

Implementing Teaching Strategies to Foster Critical Thinking in EFL Comprehension Skills with
7th Grade Students

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Abstract

This paper presents the experience of an action-research project that implemented teaching strategies to foster critical thinking in terms of listening and reading among 7th grade students in a private school in Medellin. Class observations showed that students required going beyond the usual literal comprehension tasks in order to exploit their proficiency. Additionally, the school's EFL assessment methodology required to find ways to teach and assess critical thinking for comprehension separately from production. In order to achieve this, the study implemented listening and reading interpretive exercises conceived through Bloom's taxonomy and theoretical considerations on critical thinking. Findings showed that students learned habits and skills to think critically on reading and listening input through interpretive exercises.

Key words: critical thinking, comprehension skills, reading, listening, interpretive exercises, Bloom's taxonomy

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Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

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Preface

This report is the result of an action-research project that I conducted as part of my degree as a foreign language teacher from Universidad de Antioquia. I carried out the project at Colegio San Ignacio de Loyola in Medellin, where I work as a full-time English teacher, as an exploration into ways to foster criticality in students' comprehension skills. I did so in the hope that the school, its teachers, and students would benefit from it, as teaching critical comprehension in English was something that the school was requiring and aiming to implement at the time. Research led me to the notion of critical thinking as long debated among EFL theorists and the available tools to tackle the task of teaching to think critically. I remain convinced, even more so after implementing this study, that critical thinking should be among the most important objectives of education in today's world, especially when teaching the *lingua franca* of our time.

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Description of the Context

This section presents an overview of the context where I conducted this action-research project: San Ignacio de Loyola School. I start with a quick look at the history and basic characteristics of the school. After this, I focus on the school's methodology for foreign language teaching. Finally, I briefly describe the population that was involved in the study.

The San Ignacio de Loyola School is a private institution of primary and secondary education for boys and girls in Medellin. Jesuit educators founded the school in the city's Plazuela de San Ignacio in 1885 and later moved it to its current location in the Estadio area. As a Jesuit school, it follows Catholic principles and the practice of Saint Ignatius of Loyola's philosophy of service to the community. Today, the school has more than 2000 students, most of them coming from middle and high socioeconomic strata families, and holds a reputation as one of the most important private institutions in the city due to its local and national awards.

Students at San Ignacio School learn English as a foreign language. English teachers have small groups of students—usually 15-17 boys and girls per class. The school follows an approach based on three trends in communicative language teaching: task-based learning, text-based instruction, and content-based instruction. This is combined with the *pedagogical Ignatian paradigm*, a Jesuit model for teaching that structures lessons into moments of *context* (introduction), *experience* (exposure), *reflection* (theoretical and critical discussions), *action* (practice), and *evaluation* (assessment). Additional to the Jesuit pedagogical model and the three-way approach to English learning, the school has also introduced strategies based on the latest suggestions for foreign language teaching from the Ministry of National Education's program "Colombia Bilingüe," particularly the use of project-based learning and the problem-posing

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method. As for the school's evaluation system, teachers separate the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for assessment purposes.

I am a full-time English teacher at the school, currently teaching in 7th grade. Early in the process of this research project, the school's academic coordinator, my practicum advisor, and I agreed on extending the implementation of my study to all the school's 7th grade groups instead of focusing on only one. To carry out my research project this way, I coordinated efforts with a team of 7th grade English teachers including my cooperating teacher Fabio Rodríguez, who has been in the school for almost 20 years, and two more teachers. As for my groups of students, they were in ages between 12 and 13 and had English class for an hour and a half three times a week during the year. Their English proficiency levels ranged from A1 to B2 and there were a few native speakers. Most of these boys and girls have had the possibility to travel abroad and, even though the school is not bilingual, many of them use English regularly in their everyday lives.

Statement of the Problem

This section describes the situation that I aimed to intervene with my action-research study. Specifically, there were two key elements to this situation. First, I discuss my students' needs in terms of English teaching and learning. After this, I describe a series of changes that the school was going through at the time of my practicum and how that influenced this project.

The first element of the problem was the students' needs in terms of English teaching and learning. Class observations of my own teaching practice and other teachers showed me how students, many of them quite proficient in the foreign language, displayed demotivation and discouragement towards the English class. This was due to the fact that lessons generally focused on linguistic accuracy and proficiency, while students required an education that connected more

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strongly to their real concerns and issues through the foreign language. Indeed, I had noticed how my students were more enthusiastic in class activities that addressed their interests and background knowledge through analysis, debates, and critical thinking. This made me understand that, in the context of this school, the English class needed to go beyond a focus on mere linguistic accuracy if I wanted my students to put their proficiency to actual use through the critical skills that are relevant in today's society.

The second element of the situation had to do with a series of changes that the school was going through at the time of my early class observations. Even before I started aiming at critical thinking as something that my students required to practice more often in class, the school had already started a process of revision of its evaluation standards for every grade and subject in an attempt to establish a curriculum based on critical thinking and citizenship skills. Accordingly, English teachers started to debate about strategies to prepare and assess students in terms of critical thinking in the foreign language. Since the school's English methodology assesses production and comprehension separately, it was necessary to find specific critical thinking strategies for each skill—writing, speaking, listening, and reading. In terms of production, there was agreement on how to take students' writing and speaking to a level of criticality; however, there were doubts and disagreements about listening and reading. This is how my project started to point at critical comprehension: I wanted to find ways to teach and assess critical thinking in terms of reading and listening, as a contribution to my students, the teachers, and the school.

Theoretical Background

This section establishes a comprehensive framework of concepts as well as a theoretical outline for this study's implementation. First, I establish a definition of critical thinking taking into account different views from theorists and curriculum specialists. After this, I explore the

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debates surrounding critical thinking in EFL teaching. Lastly, I address challenges and misconceptions usually associated to critical thinking and the available tools theorists have designed to tackle them.

Critical Thinking in EFL Education

Stemming from L1 education, critical thinking started to be promoted as a vital component of the EFL classroom in the early nineties (Day, 2003). However, the notion of critical thinking is in itself a matter of debate. Conceptions of critical thinking differ as their focus may go from reflective thought processes (Halonen, 1995) to material or cognitive outcomes (Ennis, 1985), from discourse analysis and evaluation (Cooper and Patton, 1997, as cited in Oda, 2008) to empowerment and social action (Benesch, 1993), to name just a few. For the purposes of this study, I used a comprehensive definition of critical thinking as “the process which stresses an attitude of suspended judgment, incorporates logical inquiry and problem solving, and leads to an evaluative decision or action” (NCTE Committee on Critical Thinking and the Language Arts, 1989, as cited in Long, 2003, p. 231). Critical thinking, understood this way, is both an *attitude* and a *set of skills* that allows reflecting on issues, analyzing assumptions, and solving problems.

Approaching Critical Thinking *Critically*

There is widespread consensus today among scholars and teachers that critical thinking enhances language learning by making students reflect on their real lives, get empowered with knowledge, and contribute to society (Brookhart, 2010; Oda, 2008; Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Stobaugh, 2013; Wang & Zheng, 2016). However, claims coming from detractors such as Atkinson (1997) or Willingham (2008) make it necessary to *think critically* on critical thinking itself and the ways to introduce it to the classroom.

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What we understand today as critical thinking traces back to the foundations of Western rationality and scientific thought in ancient Greece, which implies that it is a culture-specific construction and carries a particular system of values (Long, 2003; Whiteley, 2014; Emerson, 2013; Wang & Zheng, 2016). In the light of this, according to Atkinson (1997), non-reflexive attempts to teach critical thinking in EFL contexts rely either on a purported universalism of critical thinking or on plain cultural imperialism. For Atkinson (1997), more holistic worldviews such as those present in Eastern cultures would be a clear contrast to what would be a promotion of Western individualism and objective rationality through critical thinking. Here, however, theorists such as Gieve (1998) find it necessary to establish a distinction between two trends of critical thinking: a monologic tradition and a dialogic approach. While the former is limited to classic Western academic skills for rhetoric and discourse analysis, the latter broadens its scope and encompasses the attitude of challenging assumptions and engaging in social action (Gieve, 1998). For Gieve (1998), this means that teaching culture-laden academic skills, as Atkinson (1997) maintains for critical thinking, is not to be confused with encouraging and fostering an attitude of transcultural criticality. Critical thinking can thus be both monologic and dialogic. However, following Wang and Zheng's (2016) review of the debate, teachers do not need to *choose* one of these practices over the other; instead, this distinction reconciles the need to teach academic *skills* (monologic tradition) and the need to teach to *think* as a habit or disposition (dialogic approach).

The aforementioned debate also implies that teaching critical thinking involves broader ethical and political considerations. Since what is at stake is the quality of education, Long (2003) points out that critical thinking can be at the core of expressions of cultural exclusivism when certain groups in privileged positions have access to an empowering education over social

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sectors who are thereby denied opportunities for success in mainstream Western society. On the other hand, as Amador (2012) argues, critical thinking as a tool becomes a political matter when teaching trends and ministries of education use it as a slogan or catchphrase to promote the development of skills for the global economy by equating the idea of “critical students” to the need for a *competitive workforce*. All these are issues that teachers need to consider ethically and politically. As long as there is no such a thing as *neutrality* in matters of education, Benesch (1999) maintains that “the choice to reject critical thinking is as political as deciding to be a critical teacher” (p. 575). In the end, as Benesch (1999) reflects, although a critical thinking lesson cannot wipe out all unreflective assumptions and attitudes in our students, it will at least expose learners to alternative views and foster an informed and ethical decision-making for the challenges of our world.

Teaching Critical Thinking: Challenges and the Tools to Tackle Them

Along with the theoretical debates and the ethical considerations, there are many myths and misconceptions surrounding critical thinking. Some of the most common misconceptions include the idea that activities need to be “difficult” in order to be considered “critical,” that only gifted students can achieve critical thinking, or that young students cannot manage thinking at a critical level (Stobaugh, 2013). Additional challenges include the usually time-consuming design of critical thinking materials, as opposed to the familiarity and comfort that teachers develop with traditional low-level tasks and assessment. However, teachers can start addressing all these misconceptions and challenges through strategies based on cognitive taxonomies and frameworks for critical thinking.

One of the most widely applied tools to introduce critical thinking in education is Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive processes (Brookhart, 2010; Stobaugh, 2013). This taxonomy

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classifies thinking processes in six levels: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, and Create (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The last three levels—Analyze, Evaluate, and Create—encompass what we know as critical thinking, as they involve higher-order cognitive processes and require learners to take positions and propose solutions to problems (Stobaugh, 2013). Specifically, the Analyze level involves the cognitive processes of differentiation, organization, and attribution; the Evaluate level involves checking and critiquing, and the Create level involves generating, planning, and producing (Figure 1, p. 13). It must be noted, however, that this taxonomy is a categorization rather than a strict hierarchy, so students do not need to master each level’s cognitive processes in order but may apply different processes depending on the task at hand.

Figure 1: Task prompts for interpretive exercises in Bloom’s taxonomy top-three levels

Bloom’s Taxonomy Task Prompts	
Analyze	
Differentiating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mark out any irrelevant information in the problem or data set.
Organizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Create a way to organize the data in order to draw meaningful conclusions. ◆ Combine or organize the information in a meaningful way. ◆ Organize the information provided in appropriate categories. ◆ Put the information into a flowchart or a diagram. ◆ Create a chart or graph to show _____.
Attributing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Identify the pros and cons of _____. ◆ Describe your own biases regarding this idea. ◆ Conduct a debate about an issue.
Evaluate	
Checking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Examine the source and determine if it would be appropriate to support an argument. ◆ For the given source, identify the weaknesses and strengths. ◆ Review each source cited to determine the quality of information and evidence presented. ◆ Identify the claim and the supporting evidence. ◆ Highlight unsupported claims.
Critiquing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Select the best option for the given problem or idea based on criteria (e.g., feasibility, consequences). ◆ Prioritize the solutions to the problem. ◆ Put in order of importance the key actions. ◆ Evaluate according to criteria the best _____. ◆ Identify the criteria to measure success. ◆ Determine the costs and benefits for each given solution. ◆ Evaluate a classmate’s work based on rubric criteria. ◆ Determine the best course of action or decision based on a set of criteria.
Create	
Generating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Create a list of all the possible solutions for _____ (a real-world problem). ◆ What would change if _____? ◆ Invent a solution for _____. ◆ Formulate a hypothesis for _____. ◆ Design a survey to _____.
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Create a plan to solve a problem over time. ◆ Draw up a plan to show how your idea will work.
Producing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Deliver a presidential speech outlining a plan to address a real-world problem. ◆ Design a website to persuade your community to take action on an environmental issue.

Source: Stobaugh (2013, p. 50).

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A strategy to apply Bloom's taxonomy and overcome the challenges of critical thinking is the use of interpretive exercises (Stobaugh, 2013). Through these, students analyze introductory materials such as graphs, written texts, or audiovisual input before engaging in higher-level thinking through multiple-choice questions, graphic organizers, open prompts for production, etc. State examinations usually include interpretive exercises, mostly due to their reliability and ease to assess thinking processes and problem-solving skills (Stobaugh, 2013). Implementing this strategy in the classroom can therefore make learners reflect and take positions on real issues while at the same time prepare them for external examinations and opportunities for success in contemporary Western society.

This section has covered the multiple conceptions and misconceptions surrounding critical thinking. I have discussed the comprehensive definition and the framework of tools and considerations that I used to carry out this action-research project. Once I had defined the theoretical tools to tackle the challenge of critical thinking, the research question and objectives followed.

Research Question

How to implement teaching strategies to foster critical thinking in comprehension skills among seventh graders at San Ignacio School?

General Objective

To implement strategies to foster critical thinking in comprehension skills.

Specific Objectives

- To define teaching strategies that foster critical thinking in comprehension skills in 7th grade.
- To address ways to assess comprehension skills in terms of critical thinking.

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- To contrast student outcomes at the start and at the end of the implementation of critical thinking strategies in comprehension skills.

Action Plan

In this section, I describe the plan that I followed to carry out the objectives of my study. First, I provide context as to the timeframe and contents of the terms during which I applied my action plan. After this, I provide an overview of the design process and phases of my intervention. Finally, I describe the instruments of data collection that I employed to analyze results.

I conducted my action-research study during the third term and part of the fourth term of the school year at San Ignacio School, as of June 5 to September 25, 2017. I used topics from these terms' curriculum as the background for my design and implementation of critical listening and reading activities. These topics were the weather, appearance vs personality, and special days and celebrations. Grammar contents included basic and perfect tenses and different types of connectors and expressions.

This project's classroom implementation had three stages, each one comprising a workshop that made students reflect critically on listening and reading input. To design these workshops, I created interpretive exercises as described by Stobaugh (2013) through the top-three levels in Bloom's taxonomy and authentic materials such as videos and written texts. These interpretive exercises required students to move beyond the usual literal comprehension of input and attempt higher-level thinking involving their background knowledge and their personal views. In compliance with the school's methodology of separate assessment for each skill, and keeping in mind the problem statement of finding ways to practice critical comprehension without entirely depending on production, tasks in each workshop focused mostly on analyzing

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input, though there also were some writing tasks and oral discussions. Specific critical comprehension activities included multiple-choice questions, matching exercises, and graphic organizers following the models of Stobaugh (2013) and Brookhart (2010). Additional to the three main workshops that focused on comprehension, class implementation also involved discussions and debates on everyday topics, which served the purpose of gradually increasing the frequency of critical thinking tasks in the English class while making students adopt habits of reflection and analysis.

I used three data collection tools to assess the results of this study. First, I used a teacher journal where I wrote my class observations and impressions throughout implementation. Additionally, I designed and conducted surveys to a sample of students selected at random from all my fellow teachers' groups and mine to check their perceptions on the critical thinking workshops and on their own learning process throughout the study. Finally, I conducted interviews to the team of 7th grade English teachers to coordinate efforts and get insights from their experience and class impressions.

Development of Actions

Week	Action
June 5 th	Consent letters – I gathered all approved consent letters to pick a sample of students who would be included in the data analysis.
	Design of lessons and workshops – I designed critical thinking lessons and workshops for listening and reading as interpretive exercises.
	Class observations – I continued registering class observations on my teacher journal. I used this data collection tool throughout the project's implementation.

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<p>June 12th</p>	<p>Mid-year holidays – I continued working on the design of the workshops and lessons.</p>
<p>July 10th</p>	<p>Implementation of first critical thinking workshop – This was the pilot workshop using interpretive exercises to test students’ higher-order thinking in listening and reading. It focused on reading comprehension and included speaking activities for dialogic critical thinking. I used the first topic of the term—the weather—as the context for this workshop. After a warm-up with vocabulary activities and conversations from background knowledge, students read and contrasted two texts on culturally particular explanations for weather phenomena. Based on this contrast, students worked on a series of multiple choice questions designed under Bloom’s taxonomy levels of analysis—specifically, <i>attributing</i>—and evaluation—specifically, <i>checking</i>. Finally, there was a group discussion on issues raised in the texts.</p> <p>Interviews with teachers – These interviews focused on the pilot application of my interpretive exercises.</p> <p>Surveys to students – These surveys aimed to find out about students’ perceptions on the first workshop and on their ideas about critical thinking in general. I applied the surveys to a sample of students selected at random from all 7th grade groups.</p>
<p>July 17th</p>	<p>Teaching of critical thinking skills and implementation of dialogic critical thinking discussions and exercises – These sessions were a preparation for the next steps in the process, as students practiced analyzing and evaluating claims through dialogic critical thinking on topics from the term.</p>

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<p>Aug. 14th</p>	<p>Implementation of second critical thinking workshop – This was the second workshop using interpretive exercises to test students’ higher-order thinking in listening and reading. This workshop focused on listening and included speaking activities for dialogic critical thinking. Appearance and personality was the topic for this workshop. Students warmed-up with vocabulary activities and conversations from their background knowledge about stereotypes on looks and personality in professions and careers. After this, students watched the video of a TED conference by Cameron Russell, a famous top-model who questions the world of fashion, the stereotypes surrounding models, the concept of beauty, and race issues. Students identified the main ideas from the video through an activity involving Bloom’s taxonomy level of analysis—specifically, <i>organizing</i>—and discussed the video’s claims through the level of evaluation—cognitive processes of <i>checking</i> and <i>critiquing</i>—.</p>
	<p>Interviews with teachers – These interviews focused on the second application of my interpretive exercises.</p>
	<p>Surveys to students – These surveys aimed to find out about students’ perceptions on the second critical thinking workshop.</p>
<p>Aug. 21st</p>	<p>Teaching of critical thinking skills and implementation of dialogic critical thinking discussions and exercises – These sessions were a preparation for the next step in the process, as students practiced analyzing and evaluating claims through dialogic critical thinking on topics from the term.</p>

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<p>Sept. 18th</p>	<p>Implementation of third critical thinking workshop – This was the third workshop using interpretive exercises to test students’ higher-order thinking in listening and reading (see Appendix, p. 35). This workshop combined elements from the previous two and included both reading and listening tasks. The topic for this workshop was special days and celebrations and it focused on how famous people celebrate their birthdays. First, students warmed-up with vocabulary activities and conversations from their background knowledge. After this, students watched a video on five celebrities and their birthday parties, and then read a comic strip that criticizes the world of fame and entertainment. Students contrasted these two sources of information through a graphic organizer—level of analysis, specifically <i>organizing</i>—and then worked on a series of multiple-choice questions to further contrast and evaluate the listening input against the reading input. Finally, there was a dialogic critical thinking discussion to know students’ ideas about issues raised in the listening and reading inputs.</p>
	<p>Interviews with teachers – These interviews focused on the final application of my interpretive exercises.</p>
	<p>Surveys to students – These surveys aimed to find out about students’ perceptions on the last critical thinking workshop and their views on criticality in general.</p>
	<p>Beginning of data analysis – I gathered observations and interviews/surveys to start the data analysis.</p>

Findings and Interpretations

This section presents the findings of my study through the categories that I identified when cross-referencing class observations, student surveys, and teacher interviews. First, I

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discuss the general *effects of shifting from the traditional literal comprehension exercises to critical thinking activities* for listening and reading. After this, I address the *correlation between engagement and difficulty* that I found as related to the implementation of criticality. Finally, I analyze results in regards to the *prospect of introducing critical thinking as an evaluation strategy* in the school.

The central finding of this study is the effect of shifting between learning through literal comprehension and learning through critical reflection on reading and listening materials. Through critical thinking workshops and class discussions, students progressively became familiar with advanced cognitive processes such as analysis and evaluation in English, in contrast with more traditional activities such as dictation, cloze passages, or textual questions that only require a superficial comprehension of input. The challenge of implementing critical thinking did not necessarily lie in students' linguistic proficiency but in the way I led the transition between traditional linguistic tasks and critical reflection activities, which were new for them. Lessons started to introduce criticality progressively and increasingly through workshops and discussions, and students slowly appropriated tools and techniques of analysis to acquire the habit of seeing beyond the apparent features of listening or reading input. At the early stages of implementation, I wrote in my teacher journal:

It was clear that the critical thinking task was new and puzzling for students, as they were not used to going beyond literal understanding in English, but they started to get the mechanics after a while. My advice to carefully read all the possible answers in the multiple-choice questionnaire before picking one, and contrasting the options that seemed very similar to discover the correct answer, was useful for them, as at the first attempt they lacked the subtleties of analytical reading and usually just went with the first option

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that sounded reasonable. [...] Indeed, when designing the exercise, I made sure that the multiple-choice questions were demanding enough to take some time and effort in careful reading and analysis, avoiding answers that were too obvious. It did not come as a surprise that many students failed to recognize the differences between options that seemed almost identical at first, but I later helped them grasp the details that made the difference between right and wrong answers according to the information that the texts provided (teacher journal, July 27th 2017).

Students themselves recognized the shift from literal to critical comprehension and the importance of acquiring analytical habits. As one student would put it, the critical thinking activities “did not give us the answers right away but rather made us think and analyze what they meant”¹ (student survey, July 11th 2017) just as, before this study, as another student said, “we rarely did this kind of critical reading in class”² (student survey, August 17th 2017). Furthermore, some students expressed that they felt this shift helped them “learn to think instead of continue reproducing”³ (student survey, September 19th 2017). My fellow 7th grade teachers involved in this study also agreed that “these classes felt different [...]. They went beyond our regular objective, which is usually linguistic, so we went beyond the language itself in order to place students in a different scenario” (interview to teachers, September 22nd 2017).

Additionally, in the last stages of implementation, when students had become more familiar with tasks that required approaching listening and reading materials critically, they had also acquired habits of analysis to tackle critical thinking more easily. As I described in my teacher journal after one of the last sessions of implementation:

¹ “Los textos no nos daban las respuestas inmediatamente, sino que había que pensar y analizar lo que querían decir.” From here on, student survey quotes will appear in English with a footnote to the original Spanish version.

² “...pocas veces hacemos este tipo de lectura crítica en clase.”

³ “Estos talleres nos ayudan a aprender a pensar en vez de seguir reproduciendo.”

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While students were working on the critical thinking worksheet, I reminded them of the first workshop from some months ago, which had similar multiple-choice questions. Students now showed that they understood what is sought when shifting from literal to critical comprehension, as they were able to discover what was “not visible” in the input—as opposed to just getting a specific word or sentence for filling a gap, doing a transcription, writing from dictation, etc. In other words, they were able to go beyond the apparent content as they analyzed and evaluated the author’s purposes and the input’s structure. Since the goal was to get to this analytical point without depending entirely on writing or speaking production but on comprehension alone, multiple-choice questionnaires and graphic organizers were useful tools to allow students to show their analysis, just as is done in State tests that do not rely on production (for practical reasons). [...] Students still had some difficulties at first, but soon they were all on their own working at a fast pace and getting most answers right. When we shared answers a few minutes later, I asked students to explain why certain words and expressions would not fit in the graphic organizer for the two contrasting sources of input (video and text). At this point in the worksheet, they were not yet proposing their own analyses or points of view, but they were already contrasting ideas and claims through careful reading (teacher journal, September 21st 2017).

Consequently, by the end of the study’s implementation students were able to say that the critical thinking tasks and exercises had become “easier, due to the training we received with each workshop”⁴ (student survey, September 19th 2017), and one of the teachers thought that “our students got used to the way the critical thinking tasks worked. There really was much

⁴ “Los talleres se han vuelto más fáciles ya que hemos practicado y hemos aprendido con cada taller.”

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improvement by the end of the study.” However, the teachers also felt that this had only been a first step and that longer implementations would be required to see more improvement, both in their own teaching practice and in the students’ ability to cope with advanced cognitive skills in English. Evidently, this study was our first exploration into the kinds of exercises and tools that teachers in the school could use to go beyond literal comprehension and reach critical thinking in the English class.

Another important finding that emerged from analyzing and cross-referencing the sources of data was a correlation between engagement and challenge that appeared throughout the period of implementation. As many of my students had a good English level and they were used to rather unchallenging lessons and tests, they showed lack of motivation and engagement through often disruptions and misbehavior in the classroom. This became clear as the new challenges posed by the critical thinking lessons actually improved motivation and behavior in the classroom. At the early stages of implementation, I wrote in my teacher journal:

Students were puzzled and started asking for the answers they needed to complete the activity, but when I refused to give them any clues they started to make a competition out of it and spontaneously formed small groups to discuss the possibilities. This eagerness and effort to complete an activity is rather unusual in class. [...] It is interesting to see the effect a good challenge has on these students. They become really interested in working on something the harder it gets, so I think many English classes are boring for them because they seem just too easy or predictable (teacher journal, July 13th 2017).

Similarly, in another class observation I wrote:

With some exceptions, students were surprisingly focused on the video and the questions I asked from it. [...] This is probably due to the video being appealing to them, as it was

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not the usual artificial video students watch when learning English, and perhaps also because the English spoken in the video was fast and challenging, just as the critical thinking questions, so students needed to concentrate and avoid their usual distractions (teacher journal, August 15th 2017).

Interestingly, students themselves confirmed this hypothesis. In survey questions related to interest and motivation during the first stage of implementation, 90% of the sample of students agreed that they found the activities to be motivating, and one of them stated that “the class felt different, as there was a bigger challenge”⁵ (student survey, July 11th 2017). Likewise, another student said that the critical thinking tasks were “interesting and engaging because we needed to think harder on topics that are important but that we only seldom worked on in class”⁶ (student survey, July 11th 2017), and one student later acknowledged the need “to push ourselves harder in order to analyze and discuss”⁷ (student survey, August 17th 2017). On the other hand, at the early stages of implementation one of the teachers mentioned that she “was afraid that it [workshop 1] would be too difficult for our students, but they surprised me. They worked harder than usual on the reading comprehension section and the discussions were very engaging and interesting” (interview to teachers, July 14th 2017). The same teacher would later add that

These classes are different from what we usually do. I think students like critical thinking, it is hard sometimes but they have the ability to do it and most of them like it. It is motivating for them, so it is a good way to encourage more discussion and analysis, as they get more engaged in what is going on in class (interview to teachers, September 22nd 2017).

⁵ “La clase fue diferente ya que hubo un desafío más grande al comprender cada texto.”

⁶ “Las actividades han sido interesantes y motivadoras ya que nos ponen a pensar más en temas que son importantes pero que no vemos muy seguido en clase.”

⁷ “...nos tenemos que exigir más para analizar y discutir.”

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As shown above, both students and teachers felt that there was a correlation between being engaged and being challenged in class. This challenge did not necessarily come from actual *difficulty* but mostly from how *unfamiliar* it was for our students to employ critical thinking in the English class. This distinction is important, as I have mentioned before that progressing from low-level to high-order cognitive demands in the scale proposed by Bloom's taxonomy is not a matter of difficulty but of the particular processes involved in each level, which students may apply in nonhierarchical ways according to their needs.

The last category of findings that emerged during data analysis deals with assessment. As mentioned in previous sections of this paper, an important factor of this project was the prospect of starting to assess English comprehension in terms of critical thinking at San Ignacio School without depending on production, as the school's evaluation system grades language skills separately. With that concern in mind, this study's implementation tried ways to teach and assess comprehension in terms of critical thinking with tools such as interpretive exercises, focusing on listening and reading tasks. However, it is important to consider the question on how ready the school's student population and the teacher staff are to take the step towards establishing grading criteria on critical thinking, as opposed to the literal comprehension exercises traditionally used in many tests. The first time I surveyed students about the possibility of being graded through critical thinking tasks similar to those of my action-research study, some students felt insecure, one of them stating, "I am not used to these kinds of exercises and would need more practice"⁸ (student survey, July 11th 2017). Nevertheless, at the end of the implementation process most students agreed that they would do well in such exams, as they had "already understood what

⁸ "Creo que me iría mal, ya que no estoy acostumbrada a este tipo de ejercicios y necesitaría más práctica."

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needs to be done”⁹ and “would get good results based on the results we have shown in the workshops in class”¹⁰ (student survey, September 19th 2017). Indeed, by this point students had already gone through a process and were no longer unfamiliar with critical thinking in the English class, which shows that student performance was ultimately a matter of guidance and practice. As I wrote in my teacher journal:

In general, students show ability for critical thinking and discussion about familiar topics in English, though they still require a lot of guidance on the teacher’s part. However, when they are left free to elaborate on their views to answer open questions, they show advanced cognitive skills. Also, the increasing presence of critical discussions in my classes, even if they are sometimes short due to time constraints, has slowly made them get used to criticality in English (teacher journal, September 14th 2017).

As for teachers, on the prospect of assessing criticality they agreed that “it is possible to design and apply critical thinking tests... But just designing these tests would be very time-consuming, and also very difficult, because not everyone will be able to design good critical thinking exams” (interview to teachers, September 22nd 2017). It is true that designing critical thinking tests would be challenging for teachers who lack training and experience in this regard. However, as this study has showed, grasping the concept of critical thinking through the available theory in EFL, and exploring aids such as Bloom’s taxonomy and interpretive exercises, might be a good start. Through these tools, this study has attempted to make the task of introducing criticality become less challenging in our context, as we work towards improving our teaching practice to adapt to new needs and more demanding students.

⁹ “Me iría bien porque ya tendría claro qué es lo que tengo que hacer.”

¹⁰ “Me iría bien pues me ha ido bien en los talleres de clase.”

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Conclusions

In this section, I present the general conclusions of this action-research project. The implementation of teaching strategies to foster critical thinking in comprehension skills has affected the classroom environment and the learning process of my students in different ways, which I here refer to by taking into account the three specific objectives of the study. First, I describe the teaching strategies that I implemented as tools that allowed the shift from literal to critical comprehension in the classroom. After this, I refer to the process the students went through as the English class became an environment for more critical reflection. Lastly, I discuss the prospect of assessment in terms of critical thinking in the context of this study.

The teaching strategies that I used to design critical reading and listening lessons and activities are the result of theoretical and practical considerations described in previous sections of this paper. As mentioned when discussing findings, students were not familiar with advanced cognitive processes such as the ones at play in critical thinking in the English class, so it was important to lead the shift from *literal* to *critical* reading and listening comprehension tasks gradually and increasingly. The three critical thinking workshops that I designed focused on reading and listening comprehension and encouraged class discussions during which students applied their background knowledge and analysis on topics taken from the school terms' contents. I designed these workshops following the model of interpretive exercises as suggested by Stobaugh (2013) while making sure that tasks required students to employ some of the cognitive processes involved in analysis—differentiation, organization, and attribution—, evaluation—checking and critiquing—, and creation—generating, planning, and producing. Likewise, the group discussions, even though they required speaking, emerged from analyses on listening and reading input to create an environment of dialogic critical thinking that allowed

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students to bring real life concerns into the classroom. Throughout all these lessons, students acquired skills to take the step between literal and critical comprehension. As findings have suggested, the applied tools and concepts are useful to foster critical thinking in comprehension skills. However, every student population is different and some contexts might benefit from other approaches. In this case, many of my students were already quite proficient and the school's methodology required comprehension to be assessed separately from production, so achieving a balance between institutional requirements and the tools at one's disposal is ultimately a matter of finding what works for the students' benefit.

The second specific objective of this action-research project was to evaluate student outcomes throughout the period of implementation. This did not necessarily involve increasing students' proficiency in the short term but rather making them go beyond traditional, literal comprehension tasks in order to start thinking critically in the English class. However, contrary to the common belief that this shift would mean an increase in difficulty for students, findings showed that it was mostly a matter of *getting familiar* with new requirements in the English class, which students achieved through progressive exposure and practice. This has led me to believe that foreign language teachers can introduce critical thinking in their lessons, perhaps even in beginner-level contexts, by simply taking a close look at how they design their class activities and the kinds of cognitive processes they make their students employ. Higher cognitive processes do not necessarily mean "higher difficulty," and students will go as far as the teacher encourages them to go in cognitive terms. Unfortunately, it is sometimes teachers who see *difficulties* where students only see new—and often exciting—*challenges*.

The final specific objective of this study involved addressing the prospect of assessing comprehension in terms of critical thinking. With this objective in mind, I designed certain

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sections of the critical thinking workshops as simulating reading and listening comprehension tests, mostly employing multiple-choice questionnaires and graphic organizers. On an instrumental level, these tools appear useful and reliable as eventual assessment devices for comprehension skills. Additionally, findings showed that progressive exposure and practice in the classroom made students get better results in terms of critical thinking, and at the end of the implementation process they were confident about doing just as well in real exams. However, this will not become a real possibility in this or any other school as long as teachers do not go through the necessary training. Teaching and assessing critical thinking is in part challenging for teachers because of common myths and theoretical misconceptions. This study would not have been possible without its theoretical considerations and practical tools; likewise, schools cannot expect teachers to teach and assess aspects that they do not have *experience* or *expertise* at. In the end, this is as much a matter of practice for teachers as it is for students. Traditional education systems, conceived for the reproduction of knowledge, do not privilege critical thinking, so it is necessary to make an effort towards a transition.

To sum up, this study has attempted to foster critical thinking among 7th grade students in terms of comprehension. I have employed a set of theoretical concepts and instruments to help both my students and myself, as a teacher, go from literal to critical comprehension in the English class. I believe these tools may make the task of critical thinking become less challenging for my own future teaching practice and for other teachers, as we all work towards building an education system that is relevant for today's ethical and technical necessities.

Reflection

In this section, I address a few key lessons and reflections from my experience throughout my practicum and research project. First, I reflect on my own teaching practice,

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especially in terms of classroom management and the purpose and ethics of my teaching. After this, I focus on theoretical aspects of my research project that enriched my teaching practice, namely the importance of criticality in education and considerations on how to introduce it to different school contexts than my own. Finally, I make a reflection on the importance of research for both pre- and in-service teachers and for schools.

My practicum experience and research project have brought important reflections and lessons to my teaching practice. First, as a result of my research project's implementation, I have noticed an improvement in my classroom management. Through the renewed interest and motivation towards the English class that my research project produced among my students, I strengthened my ability to direct my groups towards learning goals. This is a contrast to my previous experience in terms of classroom management, when I often struggled to keep my lessons organized and to cope with disruptions. Additionally, as I implemented my study I reinforced my conviction on the ethics of teaching, which goes beyond the subject matter—English in this case—and involves the general purpose of education, which is to provide students the tools they need to improve their lives and impact society in positive ways.

A second element I would like to mention in this reflection touches upon theoretical aspects of my research project that enrich my teaching practice. My research project was born from the importance of introducing criticality to education, as I believe that we must transcend traditional teaching models that focus only on the reproduction of knowledge. In the case of EFL teaching, the introduction of critical thinking contributes to establishing a learning process that includes and goes beyond the merely linguistic aspects of the subject matter. Specifically, during the experience of this research project I have learned to make a clear distinction between those class activities that only require students to reproduce—dictations, gap-filling passages, literal

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comprehension questions—and those that make students use their background knowledge and analytic skills to reflect on issues through the foreign language. This does not mean for me that one should avoid linguistic-oriented activities altogether, but teachers should be more aware of the potential that analytical tasks have to both evaluate linguistic aspects and empower students with tools for life. Evidently, the shift from reproduction to analysis and critical thinking implies practical issues. In my case, having proficient students was an advantage for my implementation of high-level cognitive processes, but this has also made me reflect on ways teachers might introduce criticality in contexts of beginner level classrooms. I believe this is a work in progress for all the teachers who believe education should evolve and find strategies to affect our students' lives in positive ways, no matter their social backgrounds or resources. It is important to continue reflecting on the pedagogical tools we have—or the ones we want to develop—and the populations we impact with our teaching.

The last element of this reflection refers to research as a tool for schools and teachers. The experience of implementing an action-research project has made me see how important it is for all stakeholders in education, especially teachers, to be open-minded towards research and its potential. Unfortunately, many pre-service teachers' research projects are short-lived and do not have continuity in schools. Both teachers and schools should be aware of the possibilities for growth and improvement that research has in education, as new ideas and strategies are tested and implemented to overcome challenges or misconceptions and explore new ways of teaching and learning. Schools should be more open to experimenting with new trends in teaching, as many pre-service teachers with ideas and curiosity invite them to do. I believe that in-service teachers, no matter their experience and backgrounds, should also allow themselves to innovate and try or cooperate with projects that contribute to the progress of education.

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To sum up, this action-research project experience has equipped me with important tools and reflections to lead my profession in an ethical and purposeful manner. This study has only been an exploration on criticality and I invite teachers to reflect on ways we can all contribute towards establishing an education that is more relevant for today's complex society.

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Appendix

CRITICAL THINKING WORKSHOP #3

Introduction: Birthday celebrations are an important event for most people, and celebrities usually celebrate their birthdays with the biggest parties you can imagine. In this workshop, we will be discussing the importance of festivities and the role of celebrities in society.

PRE-ACTIVITIES

A. Briefly discuss with a partner:

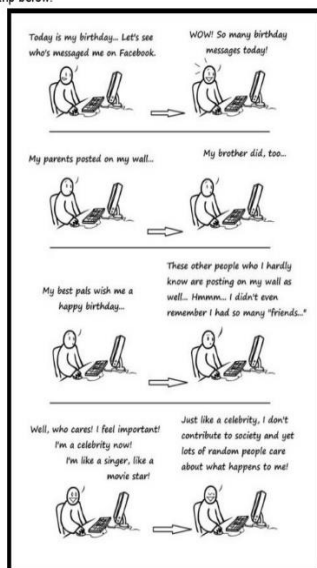
- What was your last birthday party like?
- Do you know or can you imagine what a birthday party from someone like Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, or Harry Styles looks like?

B. Vocabulary: Read the two possible definitions for each word and circle or underline the one you consider is the right one:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| - To make a buck | to make a lot of money <i>///</i> to be noisy |
| - A bash | A musical instrument <i>///</i> a big party |
| - To throw a party | to have or to organize a party <i>///</i> to throw eggs at people |
| - Throwback | return <i>///</i> a magic trick |
| - The cherry on top of... | very bad news <i>///</i> an extra detail that improves something |
| - A celeb | a type of vegetable <i>///</i> a celebrity |
| - Major | someone older than you <i>///</i> something very important |
| - Guest list | a list of people who are invited to a party <i>///</i> a list of friends |
| - ICB | stands for In Comic Books <i>///</i> stands for I Can't Breathe |
| - To take place in.../at... | when or where something happens <i>///</i> to sit down |
| - Post on someone's wall | popular Facebook expression <i>///</i> to put a painting on a wall |
| - Best pals | best friends <i>///</i> close relatives |

WHILE-ACTIVITIES

1. First, watch the video "Top 5 Celebrity Birthday Parties" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h40t7dcFzQ>)
2. Now read the comic strip below.



3. Compare the contents of video and the comic strip by assigning the following words to each box.

Facebook – Hollywood – birthday parties – birthday messages – criticism
entertainment – contributions to society – celebrity lifestyles

VIDEO	COMIC STRIP

4. Answer the following questions based on your comparisons between the video and the comic strip.

1. What is more likely to be the video's main objective?
 - a) It wants to criticize celebrities.
 - b) It wants to show how to organize a good party.
 - c) It wants to entertain people.
 - d) It wants to say that everybody should become a celebrity.
2. What is more likely to be the comic strip's main objective?
 - a) It wants to criticize Facebook.
 - b) It wants to show that it is important to celebrate birthdays with friends and family.
 - c) It wants to show that people only remember your birthday through Facebook.
 - d) It wants to say that celebrities such as movie stars and singers do not contribute anything to society.
3. From the following options, which one seems more likely to be the main relationship between the video and the comic strip?
 - a) Both criticize celebrities for not contributing anything to society.
 - b) Both criticize Facebook and social networks.
 - c) Both say that it is important to invite friends to your birthday party.
 - d) Both are centered on celebrities.
4. From the following options, which one seems more likely to be the main difference between the video and the comic strip?
 - a) The comic strip criticizes celebrities, but the video is just entertainment.
 - b) The comic strip is about Facebook, but the video doesn't mention Facebook.
 - c) The video is about birthday parties, but the comic strip doesn't mention any parties.
 - d) The video doesn't mention movie stars, but the comic strip does.
5. Reading the comic strip, one can say that its author's opinion about movie stars and singers is that
 - a) they spend too much time on Facebook.
 - b) they are useless for society.
 - c) their birthday parties are too crazy.
 - d) they are important for art and culture.
6. From the information in the video, one cannot say that
 - a) celebrities like to have big birthday parties.
 - b) there were many cakes at Harry Styles' birthday party.
 - c) celebrities' birthday parties can be very expensive.
 - d) celebrities do not contribute to society.

POST-ACTIVITY

Now that you have compared two different opinions on celebrities and entertainment, what's your personal position? Share your ideas with the class.