chai, 2004: 215-216). This is crucial inasmuch as in the early stages, students may not successfully participate in online discussion because they lack experience with this type of learning activity. Thus, teachers should facilitate discussions, and encourage students to think critically by responding to their posts.

In addition, setting questions in the online discussion is a key part in stimulating students' critical thinking and keeping students engaged in online discussion. Socratic questioning techniques following the six types of questions Socrates asked his pupils (Syque, 2002-2006) are recommended: 1) questions for clarification (i.e. what do you mean by …? or could you

put it another way?); 2) questions that probe assumptions (i.e. what are you assuming?, is this always the case? or why do you think the assumption holds here?); 3) questions that probe reasons and evidence (i.e. what would be an example? or could you explain your reasons to us?; 4) questions that probe questions about the questions (i.e. to answer this question, what questions would we have to answer first? or does this question ask us to evaluate something?); 5) questions that probe implications and consequences (i.e. what are you implying by that? or what effect would that have?); 6) Questions about viewpoints or perspectives (i.e. can anyone see this another way? or what would someone who disagrees say?)

In doing so, students should be familiar with how to respond to their teacher as a facilitator. However, at an initial stage, it may be difficult for some students because they have to answer various questions provoking their thinking, and communicate through English language. With experience they are able to gradually develop their thinking skills.

6. Evaluating Students' Thinking Skills

Evaluation of critical thinking skills can be based on Cheung and Hew's (2005: 560) generic thinking model in online discussion, which was developed from models and works on cognitive processes for online learners and the evaluation of their cognitive skills (Henri,

1992: 124-127; Hew and Cheung, 2003: 355; Newman, et al, 1997: 485-488). Based on the model, the two levels are *surface* and *in depth*. On the *surface* level, the four indicators are 1) drawing conclusions or making judgments without any justification, 2) having a prejudice against or making assumptions about a specific topic, 3) stating that one shares the conclusions or judgments made by others without taking them further, and 4) failing to state the advantages or disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment. Regarding the *in depth* level, the four indicators are 1) drawing conclusions or making judgments with support for the justification, 2) stating the advantages and disadvantages of a suggestion, conclusion or judgment, 3) stating that one shares the conclusions or judgment made by others and supporting them with relevant facts, experience or personal comments, and 4) making valid assumptions with the available indicators.

According to the indicators of surface and in depth levels, it is easy for teachers to evaluate their students' thinking skills because there is a clear definition for each level. After the evaluation, teachers are supposed to provide feedback to students by means of group meetings or one-on-one consultations with teachers.

7. Identifying the Perceptions of Students

Apart from evaluating the critical thinking

skills of students, teachers should conduct a survey and individual or group interviews to confirm whether or not the students are satisfied with the learning activities and have developed their critical thinking skills.

Here are two main topics for identifying students' perceptions on developing critical thinking skills through online discussion as suggested by Cheong and Cheung (2008: 567-568). The first one is "cognition" or 'think more', by asking whether 1) students analyze what other participants have written in the online discussion and think about what students write and want feedback on; 2) online discussion allows them more time to critically think about what to write and discuss; and 3) students feel that they have used their mind more often in asynchronous online discussion than in the class discussion. The second one regards "learning" or 'learn more', by asking if the students 1) have learnt better this way than in verbal discussion; 2) have learnt a great deal of knowledge from other participants' posts in the same group; 3) have learnt more through small group collaboration; and 4) have spent time to do some research such as surfing online for information or reading relevant text materials before discussion.

Moreover, the number of in depth and surface levels of information processing in online discussion should be recorded statistically by teachers in order to compare their students' development during the period of applying this learning activity.

In sum, assessing their own learning activities, teachers may revise the learning activity through online discussion to fit the learning ability levels and needs of the students. Such activities may be used repeatedly to develop students' deeper levels of critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

Critical thinking skills are one of the 21st century skills that global citizens should possess, and are theoretically considered to be teachable. This article has reviewed and discussed how critical thinking skills are particularly required in order to be able to survive in the contemporary world, and how online discussion can be used to enhance such skills. In addition, the guidelines suggested herein may be beneficial to English language teachers and stakeholders, particularly at university level, in order to design learning activities that develop language and cognitive skills, both in and out of the classroom. Thus, an opportunity for Thai tertiary students to adequately prepare themselves for the demands of the world today has been presented.

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Mr. Krich Rajprasit is a lecturer and assistant dean at Srinakharinwirot University. He holds an M.A. in Business English for International Communication, and his research interests include Intercultural Communication and English for Specific Purposes. His recent publications include "Investigating the impact of personality factors on perceived communication mobility of non-native English speaking Thai professionals in international companies (2014)", and "Perceptions and problems of English language and communication abilities: A final check on Thai engineering undergraduates (2015)".