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# Critical Thinking: The Missing Link in Foreign Students Academic Progress

Johan Scholtz  
AIS St Helens  
Auckland  
johans@ais.ac.nz

## Abstract

Foreign students enter New Zealand to learn and improve their academic skills. They enter a new country with dreams of academic achievement. Their focus quickly fades away after a few weeks when they realize their traditional learning style is not matching the New Zealand style. In addition they also experience problems about cultural expectations, family and social pressure. Studying in a country where English is one of the many obstacles to clear, foreign students have a noticeable drawback compared with local students. A few more obstacles in their academic adaption process are critical thinking and conceptualizing new content in English.

## Keywords

Critical Thinking, foreign students

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This poster paper appeared at the 2nd annual conference of Computing and Information Technology Research and Education New Zealand (CITRENZ2011) incorporating the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications, Rotorua, New Zealand, July 6-8. Samuel Mann and Michael Verhaart (Eds).

## Introduction

Critical thinking is influenced by various reasons - Most foreign students find it difficult to debate in general English. Fixed cultural values may inhibit these students from full participation in the classroom. Lecturers have to consider the following three learning methods. *Language* - not getting enough exposure to active academic English speaking keeps most students back from learning new syntaxes and likely would not succeed in most common conversational English. *Culture* - learning and study styles are mostly set as guide and accepted within certain cultures. This in turn presents major obstacles when foreign students enter New Zealand to gain more knowledge. *Assessment methods* - Assessment methods are usually built on factual questioning and are not interpretation based or critical thinking orientated (Levy, 2007)

## Critical Thinking

Research shows difficulty in gearing international students, in particular Asian students to deliver a critical perspective on subject matter (Egege, S. Kutieleh, S. 2004). When students are thinking critically, they are not just thinking passively and accepting everything they see and hear, they are thinking actively. A student should then ask questions about what they see and hear, evaluating, categorising, and finding relationships. Thinking means applying sound intellectual standards and involves self-

evaluation, being sure about conclusions. Students should be prepared to consider all aspects of an issue before making up their mind, and to avoid letting personal bias or prejudice interfere with their reasoning. Critical thinking is important for most academic tasks, including reading, tutorial discussions, written assignments and exam answers. Critical thinking includes such 'higher-order' thinking tasks as reasoning, problem-solving, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

### **Critical Thinking and Learning**

The skills in up-grading thinking are the same skills as those required in up-grading learning. Both require intellectually skilled metacognition (Hurd, 2004). From this we might argue that critical thinking and learning is influenced by a basic cognitive ability to grasp and process bundles of information packets in such a way that an analysis and synthesis presents higher criteria for diversity. As a result students can raise vital questions and problems, creating a more defined information block. In addition critical thinkers would use abstract ideas with interpreting well-reasoned conclusions and solutions with a tested comparison to early presumptions and assumptions. As a result students would learn how to communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems, therefore improving their leaning experience a well.

### **Methods of Learning the Improve Critical Thinking**

Lea et al. (2003:322) suggest some methods to improve critical thinking, for instance emphasis on deep learning and understanding. Of equal importance is an increased responsibility and accountability by the

student. Duron (2006) promotes a 5-step model whereby students could develop their critical thinking strategy. His model closely resembles the one by Facione (2007) and describes alternative processes that guides students to conceptualize requirements of critical thinking. This problem-solving technique guides students through the critical thinking process and uses learner collaboration. As a final guide to student practice, peer assessments to promote students' critical thinking and meta-cognitive skills are used (Hou, Chang, & Sung, 2007). Learning environments that encourage critical thinking promote active learning through frequent questions and provide enough support to allow students to challenge their current conceptions of knowledge and interact with other students (Browne & Freeman, 2000). Pedagogy based in an understanding of cognitive psychology is important for improving higher order thinking skills among students (Halpern, 1998). A skills based approach that targets specific abilities students should master at finishing a lesson is one approach to critical thinking instruction. Institutions should stress the importance of including critical thinking as measure of student learning at the graduate and undergraduate level. Because of the complexity of the task, an operational definition of critical thinking is essential to framing the assessment of critical thinking skills. Quin (2011) address the importance of active learning for foreign students at university level. Harchar as cited in Quin (2011) found that students who have opportunities to practice communication skills, encourages them to develop analytical, critical and creative skills. An alternative teaching strategy is to encourage students to share their cultures in the classroom.