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CRITICAL THINKING IN BRITISH CLASSROOMS: A PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE FOR INDONESIA'S EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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Abstract

This article investigates the importance of critical thinking (CT) as part of instructional reform. In this respect, it briefly uncovers CT traditions observed in some British schools. Given discussing CT in Foreign—in particular Spain and English--, History and Religious Education classes, it might be clear that British schools are generally familiar with CT practices in their classrooms rather than Indonesia's schools which tend to take materials for granted. As such, this brief writing tries to propose an action plan enabling CT to be disseminated into Indonesia's classrooms.

Keywords: critical thinking, British classrooms, Indonesia's classrooms, centre for critical learning.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menelusuri makna penting berfikir kritis sebagai bagian dari reformasi pembelajaran. Pada konteks demikian, kajian ini mengungkap tradisi berfikir kritis yang berasal dari hasil observasi di sejumlah sekolah di Inggris. Berdasarkan kajian terhadap kelas-kelas untuk mata pelajaran Bahasa Asing terutama Spanyol, Sejarah, dan Pendidikan Agama, hal ini menunjukkan bahwa dibandingkan dengan sekolah-sekolah di Indonesia, sekolah-sekolah di Inggris secara umum lebih akrab dengan tradisi berfikir kritis. Tulisan ini juga menawarkan sebuah rencana tindakan untuk menerapkan dan menyebarluaskan praktik berfikir kritis dalam praktik pembelajaran di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Berfikir Kritis, Kelas di Inggris, Kelas di Indonesia, Pusat Kajian Berfikir Kritis

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, a pupil in Summerhill, England, said, 'You learn here by asking questions ... Summerhill lets you do that. I learnt a lot from making mistakes, too. You can even do that here without feeling stupid' (Gribble, 1998: 11). Even if this kind of libertarian school possibly has been a story, its 'school ethos' which, as Williams (2009) states, contains 'character' and 'values', has inspired many recent educationalists to rethink of their roles in educating people. One of the cultural essences of such a school is creating schools as spacious arenas for students to express their potentials, either thoughts or behaviors, critically. The term 'critical' here could be simply defined as expressing 'reasonable evaluation' (Hawes, 1990). If students think reasonably and, as asserted by Lipman (1988) cited in Schweisfurth (2009), have 'responsible thinking', they actually practice critical thinking (CT). Therefore, this essay will elaborate what I observed in several classrooms in Birmingham, United Kingdom, in line with the issue of CT.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the notion of CT in order to be developed in schools. One of the philosophical reasons of this importance is that students are originally human beings who have rights to develop their capacity in order for them to be able to live well in their societies. Practically, moreover, students are not 'objects' of teaching, but participants who learn, criticize and construct their environments. In this respect, it is appropriate to sustain what Freire (2003) argues that education should reject 'the banking concept' where students only receive and store 'the deposits' of knowledge. Yet, implementing CT in schools seems not to be easy since schools have longer been dominated by particular philosophies and their agents that preserve old-fashioned teaching which places teachers' statements are completely right in front of their students. Under this circumstance, students appear to be passive, not active both to express what they think or feel and to produce creativity. Thus, according to Williams (2009b), CT as an effort to test 'old ideas' could create 'new ideas' if it is given a wide chance to develop in classrooms.

Because of the limited times available to conduct observation as part of the bases to write this essay, I will focus on how students and teachers operate CT in their classrooms. Principally, this writing makes use of the 'symbolic interactionism' approach by which symbols such as 'language' and 'appearance' within their interaction will be studied (Wragg, 1994). These symbols then would be linked to the idea of CT. More systematically, this essay first gives a brief description of the classrooms observed and then critically compare them with classrooms in Indonesia and propose an action plan in line with the issue of CT.

CRITICAL THINKING IN BRITISH CLASSROOMS

To enable the study of CT to be clear in practice, I observed three classrooms different in terms of subjects being taught. The first two classes were Spanish and History classes at The Four Dwellings High School located in Quinton and the last class was Philosophy of Religion or Religious Studies' class at Cadbury Sixth Form College situated in Kings Norton where both schools are in Birmingham.

In Spanish class (Year 11), students learnt more than a pure language. Based on my observation dated 22nd October 2009, when studying Spanish, students also learnt social and cultural issues from books used. For instance, the Spanish book published by Oxford University Press (2005) they used, not only teach how to master the language but also illustrate ideas, pictures and caricatures which contain moral and social messages. For example, how that book describes a

romantic story (*un film romantique*), the Western world (*un western*), comedy (*une comédie*) and funny stories which have such messages as openness and glamour. In this case, besides learning Spanish, they expressed their thought in line with these interesting issues. Based on this fact, it seems likely that a language taught indeed has a hidden curriculum, i.e. certain cultural, social even ideological mindsets. Foucault, one of the leading post-modernists, even introduces 'language as power' (Fairclough, 2001). The essence of his notion is that any language could not be free from ideological interests of a certain community, primarily a dominant group. Therefore, CT used in the Spanish class becomes pivotal part of language learning and socio-cultural issues simultaneously.

Observing the History class (Year 11) conducted on 22nd October 2009 was also inspiring. After bombing attacks happening in New York (September, 2001) and London (July, 2005), schools in the UK has seriously responded to the issue of terrorism. Students taking the subject of History also discussed it in their classroom. As I saw, a teacher started his lesson with a question regarding his previous teaching. Students were asked for answering historical aspects in accordance with Taliban and Al-Qaeda movements on the one hand and war conducted by America and England in Iraq and Afghanistan on the other. A pupil said that war on terrorism was a crucial issue to be studied because, if it was not done, terrorists would operate their missions brutally. At the same time, there was a student asking, 'what kind of war could we do to stop terrorism?' Whilst students were discussing seriously, a pupil stated that war on terrorism done in Afghanistan should keep civil rights especially children and women's fate. Such a class debate appeared to be interesting because students could rethink of the history of war and missions behind that. In this case, students could examine history as dynamic social events, not cases taken for granted. What the history teacher did to develop students' CT was actually relevant to contemporary historians who promote ideographic (sociological), besides nomothetic (chronological) approaches. The work of Goldthrope (1991) cited in Bryant (1994: 9) asserts that 'historians must contextualize, with dates and places, whereas sociologists should strive to widen the scope of their explanatory argument'. Based on the above notes, it is likely that the study of History would make students critical if it is conducted by sociological, not only chronological analysis.

The next class I observed was Philosophy of Religion or Religious Studies' class (Year 16) conducted on 5th November 2009. The teaching was started with brainstorming about 'Irenaeus theodicy' which theoretically emphasizes the nature of evil and the role of God. Generally speaking, this kind of theodicy teaches that since human beings are created and born into the world imperfectly, they should struggle to have good conducts. The existence of evil would make people try to get a better life. To respond to that issue, it seemed that students who are mostly from different religious backgrounds such as Christianity, Jews and Islam, had responses variously. Besides trying to understand what this theodicy implies, each student also tended to use his or her own perspective to examine it. Although their opinions were either similar to or different from each other, CT they built was leading to an interesting dialogue because each tried to listen to why somebody else had a particular opinion of this issue. As stated in the school guide, 'students are encouraged to develop their views and opinions whilst looking at answers given by religions in the past' (*Cadbury Sixth Form College Student Guide*

2010: 28). The most important point is that the CT orientation of this subject is under the Birmingham agreed syllabus for religious education promoting both 'learning from' each religion embraced by a student and 'learning about' multi-religious traditions (www.birmingham-asc.org.uk, accessed on 07 October 2009). In this respect, knowledge being set up is a critical viewpoint by which students have to analyze arguments or something 'behind the surface' (Cottrell, 2005). It is then mentioned by Wright (2003) as part of critical religious education.

Having elaborated the above evidence, it is obvious that Spanish class makes use of that language as a tool to critically understand social, cultural and moral issues. Next, in the History class, students develop, as Ennis (1962) cited in Hawes (1990) called, 'reflective and reasonable thinking' to decide whether cases within a history is sociologically understandable. In addition, the Philosophy of Religion or Religious Studies' class seems to be relevant to both 'reflective skepticism' to religious thoughts and 'dialogical reasoning' amongst diverse religious viewpoints of each student (Hawes, 1990). Thus, it can be said that British classrooms generally promote CT even though each class has a specific characteristic of various CT.

CRITICAL THINKING IN INDONESIA'S CLASSROOMS

To examine CT practice in Indonesia' classrooms might be not easy because this essay mostly bases on secondary not primary sources such as observation. Therefore, it will portray some trends in regard to this issue, not have an intention to make generalization. In order to be clear, I will analyze CT in foreign language, History and religious education teaching generally happening in Indonesia and then briefly compare them with those in Britain as extracted from the three British classes observed.

Foreign language teaching in Indonesia has longer been directed to the concept of 'language as language', not language as a tool to understand science, cultures and society. Such a situation affects students to only memorize materials instead of using the language to communicate their thought and understand the social life. For instance, when translating English language, students tend to translate it word-by-word and then memorize it. This trend is completely different from one of the CT postulates in language study which asserts that translation is 'a political action' (Tejaswini, 1992). It means that translation should make students aware of their cultures and society. The work of Atkinson (1997) reveals that CT in foreign language has no longer operated because teachers might ignore local cultures. Indonesia's teachers appear to take foreign language textually without contextualizing its meanings to fit into students' lives. Coleman (1996: 13) also argues that 'construction of the meaning of the English language classroom must be culturally embedded'. As such, the postcolonial perspective which states that students should critically examine concepts used in foreign language by using local meanings, should be practiced (Dewi, 2005). Shortly, foreign language teaching in Indonesia has not changed to be more critical.

It might be undoubted to say that History curriculum in Indonesia has been a battlefield of political interests (Curaming, 2004). History of this country, for example, has been portrayed based on the New Order regime interest since the 1970s. Anderson (2006) is likely to be correct when saying that Javanese cultures appear to have dominated the political interaction and images. As shown in some literature, Indonesia's political system has been under the Javanese philosophy which emphasizes the power of elites and ignored social sovereignty. As long as this

issue is concerned, History teaching is likely to be influenced by such a monolithic mindset which leads a social history only to be fitted into elites' interests. Moreover, history codification is generally based on chronological assertion (the nomothetic approach). According to Kuntowijoyo (1997) Indonesia's social history which explores, for example, social turbulence in the 1960s in detail has no longer been developed. Another case is that how and why sociologically various interest groups could meet their perspectives of *Pancasila* as the state ideology in 1945 were not sufficiently discovered. Most of the History books only describe the historical surface of that moment, not 'behind the surface' of it (Cottrell, 2005). Thus, it may be argued that Indonesia's History classes have been less critical due to monolithic and the nomothetic approaches strongly used.

Religious education in either private or State schools in Indonesia, is primarily aimed at strengthening students' beliefs (confessional), not academically discussing mindsets in a particular or even various beliefs. The 2003 Education Act (Article 12) even asserts that students are only taught by teachers who are religiously the same as their students' religions. Moreover, this subject generally takes religious doctrines as basic assumptions to understand and practice religious values instead of making use of philosophical approaches which, in some cases, support critical standpoints. As such, Indonesia's religious education seems not to be directed to create critical, but pious and loyal students to a particular interpretation of religious notions. However, in the recent years, the idea of religious education reconstruction has begun to flourish, for instance, a viewpoint proposed by Mulyana (2005) about 'case-based value learning'. His idea promotes religious education which bases on real cases in societies and students are facilitated to critically discuss and correlate these problems with certain religious values. This project might be challenging but religious teachers themselves actually need to be trained about how to deal with it in practice.

To compare CT trends in both British and Indonesia's schools, the following table illustrates their main points.

The table shows that there are a number of important differences between British and Indonesian classrooms in regard

Tabel 1
A Comparison of Critical Thinking Trends in British and Indonesian Classrooms

SUBJECT	BRITAIN	INDONESIA
Foreign Language	Learning Spanish is more than studying a language, but also analyzing cultural and social dimensions.	7Learning English seems only to read, memorize and understand the language itself.
History	The ideographic (sociological) and nomothetic (chronological) approaches are used simultaneously.	The nomothetic (chronological) approach is dominant rather than the ideographic (sociological) approach.
Religious Education/ Philosophy of Religions	Understanding 'behind the surface' of multi-religions philosophically	Understanding 'the surface' of a single religion doctrinally

to their CT trends. In relation to foreign language teaching, British classrooms tend to be critical since analyzing cultural and social meanings through the language taught rather than Indonesian ones which emphasize language memorization or 'language as language'. In addition, History teaching in Britain appears to make use of the sociological approach so that it is academically in-depth, whereas that in Indonesia pays more attention to the chronological approach. In the real case, it is likely that discovering Indonesia's social history, for instance, has not been yet developed seriously. Finally, in contrast to religious education in Britain where multi-religions are taught by using the philosophical approach, religious education in Indonesia is directed to understand and strengthen a single religious tradition. The latter primarily uses the doctrinal approach. The impact of this difference is that British religious education might be more critical of understanding meanings behind religious doctrines than Indonesia's religious education which draws more attention to internalize religious doctrines which each student adheres to.

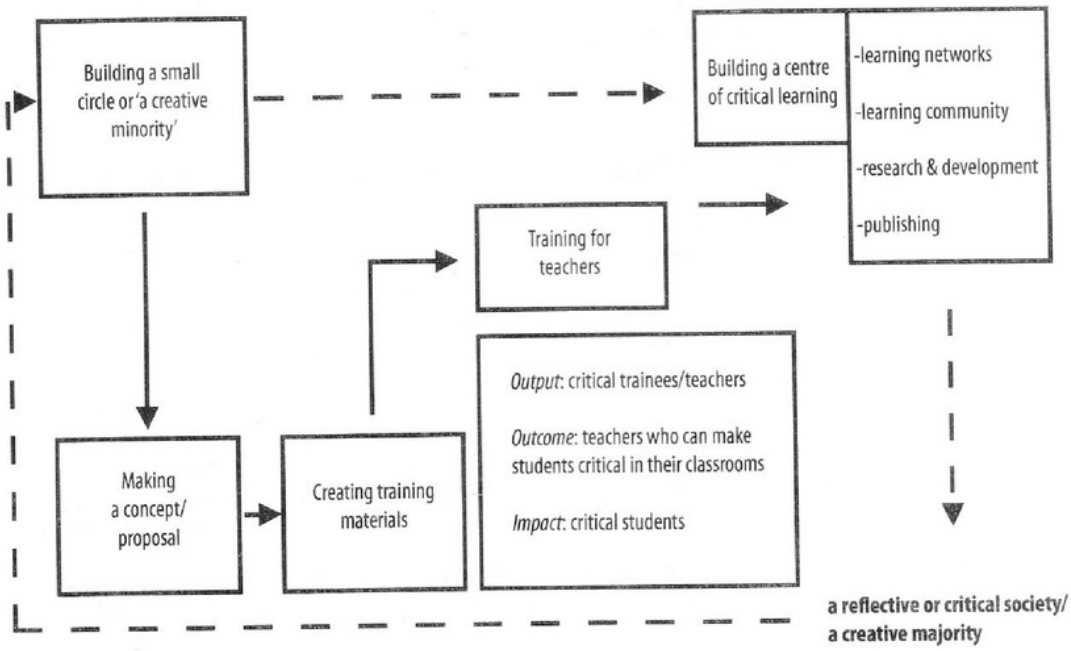
AN ACTION PLAN OF CRITICAL THINKING DEVELOPMENT IN INDONESIA'S CLASSROOMS

The following is an action plan enabling CT can be developed in Indonesia's classrooms. The action plan can be schemed as below:

The scheme illustrates a total action of CT development possibly making students more critical in their classrooms.

Scheme 1

An Action Plan of Critical Thinking (CT) Development



Moreover, it is designed to propose a project which has an impact to build a critical society in future. In more detail, this part will explain the idea as described in the above scheme and analyze the possibility of its implementation.

1. Building a 'small circle' or 'creative minority'

To prepare the concept and practical aspects of the CT development project, I would argue that a small circle called 'the creative minority' has to initially exist (Whirson, 1994). This group consists of people who are generally knowledgeable, committed and ready to cooperate to each other in line with CT development. They will have a responsibility to discuss and make sure several points. The first is preparing and creating the concept of the CT development project for schools. As it has been discussed earlier that CT contains some concepts that have to be elaborated and clarified. As such, the creative minority have to build a particular paradigm which will become their guidance. The second is both creating proposal and managing programmes of this project. This task consists of conceptual and managerial aspects. Thus, the creative minority could be divided into both conceptual and managerial persons in charge.

Some people as the creative minority possibly getting involved in this project are academics, teachers, trainers and Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOs) activists. It may be argued that a variety of people in the project is fitted into strategic and practical needs. Some of academics and NGOs' activists could supply current ideas of CT development. Critical ideas as proposed by Paulo Freire, Frankfurt Theory and other schools of thought are certainly more familiar for academics. In addition, some of NGOs' activists primarily involved in critical movements can also provide their experience of organizing activities in the field. In this respect, communities and institutions which promote critical movement could be asked for supplying and sharing their experience in developing critical ideas especially in education. Moreover, some chosen teachers asked for involving in this project are also important figures. They are not limited for foreign language, History and Religious Education teachers. Another teacher such as Citizenship one could be invited to get involved. Thus, they are all people who might strategically or practically support this programme.

2. Making a basic concept and proposal

The next important step is producing a basic concept and a proposal enabling stakeholders and even donors interest to support this project. At this level, besides preparing an outline of this project, the creative minority could contact and have discussions with diverse societies, either the government or social communities, say, possibly funding this project. At this point, the creative minority have to make sure relevant data to support the outline or basic concept submitted. Since this project will involve teachers as a target group (trainees), the creative minority can show the number of teachers and their schools which would be invited both to follow the training and to become part of a pilot project.

3. Creating training materials

Another task conducted by the creative minority is creating training materials. In this context, the creative minority could take conceptual and practical ideas of CT into the materials being prepared. Because trainees are teachers generally knowledgeable of their own subject, the creative minority have to accommodate opinions of the teachers primarily involved in the creative minority. History, Religious Education and foreign language teachers involved in the creative minority are asked for sharing their experiences about

educational aspects which should be improved, for example, contents, methods and evaluation. The creative minority also can learn from books and training materials slightly similar to this project. All previous inputs can be experiential points to create real materials of this training more appropriately. Another technical aspect is that the creative minority can consider whether the materials will be produced in the forms of printed or digital materials. Certainly, the forms will be influenced by budget, equipment available and other circumstances. If trainees are mostly from villages where they are not too familiar with computers and websites, for instance, such printed materials as books and training kits will be more useful.

4. Training for teachers

In order to be systematic, the creative minority could prepare a concept of the training. In this respect, they have to see at least two aspects. The first is related to a training paradigm. Because trainees are teachers, the training will be possible if designed to use the paradigm of 'education for adult' by which trainees have a wide chance to participate in the training from the beginning to the end. In this respect, for example, 'interactive theories' upon which trainers and trainees will make agreement in line with their training processes will be technically appropriate. However, in general, the creative minority could prepare topics and related materials and then share and discuss them with trainees. To make the training plan run well, the creative minority could contact, for example, local training officers to join this project.

The most important point is that the creative minority or a team chosen should monitor and evaluate the teachers who have followed this training and have been implementing CT in their classrooms. Teachers and schools monitored will become a pilot project. In the field, the monitoring team must observe and examine two aspects, i.e. teachers' ability to make students more critical in their classrooms (outcome) and students' competence to think and express their ideas critically (impact). As a result, the monitoring program will become feedback for the creative minority to improve CT development in the following time primarily relating to CT dissemination stage into many schools (after the pilot project has finished).

5. Building a Centre for Critical Learning (CCL)

As follow up of this project, I argue that it is quite important to build an agent called a centre for critical learning (CCL). The goal of this body is to create a reflective/critical society or 'the creative majority' (Wallace, 1995). This institution can develop some programs as follows:

5.1 Learning networks

The learning network here is an 'online learning environment' (Sea, Pickett&Pelz, 2003. http://www.sloan-c.org). The various sources in line with CT will be up loaded through the network/website created and this network can make use of the existing relevant websites as well. Therefore, teachers, students and other communities could participate in both sharing their knowledge and developing the online CT.

5.2 Learning community

The learning community is 'people engaged in intellectual interactions for the purpose of learning' (http://main.gvsu.edu). This program is dedicated for both groups of people who have longer had little access to education and schools which have limited learning resources. This program can accommodate groups of people such as academics, trainers and

professionals to share their knowledge and experience with other people in communities. In this context, CT could be the main aspect of learning.

5.3 Research and development

Research and Development (R&D) here could support teachers in particular in conducting research promoting CT in their classrooms. For example, Classroom Action Research (CAR) can be popularized as a model. In this respect, CCL could cooperate with donors, the government and private sectors to provide research grants for this activity.

5.6 Publishing

CCL also has a programme to publish qualified research on CT and other related materials in the form of books, academic journals and newsletters.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that British classrooms have in many cases practiced critical thinking (CT) rather than Indonesian classrooms. Foreign language teaching in Britain has analyzed cultural and social aspects within the language taught, whereas that in Indonesia tends to emphasize language memorization. Next, in contrast to Britain where History is taught dominantly with the sociological approach, History teaching in Indonesia is mostly taught based on the chronological approach. In addition, Religious Education in Britain is more philosophical and multi-religious approaches than that in Indonesia which is more doctrinal and mono-religious approaches. These findings enhance our understanding of CT development in Indonesia which in some cases needs to be improved.

The most important point of the action plan arranged is that teachers' training could become the central program which will possibly change teachers' performance in order to be more critical or reflective. Furthermore, the training will possibly influence teachers' teaching styles in their classrooms. In this respect, other programs in the action plan would actually support the possible changes of teachers' performance. As a result, it will influence their roles to make students become motivated to express their thought reasonably and responsibly.

Another supporting system proposed is the idea of building a centre for critical learning (CCL). This body can generally function to study and disseminate CT and other progressive educational ideas into various communities. At this level, the existence of CCL would multiply critical and creative people in a society. On this basis it may be inferred that CT in classrooms are embryos of that in societal relationship at large. Consequently, critical people would be created in everywhere so that each of them will probably say, as Shakespeare cited in Prochnow and Prochnow (1981: 375) said, 'for I am nothing if not critical'. If this happens, schools might be 'suspected' by authoritarians for coming critical citizens into beings. Thus, it can be said that schools have been back to the right path since they have create students to be subjects not objects of social change.

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