# Contrastive Lexical Competence and Critical Thinking: A Critical Review

**Maryam Larzade Moqadam[1,2], Meisam Ziafar*[2]**

[1]Department of ELT, Khouzestan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran
[2]Department of ELT, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran

*Corresponding author's email: meisamziafar@yahoo.com

**ABSTRACT**

*In order to reach the optimum eventual outcome of the contact between learners' first culture (C1) and the target culture (C2), which is supposed to result in intercultural competence and tolerance, and in order to prevent negative consequences such as stereotypes, biases, prejudices and bigotry, critical thinking serves as an effective strategy. Through acquiring contrastive lexical competence (CLC), realized through Lexical Chunks (LC), taken for granted cultural norms are problematized and learners are defamiliarized only to experience new perspectives and viewpoints. This article aims to indicate how CLC enhances learners' tolerance and intercultural competence, taking advantage of contributions made so far by research done on critical thinking.*

**KEYWORDS**: intercultural competence, critical thinking, contrastive lexical competence

## INTRODUCTION

Learning a second language involves facing another culture presented through the new language. Without conscious efforts in order to make the best out of the contact between learners' cultures (C1) and the target culture (C2), cultural stereotypes, biases, prejudices, xenophobia, and bigotry will rein the intercultural understandings and language teaching practices and learners' identities will be ignored, marginalized, and even startled. What has been proposed as an effective solution to such negative consequences is Critical Thinking (CT). Thus, it can be claimed that CT, through suppressing prejudice and bigotry, paves the way for learners to gain intercultural competence and become intercultural speakers. "An intercultural speaker is determined to understand, to gain an insider view of the other person's culture and at the same time to contribute to the other person's understanding of his/her own culture from an insider point of view" (Sercu, 2002, p. 63).

Paul (1982) distinguishes between two types of critical thinking: the weak sense and the strong sense. The weak sense involves critically thinking about others' views and attitudes, when the strong sense is concerned with critically thinking about one's own attitudes, viewpoints, beliefs, opinions, and judgments. Paul further holds that critical thinking (CT) involves a 'deep knowledge of oneself' and that a 'strong critical thinker' is capable of getting the 'bigger picture holistically' and also capable of considering various viewpoints simultaneously. He considers dialogue with different others, who hold different opinions and 'cultural backgrounds', the main feature of critical thinking, which results in viewing issues from different standpoints and in 'contextualizing' our own positions within 'the bigger picture'. Yassine (2006) proposes the concept of intercultural awareness which means becoming more aware and gaining better understanding of one's own culture and the other cultures throughout the world with the main goal of promoting 'intercultural' and 'cross-cultural' understanding.

Mason (2008) holds that such a CT may positively result in 'tolerance' and that critical thinking involves thinking towards obviating 'egocentric and sociocentric' (and also culturocentric) thinking'. Siegel (1988) advises that such a tolerance should not be merely a tolerance 'born in relativism' and warns a 'descent into relativism'. This tolerance is what prevents humans from prejudice, bias, and bigotry. In order to enhance tolerance, critical thinking must promote humans' flexibility toward others by shaping relativistic attitudes which results in the belief that "I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances." (Kramsch, 1995, p. 85).

**CRITICAL THINKING AND CULTURAL TOLERANCE**

According to Wright (2002) there are two ways of teaching CT. It can be taught either as a separate course, or be incorporated into current subject courses. He asserts that the problem with a separate course for CT is that what is learnt through these courses is not easily transferred to the other courses within the curriculum. On the other hand, the drawback of the incorporation of CT into each subject course is that it needs teachers who are adept in CT. In teaching language/culture the second status seems much more tenable due to the fact that cultural issues come up within language classrooms which must be committed to CT strategies. Wright (2002) proposes a critical challenge in CT which involves "helping students acquire the tools needed to solve problematic situations about what to believe or what to do" (Wright, 2002, p. 258). As mentioned before as a result of the contact between C1 and C2, taken for granted beliefs and values are problematized, challenged, and questioned (Kramsch, cited in Thanasoulas, 2001).

It can be claimed that each instant of C1-C2 contact is a problematic situation and a critical challenge to be solved by students through equipping them with the requisite cultural information in order to shape within them sound beliefs and judgments. Wright claims that there are some criteria for a problematic situation or critical challenges. The first one is that it must involve judgments by students.

When comparing C1 and C2, there is no escape of judgments. What is important then is that such judgments must be made based on the fact that both cultures are plausible and acceptable sources for drawing criteria in our judgments. On the other hand students must have a relativist attitude toward what is right or wrong. However, as mentioned by Ziafar(2009), it does not mean that there is no truth; rather there exist more than one version of truth according to the contextual and local cultural norms and values. Accepting such a position would result in the promotion of learners' tolerance, when bearing in mind the fact that "If you let your language think for you, you will be like a machine, and if you let your culture judge for you, you will be the same machine programmed with prejudice" (Ziafar, 2009, p. 15).

The second criterion is that the problem must be relevant to students' lives and challenge their deep-rooted beliefs and attitudes. Culture is always relevant to students' immediate lives and C1-C2 comparisons always challenge their set and immaculate held beliefs (on the condition that C1 and C2 hold contradictory convictions). The third criterion is that the CT must be provided within the curriculum. As it was mentioned before, critical cultural comparison better fits a paradigm in which CT is exercised within language classrooms, rather than as a separate course. The next criterion is that the task must be feasible and compatible with learners' prior knowledge. Learners at least have familiarity with their own culture as the starting point; however such familiarity must go through critical practices and be challenged. Considering the last criterion, one must be wary not to cause anger due to questioning established cultural values.

According to Paul (2005), CT is "the art of thinking about thinking in 'an intellectually disciplined manner" (Paul, 2005, p. 28). He claims that critical thinkers go through three interrelated phases. In the first phase learners analyze their thinking, then they assess their thinking, and finally they improve their thinking and that creative thinking evolves as a result of the last phase. In the first place, learners analyze their own cultural norms and values, and that of the other culture. In the second phase they try to assess each culture in the light of the other one.

Finally, they improve their cultural beliefs through finding a third position relevant to both C1 and C2. Through such a process learners 'reconstruct' their attitudes in the light of new ideas which problematize their built-in beliefs and attitudes. This is the phase in which metacognition is at play since it involves thinking about one's thoughts and judging whether they still hold water in the light of incoming new viewpoints and cultural norms. Kienzler (2009) advocates a classroom environment in which a 'multiplicity of voices' and 'alternatives' are sought and claims that tolerance and openness transpire as a result of accepting the value of having 'two contradictory truths' as opposed to prejudice (fanaticism).

Potts (cited in Ozka, 2010) enumerates some indicators of critical thinking like promoting interaction among students as they learn and asking open ended questions that do not assume one right answer. Staib (2003, cited in Marin & Halpern, 2011) claims that the best practices for developing CT are real-life role-play, case studies, group discussion, and student-teacher interaction. When faced with cultural contents within language classrooms, teachers can do their best by setting forth a critical comparative discussion on LCs among learners and also between themselves and learners. Classroom interactions lend themselves very easily to cultural discussions, benefitting from the cultural background of learners.

In order to critically examine theoretical assumptions (taken-for-granted ideas) in students, Yancher and Slife (2004), propose an approach which includes some steps. In the first step students are provided with experiences so that their desire in CT is enhanced, mostly through examination of theoretical assumptions.

Leming (1998) enumerates some barriers to the development of CT. the first criticism is that teaching mostly involves 'knowledge transmission'. Providing students with cultural information and leaving them on their own to make sense of the received information and their judgments prevents them from achieving a critical understanding of cultures and hinders intercultural understanding, and may even result in reduced stereotypical and shallow understanding of other cultures. The second criticism is the 'broad and superficial' content presentation, which overloads learners' minds and impedes their higher order thinking. This is almost always the case within EFL/ESL classroom in which cultural information together with highly dense language contents are presented which leaves no room for higher critical cultural comparisons.

The third drawback is related to the teachers' low expectations of students. Considering students as incapable in dealing with higher order thinking, when dealing with cultural information, results in teaching practices devoid of any attempts to promote deep understanding and cultural awareness. Another barrier is large number of students in classrooms which hinders the process of engaging them in 'free exchange of ideas'. The next barrier is the lack of planning time for teachers which makes them prefer lessons which require rote memorization rather than lessons in which learners' attitudes and beliefs are questioned and challenged. The last barrier mentioned is a culture of teacher isolation which prevents creative and innovative sharing of information.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study was a library research through which attempt was made to critically review related literature in order to find the benefits that CLC may have for language learners in acquiring and employing critical thinking skills. After introducing major concerns in teaching and learning critical thinking on the part of language learners attempt was made to show how CLC may fit in the current trends in the education of critical thinking skills.

## CONTRASTIVE LEXICAL COMPETENCE CAN PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING

A great deal of cultural message is incorporated in LCs in the form of idioms, routines, proverbs, and so many other lexical structures. There is an emphasis on the role of LCs in creativity in language learning. Contrastive Lexical Competence (CLC) can be defined as an ability in languageacquired through mastering equivalents for LCs between languages. It also involves knowing how L2 LCs can be used in order to do the same functions realized through using similar LCs in L1. Language learning with the aim of gaining CLC is beneficial in that it readily brings L1 and L2 cultural norms into play. Trying to find out the messages embedded in L2 LCs sensitizes language learners to the differences that exist between the two worldviews and cultural oddities.

If not asked and elicited in the first place, other culturesmay sound bizarre and anomalous, if not cruel and inhuman. Questioning learners discloses such inner judgments brought about by C1-C2 LC comparisons and helps them suspend judgment until they gain requisite knowledge. Learners must feel that what they think and feel about information provided through speech are valuable and worth investigation and probing. Learners can be asked to look for data in order to support or reject their judgments. Contrastive LCs encourages learners to synthesize and logically analyze information and thence promote their intercultural understandings.

It is also possible to put skills introduced by Facione (2010), for CT into a CLC paradigm. In the case of interpretation examples are recognizing a cultural issue and describing it without bias inspired by C1 LC norms, and clarifying the meaning of cultural behaviors and the purposes behind them which may even be a matter of survival. Examples of analysis as the second skill are identifying the similarities and differences between C1 and C2 norms realized in LCs, and the ability to indicate what reasons support or criticize one's conclusions. Evaluation involves judging one's interpretation (about cultural facts), comparing it with other alternative interpretations, and judging if two statements support or contradict each other and the conclusions drawn.

Inference involves drawing out or constructing meaning from postulated cultural information. Explanation involves the ability to state and justify one's reasoning based on the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations which must not be biased toward one's own C1. The last skill is self-regulation which deals with 'self-consciously to monitor one's cognitive abilities'. Examples are monitoring how well one is freeing himself/herself from his/her own personal opinions and assumptions in the investigation of cultural data, and rectifying his/her errors when finding answers to cultural problems. Those who always have a concern for target LCs are more inclined to finding differences in the way languages encode cultural messages.

A separate course for CLC would resemble a cultural studies courses not a language course.When teaching culture, one possible consequence may be challenging learners' held beliefs in a detrimental way in order to impose on them values and norms expected by others. As Jeevanatham (2005) puts it, CT deliberations safeguards learners against 'indoctrination' through letting them develop their own ideas. When presented with norms and judgments,

CT helps learners find their own positions independent of what others try to enforce. Acquiring contrastive LCs promote CLC as an efficient strategy through which learners are offered with the opportunity to autonomously practice their own judgments. Such a practice does not involve simple manipulation of cultural information by learners and letting them choose on their own since "a competent chooser may still be a slave to convention, choosing by standards he has accepted quite uncritically from his milieu" (Bramall, 2000, cited in Papastephanou &Angeli, 2007, p. 612).

The authorsof the present article believe that through obtaining CLC which reveals to the learnersone's own cultural norms and those of othersdevelops EFL learners' critical thinking skills since LCs are apt to initiate profound thinking about cultural norms. CLC facilitates the problematization of taken for granted cultural norms. "From clash between the native culture and the target culture meanings that were taken for granted are suddenly questioned, challenged, and problematized" (Kramsch, cited in Thanasoulas, 2001, p. 9).

Two cultures (C1 and C2) may be similar or different; the role of CLC is better felt when dealing with differences, although according to Yassine (2006):

> Interculturality is best conceived as an active process of interchange, interaction and cooperation between cultures emphasizing the similarities and considering the cultural diversity as an enriching element. It promotes the coexistence between several groups of different cultures (p. 32)

Within a CLC paradigm, taken for granted ideas are challenged through contrasting LCs in C1 with LCs in C2. Another strategy involves formulating a set of critical thinking questions in order to help students identify 'theoretical assumptions' and determine their 'practical implications'. The third step involves determining the theoretical assumptions of theories under study, through critical thinking questions. Theories can be equated with cultures and theoretical assumptions are the same as cultural norms. The fourth step involves identifying the practical implications of assumptions, which in the case of CLC, is mainly pedagogical implications. The last step consists of determining the value of and validity of theories (cultures) being studied considering the theories' assumptions (cultural norms), and implications.

Exercising this contrastive practice to enhance CLC resembles a process introduced by Hofreiter (2005) as follows:

> The process of critical thinking begins with a problem or issue. The critical thinker looks within, keeping an open mind, and judges his/her own emotional reaction to the issue. Once his/her own bias is identified, the new information is considered and judged for its credibility; this may involve comparing it to other previously accepted information, considering the information's source and consulting others (p. 55).

## CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Critical thinking research has provided fruitful insights for teaching and learning practices, which if practiced properly, results in higher order thinking and understanding. Based on the findings of CT, in dealing with cultural issues as indispensable part of language teaching practices, a critical CLC can be suggested which helps us in inhibition of low-order, shallow, and stereotypical understanding about other cultures and if properly performed enhanced tolerance and intercultural understanding.

Although the pedagogical implications of the discussion are already provided within each section in the paper, the following can be also considered as a summary.

1- Taking Paul's (1982) two types of CT, it can be claimed that within a language classroom both weak and strong sense of CT must be practiced through challenging learners' taken for granted beliefs encoded in LCs in order to enhance their tolerance. Such CT, as Potts (cited in Ozka, 2010) puts it can be achieved through interactions and open-ended cultural questions with no definite and absolute answer. This may be in the form of asking learners to find L2 LC equivalents for cultural messages they are already familiar with in the form of L1 LCs.

2- CLC can be easily enhanced in language classrooms, in which instances of C1-C2 contacts create problematic situations resulting in learners' judgment, bearing in mind the fact that both cultures are acceptable sources in drawing criteria in our judgments. LCs provide learners with the chance to look for proper counterparts and may instill in them the fact that languages serve the same purpose of effective communication which may in turn promote tolerance and mutual understanding.

3- Considering the interrelated nature of culture and language (as messages are conveyed through LCs), it seems more effective that cultural points are taught as they surface within language classrooms and not as separate courses. Such a position requires teachers adept enough in critically dealing with cultural contrasts and in helping learners find their third critical positions (C3).

4- As Paul (2005) claims, CT involves three phases: Analyzing, assessing, and improving one's thinking. As the major contrastive capability, CLCeasesan analysis of contrasts between cultures, continues with assessing one's

positions (through dialogues and negotiations) and finally improving defective beliefs. All these can be better achieved by the supports of teachers experienced in teaching culture and CT.

5- To put it into Leming's (1998) criticisms over developing CT, it can be claimed that C1-C2 comparisons to promote CLC must be rather directed by teachers to help learners achieve a critical thinking position towards cultures rather than reduced, stereotypical, and shallow understanding of cultures. Cultural and linguistic knowledge must be presented gradually in order to leave some room for the realization of CT and CLC.

6- Providing cultural information must be accompanied by asking purposive questions which discloses learners' inner judgments and helps teachers to inhibit the formation of stereotypes and the promotion of tolerance within learners. Learners are already capable of revealing their judgments in L1 LCs and it represents a unique opportunity to make them aware of the presence of similar LCs in L2 to be appreciated and deeply understood in the light of their CLC.

7- Teachers can help learners find similarities and differences between cultures and enumerate advantages and disadvantages of cultural norms and values. Then, learners must be given the opportunity to judge their own interpretations and to see if other interpretations support or contradict that of their own. Learners must be able to justify their own reasoning based on evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, and contextual considerations which are not biased toward their own C1. Finally the learners must be helped to free themselves from their personal opinions and assumptions in dealing with cultural information and they must be enabled to improve their beliefs upon finding new answers to cultural problems and their continuously problematized CLC.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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