Challenging the notion of non-Western students’ incapability for critical thinking

H. Jeong
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT: There is a longstanding belief that critical thinking is exclusively embedded in the Western Anglo-Saxon culture and language, thereby non-Western students using English as an additional language may not be capable of critical thinking (e.g., Atkinson, 1997). This paper reports on a study that questions this belief. The study explored the accounts of eight non-Western, international doctoral students at a New Zealand university and also analyzed their academic texts. The data of the study suggested that criticality or critical thinking was found in these students’ verbal accounts. What they appeared to struggle was to express their critical thinking academically. This paper argues that, unlike the claim, non-Western students should learn critical thinking itself in the course of learning English; they may need to develop skills to communicate their critical thinking effectively in the English-medium academic context.

1 INTRODUCTION

In English-medium academic contexts, critical thinking or criticality is emphasized as one of the most important qualities in developing and demonstrating knowledge (Moore, 2011). Some scholars suggest that there is no clear, commonly accepted definition of the concept of critical thinking or criticality (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Ridley, 2008). For example, Ridley (2008) notes that “it is not always straightforward to articulate what is meant by ‘being critical’” (p. 117). Nevertheless, there is an evidently overlapping idea about critical thinking: It is accountable for making evaluative, rational judgments of things, states of affairs or arguments, and attaching values to them (Davidson, 1998).

As Paltridge and Starfield (2007) report, students using English as an Additional Language (EAL) often struggle with expressing their ideas including critical thinking in the language. The issue is, some scholars claim that non-Western EAL students are not capable of critical thinking (Atkinson, 1997). According to this claim, the challenges that EAL students face are not simply related to the matter of expressing their critical thinking in English, but more to their incapability for critical thinking itself.

The notion of non-Western EAL students being uncritical or being incapable of critical thinking emerges from the belief that critical thinking is what has been practiced exclusively within the Western Anglo-Saxon culture. For example, underpinned by the cultural/linguistic relativism, Atkinson (1997) argues that criticality is a non-overt virtue and practice, which is embedded in the individualistic Western middle-class culture or in the English language used in this particular culture. In this line of thinking, he states that non-Western second language speakers of English therefore tend to have difficulty in thinking critically. He then proposes that this group of second language speakers of English need to learn critical thinking as apprentices of English teachers (probably Westerners, considering his overall argument in his article).

However, the claim that second language speakers of English are not so critical due to their cultural backgrounds can be challenged in the light of some notions concerning critical thinking. First, the assumption that critical thinking is the preserve of Western culture has been questioned. For example, Davidson (1998) and Tian and Low (2011) point out that there is no clear evidence that criticality is a product of the individualism of Western culture, while being incompatible with collectivism. In addition, Paton (2005) and Kumaravadivelu (2003) point out that in the history of other cultures, such as China and India, patterns of scientific and philosophical thinking are found, which are considerably similar to those of critical thinking. Thus, they suggest that criticality may be not just an asset of the Western mind but also that of any cultures. Moreover, from their research studies or teaching experiences, Paton (2005) and Kumaravadivelu (2003) found that when subject content knowledge is limited, not only English second language speaking students but equally first language speaking ones were not successfully critical. Then they concluded that contextual rather than cultural
elements more crucially influence critical thinking ability of L2 speakers (as well as L1 speakers) of English.

The study presented in this paper questions the notion that non-Western EAL students using may not be capable of critical thinking. It examined the notion against its findings. The next section reports the methodology of the study, which is followed by the section for the findings and discussion. Finally, the conclusion section closes the paper.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research question

To what extent do eight non-Western PhD students' written texts and accounts on their research projects reveal their criticality?

2.2 Participants

The participants of the study were new, conditionally enrolled international PhD candidates at a New Zealand university by the time data were collected. They were from three different faculties of the university: the Faculty of Arts and Social Science, the Faculty of Education, and the Management School. Among eight participants, seven were female, and one was male. One was from China, three from the Maldives, two from Sri Lanka, and two from Vietnam.

2.3 Data collection

The study was part of a larger research project aiming at investigating the nature of their acquisition of academic literacy competences needed for undertaking the literature review. The data for this study were collected from the monthly interviews with each participant for a six-month period, which were the main data collection method for the larger project. All the interviews were audio-recorded first and then transcribed. In addition, the literature review sections of the final research proposals of five participants (among the eight participants) were collected.

2.4 Data analysis

Overall, the interview data were explored by means of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), a qualitative approach designed to investigate individual experiences. First, the data from each participant was treated as a separate case. I examined each case using the research question presented above as the focus and identified the participant’s accounts corresponding to it. This examination allowed me to explore the criticality of individual participants embedded in their accounts and also to find common themes emerging from different participants' data. Later, the participants’ accounts were grouped and reorganized in accordance with those themes, which were interpreted in detail.

In addition, the criticality embedded in the literature review sections of five participants’ research proposals was examined. According to Bruce (2014), criticality is expressed by means of using certain discoursal/linguistic devices, such as the Concession–Contraexpectation interpropositional relations (Crombie, 1985) or attitude markers (Hyland, 2005).

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Unlike the belief that critical thinking is Western-cultural thinking embedded in English language, the data of the study revealed that the participants, all of whom were from non-Western cultures, were critical in reviewing the literature. For example:

#1

When I read the article about language anxiety in speaking, Woodrow says that Vietnamese students are quite different from other Confucian heritage students from Korea, China, or Japan, and according to her, Vietnamese students are not anxious but very confident in speaking. And she said we are something like Westerners I think it is very funny (laugh) I don’t agree with her. I came from Vietnamese context and I think maybe she’s wrong or she is overgeneralizing. (P8)

#2

In the literature, there are standard instruments that I may have to use. My supervisor is pushing me to use them, forcing me. That’s ok, that’s better to use because people really value these instruments so I can use them for comparison but some of them are not really useful. For example … I’m thinking what would be then like several steps of stairs in these small islands, but I haven’t been able to think of any. (P4)

#3

One time with my model, my second supervisor wanted me to add some elements of power to it. But I felt that it should not be added … I thought it is not going to be relevant but I didn’t say anything at that time. I went back home, and I read the literature again, and then, I was convinced this is not coming here. (P2)

#4

I: What I really want to know is, when you came here (to the university) first, you told
me several times that actually you feel like you already know [what is in the literature] through your experiences as a teacher.

P3: Yes, that’s true.
I: [Then] is it like, you already know what is happening there but when it becomes … academic research, you need some … backing up literature [for what you have known already]?
P3: Sometimes I feel, ok, it is a feeling which is hard to describe. For example … think my idea is original because I got the idea from my own teaching before I read any literature …. I can’t use it as my idea because someone else has created or they have put the ideas into literature long long time before I did it…
I: [Then] when you read two different arguments or opinions, one is very much matching with your experience and then the other is not, do you naturally agree with…
P3: Of course of course if it is really something you gained from your experience because you experience that oh it is so true, of course very naturally I may just turn to the side which I have experienced. (P3)

In Extracts 1 and 2, P(participant)8 and P4 expressed their evaluative opinions about the validity of a research finding and a data collection instrument when applying them into their own research contexts. Then in the comment of P2 (#3), it appears that she checked whether she would need the concept of power for her research against her overall conceptual framework (model) and concluded that the concept was not relevant to examining her research topic. For me, the critical attitude of these three participants toward the target literature or others’ opinions exhibited in their accounts appeared to be a natural reaction arising from finding out mismatches between certain publicly-reported notions and what they had perceived. That is, for the participants undertaking the LR itself was an academic practice within their English-medium academic context. However, their critical attitude itself, with which they considered the validity and necessity of the target literature, seemed to emerge as a natural disposition that they would activate in their day-to-day living, rather than as the application of a particular Western way of thinking. This possibility of critical thinking—assessing the value of the target literature—being a natural disposition seemed to be more clearly evidenced in P3’s remark in Extract #4. In the extract, it was quite obvious that she naturally assessed the truth value of theories from the literature based on her teaching practice. The findings of the participants’ engagement with critical thinking presented thus far emerged from the interview data in which they and I were not even discussing critical thinking as a topic of our conversations. Then in an extract from P1, she answered my question about how she could be critical:

#5
I think that when you’re critical, for example, for me, there are four self efficacy [theories]. There are a lot of opinions about self-efficacy I read. Yeah, I think that a lot of articles, a lot of researchers write about that one and they have different opinions. When you’re critical you choose the ones that are suitable to your own context your own aims of your study. (P1)

Thus, the ways of being critical that P1 described above appeared to correspond to the critical mind-set displayed by the other four participants in Extracts 1 to 4. Here an important point that needs to be emphasized again is that the participants’ attitude and behavior of critically assessing the target literature appeared to be an element of their human nature, rather than what they had attained through disciplinary practices in English-medium academic contexts. This inference is based on the fact that there seems to be a considerable resemblance between the ways of the participants being critical presented here and those of any human beings engaging in evaluative thinking for their daily concerns, such as shopping, choosing a job, who to have as friends, or even what to eat and drink for health. In addition, the naturalness of the criticality of the participants is, however, not to imply that their critical thinking was impulsive or irrational. Rather, while reading Extracts 1 to 4 carefully and iteratively, I realized that the participants largely involved rational and logical reasoning to judge the target literature critically. For example, P8 suggested the possibility of overgeneralization in Woodrow’s argument about Vietnamese English learners. P4 pointed out the inadequacy of asking questions about climbing staircases to her potential participants who live in a context where there are no or very few staircases. The comments of P1, P2, and P3 also indicated that they analyzed the target literature in terms of its operability for and applicability to their own research projects.

Meanwhile, unlike other participants, at her first interview P6 expressed the view that she was struggling with making a critical literature review. Apparently, some of her comments on the day appeared to be contradictory to the overall finding that the participants’ criticality seemed to be a natural human disposition. For example:

#6
I started thinking about, forming my literature review. I started thinking I should be much more critical than I was … I think, how to form this voice, your voice into your literature, but still I find
it difficult to deal. When I talk about my literature with my supervisor, she has given me an idea, of course, she has stressed to be critical but, how was not really explained. How you are going to be critical. And what are the strategies that you can follow in your writing… I was thinking, how am I going to be critical, I was reading and reading, but I found a lot of ideas from different research, but becoming a critical reviewer, is I think still difficult, for, in my case, it’s difficult, I don’t know how. (P6)

Her narrative shows that P6 felt unaware of how to be critical in writing her literature review text. By confronting her case, seemingly diverging from those of the other participants, I felt it necessary to clarify if her feeling of not knowing of how to be critical actually signaled her inability to be critical. I began to carefully examine the reason why she thought she was not able to be critical. Eventually, I realized that this was in fact embedded in her comment above: her inability to make a critical literature review at that time was directly related to the fact that she did not understand what the concept of critical thinking means. In her account, she actually made a point that she would be able to be critical if the meaning of the concept was clearly explained to her. What was very interesting is, at the same interview throughout which her central concern was not being able to be critical, she engaged with a type of thinking as follows, which could be considered as critical thinking:

#7
There are no enough … students who just get in the university, that they are not given full induction of these kinds of things [including how to be critical], because, ok, I might know from you, one thing, from my friend, another … but it’s … in my point, officially it should be given from the university… I think, when I first come, I should be given those things right? (P6)

Thus, she was in fact critically evaluating the system of the university where she was undertaking her PhD, in terms of not providing sufficient input and support to new PhD students. For me, this seemed to indicate that she engaged with critical thinking even though she did not associate her actual critical thinking with the term critical thinking. In other words, she was critical naturally or implicitly, but by not knowing what the concept of criticality refers to, she thought to herself that she was not able to be critical. Then, only one and half months after the first interview, she appeared to have undergone considerable change from the previous two interviews. She looked much more confident than before, saying, “my next writing … all the literature review chapters will be much better than what I have done earlier.” (P6). I asked her if she had solved the issue of not knowing how to be critical:

#8
I: The question you were asking [one and half months ago] was what it means by being critical or by having your own critical voice. What do you think about that now?
P6: Yeah I remember telling you that… Later when I started reading it was completely different from the way I read earlier because, [before,] I was reading to get information rather than criticizing or thinking about what I want to. But I think later… I started to think yes I might not agree sometimes … now when I read I become very critical. [When] I don’t think it’s truthful for Maldives… I am changing my sentence. I think that is how now I understand how I can be critical when I write. (P6)

The drastic change in her self-awareness about her ability to be critical did not seem to indicate that she had not had the ability previously, but attained it for such a short time period. Rather it would be a more realistic interpretation that she now came to understand the concept of criticality more clearly than before, and realized that it was an ability that she already exercised.

Overall, it seemed to be quite evident that the criticality of the participants of the study was not what they had to learn in the process of developing their competence in using English, but it seemed to be part of their human nature, which they had been engaging with, even before understanding the term of criticality clearly. Nevertheless, improving competence in using academic English appeared to be still very important in undertaking a critical review in the English medium context. Firstly, Hai and Tram stated:

#9
My supervisors expect me to be critical in reading. But you cannot be critical when you don’t understand the articles… Ok writing, I think if I understand their (the authors’ of the literature) intentions, I can write in my own words. not very good, not very beautiful writing, but express my own idea, That’s what I worry. I don’t, you know, how can I be more critical when I don’t understand [the] real intention of [an] article. (P1)

#10
When I read some articles, I don’t really think I can understand correctly or not. Yeah. So it is just from my understanding but I don’t know how exactly it is if it is … if I have ideas I think it’s easy to write not very difficult but just I can’t understand it, or it is not very clear to me, [then] I just still can’t write. (P8)

Here P1 and P8 clearly pointed out that a reason for them to find difficulty in making a critical review of the target literature is that it is not easy
for them to develop an accurate knowledge of what they read, because such accurate knowledge is the basis for assessing values of the target literature. A indicated in Extracts 9 and 10, the participants considered that this difficulty in understanding the meanings intended by the authors of the literature arose from not having sufficient linguistic/procedural resources as second language speakers of English. Thus, the intention to evaluate the target literature based on a correct understanding of it would have driven them to acquire new linguistic/procedural resources. As such, for them, becoming more capable in critical thinking by acquiring new resources was not because critical thinking is embedded in English language, but because critical evaluation of the literature requires an accurate understanding of it, for which a developed competence in using academic English is a prerequisite.

Regarding this point, the analysis of five participants’ literature review sections in their final research proposal revealed that, in general, the participants needed the competence for using linguistic and rhetorical patterns of English language to express the content of their thought appropriately in their academic context. That is, it emerged that, to encode their critical thinking appropriately in their academic context, they might have developed the way to textually enact criticality. The findings from the document analysis indicated that, to a certain extent, these participants expressed their critical thinking appropriately in their English-medium academic context by means of using certain rhetorical patterns. However, this competence of theirs for enacting criticality was emerging and they appeared to need to develop further such competence, in order to communicate their critical thinking more effectively and sufficiently.

The participants’ accounts align with the overall notion suggested by Davison (1998), Tian and Low (2011), Paton (2005), and Kumaravadivelu (2003), resisting Atkinson’s (1997) viewpoint: That is, they clearly challenge the idea of uncritically of non-Western students. They indicate that criticality is autonomous from English language competence. Further, the findings of the study suggest that it would be necessary to differentiate criticality and writing competence for expressing critical thinking appropriately and effectively.

This realization would be important for writing teachers in English-medium contexts to understand EAP students and to design curriculums, teaching strategies, and lesson plans. For example, the teacher may encourage students to form critical opinions about the issues that they want to discuss, for which they can relate and transfer their experience of exercising critical thinking in day-to-day living to their second language academics writing. Then when the students engage in the actual writing proceed as a next step, they may be provided with language resources for their writing my teacher or textbooks. In undertaking this step, the students would be further developing their ideas by observing and evaluating their own thought and language having been written down and (thus) because more perceptible and analyzable to themselves. Afterwards, the teacher may help them to revise their texts as a way of making them more prototypical academic texts, while maintaining the content in which their critical thinking has been embedded.

4 CONCLUSION

The study indicates that non-Western students can be critical or have criticality. The findings of the study presented in the paper resist the longstanding belief that criticality is what exclusively belongs to the Western culture and English language (Atkinson, 1997). Instead, critical thinking seems to be one of universal dispositions that people from different cultures have and utilize. To express critical thinking appropriately and effectively in English-medium academic contexts, EAL students may need to develop linguistic and rhetorical skills of the language. However, such need does not mean that they have to learn critical thinking itself. The argument for the criticality of non-Western EAL students may help reshape the expectations them regarding what they are already capable of and what they need to develop further in the course of learning English for academic purposes.

REFERENCES


