

Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking in TESOL: East vs. West

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TESOL educators in general assume that Asian L2 students are challenged in using critical thinking for L2 academic purposes. They believe that the students' native hierarchical and collectivistic cultural background render them less capable of expressing controversial viewpoints in their L2 writing and speech. This widespread assumption will be challenged here on the basis of studies demonstrating Asian L2 students' unique, yet adequate critical abilities. The present paper argues that what undermines accurate understanding of Asian L2 students' critical cues in L2 classrooms may be the Western ESL teacher's presupposition that these students have somewhat defective critical abilities. It also probes in the differences between monological and dialogical critical thinking. Dialogical critical thinking, which, unlike the monological type, recognizes a variety of opposing viewpoints and opinions, offers students both in the East and West an equally relevant and beneficial approach to critical thinking. Similarities between such Western modes of dialogical critical thinking and Eastern modes of thought are illustrated to provide a new definition of critical thinking that is inclusive of both Eastern and Western values as a valuable option in L2 classrooms. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications.

Key words: critical thinking, monological and dialogical critical thinking, L2 academic writing

INTRODUCTION

TESOL educators in general assume that Asian ESL students (e.g., Japanese, Chinese and Korean) are challenged in using critical thinking for L2 academic purposes (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996a, 1996b). They state that critical thinking is a Western socio-cultural practice which the individual who grows up in the Western culture acquires naturally and subconsciously and thus, it is difficult—if not impossible—for Asian students to learn and be able to use the mode of thought only through instruction. The TESOL educators also believe that the Asian students' native hierarchical and collectivistic cultural background further render them less capable of expressing controversial viewpoints in their L2 writing and speech. The purpose of this paper is to challenge such a widespread assumption that Asian ESL students are at large unsatisfactory critical thinkers and to suggest an alternative approach to the teaching of critical thinking which is relevant and beneficial for students both in the East and West.

In so doing, the paper will first demonstrate the tacit agreement among many TESOL educators that critical thinking is, in essence, a *Western thing* with which Asian ESL students inevitably have difficulty learning and applying in their L2 academic tasks. The assumption will subsequently be questioned based on the studies that demonstrate Asian students' unique, yet adequate critical abilities. It will be argued that what undermines accurate understanding of Asian L2 students' critical cues in L2 classrooms may be the Western ESL teacher's presupposition that these students have somewhat defective critical abilities. The paper will then probe in the differences between monological and dialogical critical thinking. Dialogical critical thinking, which, unlike the monological type, recognizes a variety of opposing viewpoints and opinions, offers students both in the East and West an equally relevant and beneficial approach to critical thinking. Similarities between such Western modes of dialogical critical thinking and Eastern modes of thought are illustrated to provide a new definition of critical thinking that is inclusive of both Eastern and Western values as a valuable

option in L2 classrooms. The paper will conclude with pedagogical implications.

IS CRITICAL THINKING A WESTERN CONCEPT?

Atkinson (1997) provoked a heated debate on the implementation of critical thinking in the L2 classroom. One controversial point presented by Atkinson was that critical thinking is a tacit, indefinable, socio-cultural practice and behavior which individuals in the U.S. or Western society subconsciously and naturally acquire—in other words, they learn “through the pores” (p. 73)—by simply being brought up and immersed in the culture. In order to illustrate this point, Atkinson examines popular academic literature that deals with critical thinking and elucidates the unspoken and arbitrary nature of scholars’ agreement on the definition of critical thinking. After pointing out that people who actually use the term in everyday life never attempt to define critical thinking, Atkinson (1997) states:

All the more interesting and troubling is the fact that academics, normally considered masters of precise definition, seem almost as unwilling or unable to define critical thinking. Rather, they often appear to take the concept on faith, perhaps as a sort of self-evident foundation of Western thought such as freedom of speech. (p. 74)

Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a) concur with Atkinson’s argument that critical thinking is such an unconsciously shared practice, especially amongst mainstream students in Western societies. They analyze critical thinking as a socio-cognitive practice that is rooted in the social and cultural contexts in which the individual grows up. It is, therefore, much more difficult for ESL writers whose socio-cognitive practices were developed and characterized by their own particular cultures to be socialized into a wholly different, or sometimes even diametrically opposed set of analytical and reasoning behaviors unique to the West. Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a) state:

L2 student-writers, given their respective socio-cultural and linguistic socialization practices, are more likely than native English speaking (NES) students to encounter difficulty when being inducted into CT courses in freshman composition classes; they are not “ready” for CT courses in either L1 or L2 writing classrooms. (p. 232)

Such difficulties faced by non-Western ESL students in learning how to think critically are also discussed by Atkinson (1997) for the same reason as that given by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a). Atkinson presents three different characteristics between non-Western and Western cultures and argues that with such cultural gaps, ESL students are greatly challenged in adopting the Western mode of thinking. For example, the idea that the individual is a distinct and independent entity from others underlies the practice of critical thinking in Western societies. The concept of the individual, however, varies significantly depending on each culture. Matsumoto (1988) shows how the Japanese understanding of the individual is inseparable from his/her relation to others in society. In a similar way, while the norm of self-expression is widely accepted and practiced as the evident means of critical thinking in Western cultures, Chinese, for instance, do not value self-expression as highly as Westerners do. Studies suggest that Chinese students tend to regard scholars’ knowledge as more important than their original contributions to the academic discourse (Scollon, cited in Atkinson, p. 83). The use of language in Western contexts is also popularly understood as a tool for discussion and debate. The research, however, indicates that this is not the case everywhere because in China, intelligent people prefer to be silent, as being expressive of one’s viewpoints and opinions is considered rather rude and unintelligible (Harklau, 1994).

Unlike Atkinson (1997) and Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a), Gieve (1998) espouses universal importance of critical thinking regardless of students’ cultural backgrounds. According to Gieve, there are two types of critical thinking: *monological* and *dialogical*. When defined in the dialogical view, critical thinking has a significant and far-reaching value for students in any society and culture.

The monological critical thinking, which Gieve describes as “defined by the informal logic movement” (p. 126), can generally be understood as the kind of thinking that is “reducible to logical thinking” (Walters, 1994, p. 1). A typical example that implements this monological type would be current popular textbooks of critical thinking that concentrate almost single-mindedly on training students in the recognition of logical fallacies (Lipman, 2003; McPeck, 1981; Paul, 1994; Walters, 1994). These types of textbooks generally assume that there is only one clear-cut, unchanging way of analyzing and evaluating arguments, which is to identify and reveal “errors” in their logic. It posits that critical thinking can simply be taught and mastered by the learner if he/she becomes well-informed of these already-defined, certain types of logical errors and becomes skillful in detecting them. In this process, more relevant and realistic factors in arguments such as “self-deception, background logic, and multi-categorical ethical issues” (Paul, 1994, p. 185) are considered trivial. Paul (1994) describes such a uniformly narrow-minded and unrealistic monological approach of critical thinking textbooks as follows:

The usual scenario runs something like this. One begins with some general pep talk on the importance of critical thinking in personal and social life...Then one launches into a discussion of the difference between arguments and nonarguments and students are led to believe that, without any further knowledge of contextual or background considerations, they can learn to analyze and evaluate arguments by parsing them into, and examining the relation between “premises” and “conclusion.”...To examine that relationship, students look for formal or informal fallacies, conceived as atomically identifiable and correctable “mistakes.” Irrationality is implied thereby to reducible to complex combinations of atomic mistakes. One roots it out, presumably, by rooting out the atomic mistakes, one-by-one. (p. 185)

Dialogical critical thinking, on the other hand, is a kind of discourse in which “the taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions that lie behind argumentation are uncovered, examined, and debated” (Gieve, 1998, p. 125). In such a classroom, students are persistently challenged to question what

they believed was always true and right, to critically examine themselves, their peers, teachers, experts, and authoritative texts and to discover their own as well as others' deep-seated prejudices, biases and self-centered beliefs and knowledge. This type of critical thinking would lead students to see not just the "truth underlying statements," but also "ethical claims to normative rightness inherent in actions and human relationships and claims to sincerity or truthfulness made by speakers, in the course of critical reflection" (p. 127). When defined in this dialogical way, Gieve states that critical thinking is hardly irrelevant or ill-suited to non-Western ESL students. In fact, it is the responsibility of ESL teachers to ascertain that students do benefit from dialogical critical thinking and use it to improve themselves, their own society and culture. To deny the access to this possibility would mean limiting the opportunity of those who are in fact capable of using dialogical critical thinking for their own ends.

A similar view is espoused by Benesch (1999), who claims that deciding *not* to address critical thinking in the L2 classroom is as political as deciding to address it. Dialogical critical thinking enhances students' understanding of the world's complex, multi-layered views, which in turn helps promote tolerance and social justice among people. Benesch (1999) gives an example in which such an open-minded and fair understanding of a complex issue such as hate crime was successfully developed amongst ESL students through a dialogical discussion of the murder of a gay college student, Mathew Shepard.¹ While it is perhaps more practical if ESL students were taught immediate needs such as writing skills suited to their content courses, it is still worthwhile to train these non-Western speakers of English in questioning what they assume is no doubt true and right about themselves, society and the world. Choosing not to do so, Benesch states, invites students to unquestioningly accept the status quo, which in turn undermines possibilities

¹ Mathew Shepard was an openly gay college student in Wyoming who was assaulted and killed because he was a homosexual. He was approached by two men, who posed to be homosexuals, in a bar and taken to an isolated rural area to be beaten to death.

for change and improvement. This could be a problem relevant not only to the U.S. or West, but to any society which strives to develop or sustain a viable and healthy democracy.

EVIDENCE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN THE EAST

In response to such a group of scholars who maintain that non-Western speakers of English are not adept in using critical thinking for L2 academic purposes (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996a, 1996b), Stapleton (2001) points out that these scholars' arguments are not based on empirical evidence that in fact disproves the ability of non-Western students to think critically.² In addition, Stapleton (2001) notes that popular topics in current ESL composition textbooks—such as gun control, freedom of speech, gender issues, and homosexuality—are not as much critically recognized and discussed by the public in, for instance, Japan as in the U.S. Stapleton wonders how such differences in a student's knowledge of the topic's socio-cultural context can determine his/her performance in critical thinking.

In order to answer these questions, Stapleton devised an empirical study in which he searched for traits of critical thinking in the English writings of 45 Japanese undergraduate university students. These traits of critical thinking included such elements as arguments, evidence, recognition of opposing viewpoints and fallacies. The results indicated that the students presented a deeper understanding as well as a higher quality of analysis of an issue about which they had more socio-cultural knowledge (i.e., rice importation in Japan) than an issue about which they had less socio-cultural knowledge (i.e., gun control). An issue such as rice importation in Japan, Stapleton states, socially, historically and culturally speaks more to the minds and hearts of the students. They are also constantly exposed to the relevant media,

² As shown earlier, Atkinson's (1997) evidence is largely based on early socialization process, and Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996a) (1996b) base their arguments on the examination of L1 freshman composition textbooks.

discussions and education about the issue both inside and outside the school. An issue such as gun control, on the other hand, may not alert or even interest the Japanese university students as much as it does their American counterparts. For in Japan, the possession of guns is neither allowed among citizens nor is there such a thing as the constitutional right to bear arms—a point which governs the gun control debate in the U.S. Ramanathan and Kaplan state (1996a):

As for L2 student-writers, given that they have not necessarily been socialized in this [American] culture, they may not perceive alleged “problems” as problems at all, or even as matters of particular interest... For example, a topic such as gun control may not be seen as a “problem” by individuals from other cultures in which guns are prohibited entirely, and that individuals from other cultures may not understand the implied constitutional right to bear arms that among other issues, underlines the gun control debate in the United States. (p. 239)

In addition to such differences in the students’ ability to think critically depending on their level of familiarity with the topic, Stapleton’s (2001) study also showed that the Japanese students generally had an adequate knowledge of what constitutes a good argument, using a variety of evidence such as logical explanations, facts, comparisons, analogies, and personal experiences. For example, those who agreed with rice imports in Japan argued that free trade is beneficial because it improves the competitiveness of farmers, making them more internationally minded and self-sufficient, enhancing the technology of agriculture. Those who disagreed with rice imports discussed the environmental effects of losing rice paddies, as rice paddies conserve water in a humid mountainous area and serve as micro ecosystems for plants and animals. Even with the unfamiliar topic of gun control, the students were able to give sound arguments such as the need for protection as pro and facilitation of murder and crime as con. Moreover, some students touched upon the Second Amendment, which guarantees the constitutional right to own a weapon, and others even went beyond to discuss

more abstract issues such as “the displacement of power and the climate of fear guns can create” (p. 526). These results counter the popular understanding that Japanese English speakers are in general unskilled at using critical reflection for L2 academic ends. The results, in fact, prove the adequate level of Japanese students’ critical thinking abilities.

If what Stapleton (2001) shows about Japanese students’ critical abilities is indeed true, why is it that scholars such as Atkinson (1997) continue to claim that non-Western students do not perform critical thinking satisfactorily in L2 classrooms? Stapleton observed how Japanese and non-Japanese raters responded differently to the students’ arguments, using the knowledge which the raters themselves grew up with respectively in their own socio-cultural backgrounds. If the individual were to, indeed, formulate assumptions based on his/her own socio-cultural practices and values, Stapleton suggests that the non-Asian scholars who say Asian students are insufficient critical thinkers may also be making such an overgeneralization of Asian students based on their own limited, ethnocentric world views. Stapleton states:

The claims that Japanese cannot think critically may in part be explained by a lack of shared assumptions between the non-Asian researchers and their Japanese students. When assessing the critical thinking ability of learners, it is natural to make judgments based on one’s own assumptions. When attempts at arguments appear fallacious, there is a tendency to believe that the purveyor of the “fallacy” is not a good critical thinker. (p. 530)

In fact, Stapleton’s (2001) remark about the Western scholars’ one-sided assessment of L2 learners’ critical abilities is reminiscent of the increasing opposition to somewhat deterministic and even reductive representations of non-Western students in L2 classrooms (Kubota, 1999; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1997). Zamel (1997), for instance, cites Tan’s (1995) critical response to a *New York Times Magazine* article that generalizes Chinese people as being “discrete and modest” and the Chinese language as inherently ambivalent whose words for “yes” and “no” are non-existent (p. 64). Tan complains that

these stereotypical assumptions about Chinese make her “throat seize,” because no Chinese in fact acts as “those little dolls sold in Chinatown tourist shops, heads bobbing up and down in complacent agreement to anything said!” (p. 65). Zamel observes an increase in research whose results simply remind TESOL educators of students’ L1 socio-cultural backgrounds as the obstruction to their academic success in L2 instruction. Although the research is perhaps well-intentioned, hoping to help struggling ESL students survive in L2 academic settings, Zamel, like Tan (1992), also wonders as to how such a type of reminder is, in fact, helpful. The reminder’s bottom line, Zamel (1997) states, seems to be not very far from simply asserting that non-Western students are, in essence, unable to perform certain Western things, and the only solution for such a problem is to teach the students how to think like the Westerners do:

Although I recognize that this work stems from the well-intentioned notion that taking into account students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds gives educators insight into and makes them sensitive to students’ struggles with language and writing, I am also struck by the way this leads to a deterministic stance and deficit orientation as to what students can accomplish in English and what their writing instruction should be. (p. 341)

AN EXAMINATION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN STYLES OF CRITICAL THINKING

The previous section challenged such an exclusive understanding of critical thinking as a Western creature and presented some evidence of the Asian students’ critical abilities. It is, however, perhaps still unrealistic and even impetuous to make an assumption that critical thinking is equally and identically valued and practiced both in the East and the West. For obvious differences in how non-Western L2 students and their Western L1 counterparts exercise and present their critical abilities in academic tasks may be

difficult—if not impossible—for TESOL educators to ignore or deny. The important questions to ask then are in what ways such differences, in fact, have been interpreted and treated by ESL teachers in L2 classrooms, and how the ESL teachers' awareness of those differences between Eastern and Western modes of thought can benefit the non-Western ESL students' L2 academic performance.

In order to answer these questions, the present section will first discuss the widely recognized contrastive rhetoric analysis between Eastern and Western languages (e.g., Chinese and Japanese vs. English). For one can argue that a persistent image of Eastern ESL students (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) as indirect and circuitous thinkers, as opposed to that of Western students as direct and straightforward thinkers, originates in such influential contrastive rhetoric theories that implied rhetorical differences as reflective of culture-specific thought patterns. The digressive and roundabout nature of non-Western students' rhetorical styles, in particular, has been equated with a lack of logical and critical thinking abilities. Second, a body of research that has interpreted Eastern students' non-Western rhetorical and intellectual practices more comprehensively or, in fact, more reflectively of the students' genuine intentions and motivations will be presented. It will be argued that apparent indirectness and passivity observed in non-Western ESL students' academic performance does not necessarily signify a lack of critical consciousness. The emphasis will be placed on the different manifestations and presentations, and not on the deficiency of non-Western students' critical thinking ability.

Kaplan's (1966) widely quoted article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," was the first to point out that non-Western ESL students' thought patterns, which were formulated based upon their L1-specific rhetorical conventions, negatively affected the ways in which the students wrote in their L2. Examining the English papers written by students from the Semitic, Oriental, Roman, and Russian cultures, Kaplan presented the well-known diagrams, which depicted the thought patterns of these non-English cultures with various zigzags in contrast to that of the English with a straight arrow. What was popularly and even unfortunately implied and

imprinted on the minds of many TESOL educators from such a memorable diagram was the persistent, fixed image, for instance, of Asian students as circuitous and digressive thinkers, who are greatly disadvantaged in writing a linear, straight-to-the-point type essay favored in English (Connor, 1996). As Connor states:

Unfortunately, Kaplan's diagram and his hypothesis have been interpreted too simplistically and too literally. Novices reading the article assume that all writers of a particular language compose all their writings in the organizational pattern described by Kaplan. It is even more unfortunate that Kaplan's diagram is taken to mean that a writing pattern reflects a thinking pattern. In other words, the Chinese write in circles; therefore, they must think in circles. (p. 31)

What followed such a deterministic view of Oriental students as evasive thinkers was the inevitable implication that these non-Western students, after all, may even lack the ability or the motivation to think clearly, logically, and critically. For example, Fox (1994) talks of Western faculty members who are overwhelmed and even irritated by the seemingly disjointed and roundabout manifestations of non-Western students' thoughts (pp. 13-14). One professor, upon encountering a series of non-Western students' theses and dissertations filled with seemingly pointless facts and information, concluded that these students were, after all, unable to "think" (p. xiv). Although these non-Western doctoral candidates had been successful scholars in their home countries, some of them being published authors, Fox continues,

at least one faculty member I interviewed had come to the conclusion that they weren't able to "think" at all. In his view, if you can think clearly, you can write clearly, and what you think will be evident in how you speak about a topic. But these students hadn't had much opportunity to speak up, he had noticed, either in their families or in their education systems, which emphasize rote learning and imitation. Since curiosity and self-expression had been stifled, students' ability to "think" was limited, and thus any kind

of writing that called for analysis or “critical thinking” was bound to be deficient. (pp. xiv-vx)

In contrast to such TESOL educators who assume that non-Western ESL students’ rhetorical errors in L2 are attributable to their L1 thought patterns, Kubota (1998), on the other hand, acknowledges developmental factors as more pertinent in explaining non-Western ESL students’ difficulty with L2 writing. What Kubota (1998) proposes is positive transfer between the students’ L1 and L2 writing, which means regardless of the culturally specific L1 rhetorical style, good writers in L1 still write well in their L2, understanding and implementing the mode of thought that is appropriate in the language. Examining both the Japanese and English essays of 46 Japanese university students, Kubota (1998) discovers just such a positive correlation between the students’ L1 and L2 products. Some Japanese ESL writers, despite using an inductive rhetorical style in their L1 writing, were still able to shift this mode of thinking into a deductive one, being more straightforward as well as assertive in their L2 composition.

Kubota’s results correspond to Kobayashi’s (1984) investigation of U.S. and Japanese university students’ writing samples. Her study showed that while one group of Japanese students who were enrolled in Japanese universities mainly used the inductive style of writing in English, the other group of Japanese students who attended American universities, on the other hand, was able to write adequately enough in the deductive style, no differently than their U.S. counterparts. What Kobayashi’s and Kubota’s (1998) studies imply is that inadequate English writing is caused more significantly by ESL students’ lack of composing experience as well as syntactic and lexical control in English rather than by L1-specific rhetoric. Kubota (1998) reminds TESOL educators not to conclude so systematically that Japanese students’ poor English writing is solely attributable to their L1 rhetorical styles. As writers in one culture, Kubota states, “are diverse in their ability, experience, and intention” (p. 74), it is important that TESOL researchers evaluate non-Western ESL writers on an individual basis.

Speaking of such a complexity in evaluating non-Western ESL students’

critical abilities, interesting and paradoxical evidence was also presented by Littlewood (2000), who compared the critical attitudes of Asian and European students in senior secondary and postsecondary schools. Common preconceptions about Asian students' learning attitudes are that they are attentive and obedient to the opinions of authority figures. The survey, which was given out to 2,307 students in eight Asian and three European countries, however, found out that such a stereotype of Asian students does not in fact "reflect the roles they *would like* to adopt in class" (p. 33). The students in Asia, equal to their counterparts in Europe, were open to questioning authoritative opinions and preferred active, independent gaining of knowledge over passive, teacher-dependent transmission of facts and information. Given these results, Littlewood (2000) suggests that Asian students' apparent, complaisant and submissive attitudes are more reflective of "the educational contexts that have been or are now provided for them, than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves" (p. 33). Asian students, Littlewood (2000) continues, in fact, do not wish to be "spoonfed with facts from an all-knowing 'fount of knowledge'" and want to "explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers" (p. 34).

Similar results were also obtained in Stapleton's (2002) attitude survey of 70 Japanese undergraduates in Japan. What the survey reveals is that the Japanese students, contrary to their commonly acknowledged tendencies toward hierarchism and collectivism, show no hesitation to voice opinions to authoritative figures. They, in fact, believe it necessary that any important, critical view be clearly stated, even if it endangers and breaks harmony. Stapleton concludes that although Japanese learners of English in L2 classrooms may seem obedient on the surface, such a phenomenon does not necessarily "reflect the real desires of the students" (p. 255). As shown in the survey, the students can indeed become controversial or sometimes even be willing to disagree. It is just a matter of whether such a critical attitude is expressed clearly or detected and interpreted accurately and sensitively by ESL teachers.

Speaking of the ESL teacher's accuracy in detecting nonnative students'

critical abilities, Cahill (2003) suggests just how challenging such a task can be for the Western ESL teacher, especially in writing classrooms. As mentioned earlier, the widely accepted views espoused by scholars such as Kaplan (1966) and Hinds (1983) describe Eastern rhetoric (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) as largely nonlinear and indirect. In particular, these scholars often talk of the Eastern rhetorical four-step procedure called *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* in Chinese and *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* in Japanese, which are commonly translated in English as “introduction,” “development,” “turn,” and “conclusion.” What is frequently denoted about this rhetoric is that the “turn,” in particular, is “a circular move of indirection or as an abrupt shift or digression from the main argument of a composition” (Cahill, 2003, p. 171). Examining Chinese and Japanese literature that theorizes the implication of the four steps, Cahill (2003) contravenes such a common notion of the “turns” and instead, loosely redefines it as “the occasion to develop an essay or paragraph further by alternative means” (p. 173).

What Cahill’s (2003) analysis reveals is that the “turn,” in fact, serves no differently from how any significant body part of the Western rhetoric serves the entire composition. The alternative means include additional examples, analogies, comparisons, and opponents’ views that follow the previous step or lead to the following step. The part can also function as a transitional bridge between the “development” and “conclusion,” attracting the reader’s attention with surprises or a fair degree of uncertainty, preparing a punch-line for the ending. The traditional contrastive analysis, however, exaggerates the function of the “turn” into something that is “singular, enigmatic and strange for the Western reader...encoding it with comforting illusions and stereotypes about Eastern thought, psychology, culture and writing” (Cahill, 2003, p. 187). Such a mythologized notion of Eastern rhetoric function makes it harder for the Western ESL teacher to understand how to decipher accurately a particular signal in the non-Western student’s L2 writing. Cahill suggests a further investigation into similarities rather than differences between L1 and L2 rhetoric so that Western ESL teachers will have some common ground on which they can build more legitimate understanding and evaluation of the

non-Western ESL students' L2 writing.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE DEFINITION OF CRITICAL THINKING BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

In response to Cahill's (2003) suggestion that L2 instruction may be of more benefit if TESOL educators become aware of similarities, rather than differences, in how Eastern and Western students apply their critical abilities to their academic tasks, the present section attempts to discover some potential ways which such seemingly different Eastern and Western critical approaches can in fact complement and enhance one another. A comprehensive definition of critical thinking that is inclusive of both Western and non-Western values will be provided as a valuable option in L2 classrooms.

In so doing, this section will first go back to the debate between monological versus dialogical critical thinking. Particular attention will be given to how scholars outside the TESOL discourse, such as Walters (1994), similar to some well-informed ESL educators introduced earlier, regard dialogical critical thinking as more important and beneficial to students' intellectual growth than monological, for the former recognizes aspects of the human mind that appreciates, rather than discredits, different values and viewpoints. Secondly, the similarities between such a Western dialogical critical approach and Eastern treatment of critical thinking will be examined. Important points are made as to how seemingly contradictory Eastern and Western values such as collectivism versus individualism are not in fact opposing, but are complementary. Lastly, it will be suggested that L2 instruction may indeed profit from such a balanced application of both Eastern and Western thoughts in understanding and evaluating students' individual critical abilities.

As explained earlier, what concerns some well-informed TESOL educators is the monological nature of critical thinking in current L2 instruction. To recapitulate, one of the main features of monological critical thinking

textbooks is their single-minded concentration on the discoveries of logical fallacies in arguments (Andolina, 2002; Cavina, 1996; Cooper & Patton, 1997; Moore, 1995; Scull, 1987). Many of these monological critical thinking textbooks contain a chart of logical fallacies, followed by an exercise asking learners to identify what types of fallacies the arguments contain. The following table is from Cooper and Patton (1997), except that the examples were changed from the original for the purpose of making the theme (i.e., abortion) consistent throughout the different types of fallacious arguments:

TABLE 1
Types of Logical Fallacies

Fallacy	Description	Example
Appeal to Authority	Appeals to an authority who is not an expert on the issue under discussion.	Abortion to save the mother is irrelevant because a pediatric surgeon has never seen a case in which such a dilemma has arisen.
Appeal to fear	Implicitly threatens the audience.	Abortions often leave the women infertile.
Appeal to pity	Attempts to win sympathy.	Young women are forced into having abortions because of older boyfriends who don't want the child.
Begging the Question	Offers no actual support; may restate as a premise the conclusion in different words.	Abortion is wrong because it is the killing of a child.
Loaded question	Asks a question that contains an assumption that must be proven.	What if your parents had aborted you? What if Einstein's parents had aborted him? (p. 165)

While this type of technique-focused monological critical thinking may indeed provide students with certain useful skills such as detection of logical fallacies, what may also be true is that the mode of thought involves a rather superficial understanding of social problems. Dialogical critical thinking, on the other hand, directs students' attention to more complex factors such as the protagonist's deep-seated ideological, political, and socio-cultural beliefs and values, which underlie his/her subjective assumptions and perceptions of the world. An example of such dialogical critical thinking in the L2 classroom

was introduced earlier by Benesch (1999), who, through a critical discussion with her students on the murder of a gay college student, Mathew Shepard, successfully identified some of the assumptions held by the male students that “heterosexual men are justified in responding to the presence of homosexual men with anger or violence to assert a traditional notion of masculinity” (p. 577). Benesch further illustrates how students came to realize that such an assumption was in fact reflective of the socially constructed misconception that “homosexuals are primarily interested in making sexual overtures to and converting heterosexuals” (p. 578). Unlike monological critical thinking that concentrates on the structural soundness of arguments, dialogical critical thinking probes into the interiors of one’s multifaceted belief system, aiming to improve or transform some parts of it so that one becomes more open-minded and sensitive to various conflicting views and opinions in society. The striking difference between monological and dialogical, therefore, is that the latter aims to enhance deeper understanding among different protagonists, whereas the former tends to be rather superficial and even conflict-ridden as its main purpose lies in the rebuttal of opposing viewpoints.

The difference between monological and dialogical critical thinking has been also discussed by Walters (1994), who edited a book called *Re-Thinking Reason: New Perspectives in Critical Thinking*. This book contains a series of articles that examine and define critical thinking beyond the traditional “logicism”—“*the unwarranted assumption that good thinking is reducible to logical thinking*” (p. 1)—a term which Walter equates with the dominance of monological critical thinking currently implemented in U.S. university courses. Walters explains that critical thinking has now entered a second stage, in which these “second wave” proponents of critical thinking have begun to assert that “the logistic reduction of good thinking to logical thinking legitimizes a theoretical model and pedagogical tone that are both problematic” (p. 10).

A specific problem which Walters observes is how a term such as “universality” is mindlessly used to represent the monological type of critical

thinking. For when examined from a dialogical perspective of critical thinking, one can argue that this universality is a “disguised justification” of *totalization* (p. 10). What Walters means by totalization is that monological critical thinking tends to disregard and rule out alternative types of thinking which, for instance, emphasize creative imagination, intuition, insight, or empathy. The second-wave critical thinking theorists, including Walters, acknowledge the valuable role which such non-analytical, dialogical thinking can play in the making of a good, critical inquiry (p. 11). Totalization also refers to the danger of fostering unnecessarily aggressive and adversarial individuals who believe that their sole task in discussions is to pinpoint opponents’ logical fallacies and discredit their arguments, viewpoints and opinions. As shown earlier, monological critical thinking aims to develop one’s ability and sometimes even motivation to dispute and dissect every potentially flawed viewpoint by revealing “mistakes” in its reasoning. This kind of exercise can easily instill *a priori* skepticism inside the individual’s mind which in turn “transforms dialogue into a forensic exercise that has as its only point beating one’s opponent by challenging his logic and evidence” (p. 12).

Tannen (2002), in fact, explains that such an adversarial and aggressive attitude is common or even understood as a necessity among Western scholars, if they are to indeed effectively assert their opinions in the academic discourse. Tannen defines such a discursive phenomenon “agonism,” whose underlying ideology of “*ritualized* adversativeness” [Italics are original] conceptualizes and conventionalizes intellectual interchange as a “metaphorical battle” (p. 1652). Tannen further expounds on such an agonistic convention of academic discourse as follows:

For example, a common framework for academic papers...prescribes that authors position their work in opposition to someone else’s, which they then prove wrong. This is agonistic to the extent that it is conventionalized and prescribed. This standard framework creates a *need* to make others wrong which tempts—indeed, requires—scholars to (1) at best oversimplify, at worst distort or even misrepresent others’ positions; (2) search for the most

foolish statement and the weakest examples to make a generally reasonable treatise appear less so; and (3) ignore facts that support the opponent's views and cite only those that support theirs. (p. 1635)

The second-wave theorists instead advocate a type of critical thinking that encourages the individual to explore beyond simple logical fallacies, to identify unstated assumptions and accept differences in viewpoints. They remind students that opposing opinions do not necessarily require them to be wrong and unacceptable. Even if one disagrees with someone, an individual can still be sensitive enough to understand views that exist outside one's own belief systems, for such a humble and respectful attitude is indeed what makes a dialogue possible and worthwhile. As Walters (1994) states:

While it is true that certain contexts call for the critical thinker to challenge the logical soundness of arguments and the evidential backing of belief, it is equally true that good thinking requires him at times to suspend his skepticism long enough to relate empathically to perspectives contrary to his own, to accept them in a noncontentious spirit in order to explore their styles as well as content. (p. 12)

Interestingly enough, such a Western second-wave critical thinking theorists' call for tolerance of opposing viewpoints may in fact remind one of the values that are practiced in so-called collectivistic Eastern societies. Although it was mentioned earlier that apparent complaisant and harmonious attitudes observed in non-Western ESL students may literally be an "apparent" phenomenon, one can still argue that their elusive and indirect presentation of critical thoughts is reflective of their respect and tolerance of different opinions. In fact, Ikeda (2002), in a speech delivered at Harvard University, talks of the philosophical origin that gave Japan such a virtue of harmony. Apart from the Confucian influence from China, what emphasized harmony were the codes of samurai (warrior), which educated individuals to achieve self-control and self-mastery so that they can act in a responsible and respectful manner toward others (p. 208). The original emphasis on harmony, therefore, one can argue, was not only about unquestionably suppressing

individual needs for the good of the group, but also, or even more importantly, about compromising and moderating the individuals' needs so that others' needs can also be acknowledged and taken into consideration. In such a group-oriented thought process, critical thinking still operates since various needs are given the opportunity for analysis and evaluation. The difference, however, is that special attention is also given not to minimize and damage the interests of each individual as much as possible.

Speaking of such a potentially reconciled understanding of Eastern and Western thoughts, Sato (1996) presents a fresh conceptualization of the dichotomies between Eastern collectivism versus Western individualism. What Sato discovers from her investigation of Japanese elementary education is that group-oriented and individualistic thoughts are not as antithetical and inimical to one another as they are commonly thought of among Western scholars, but are in fact, complementary and beneficial to each other. As what enables a group to develop and flourish depends on the individual's strength; by the same token, the development of each individual's strength can also be triggered and enhanced by the group input. Sato states:

Individual development is both bound and enhanced by membership in mutual learning communities, and those same communities, in turn, are strengthened by increased individual capacities; they complement one another toward reciprocal growth...Conceived in this way, individual self-development consists of internal and social processes. As such, individual capacity building is not distinguishable from group community building; both are inseparable and equally important. (p. 122)

In addition, Sato observes that the strength of the individual student in Japanese schools are understood not only based on one's academic achievements, but also on his/her ability to have empathy and consideration for others. Perhaps because of such a well-rounded evaluation of the individual, Sato sees Japanese teachers as very flexible and even tolerant of students' different levels of intellectual and mental capacities. As Sato states:

Among the Japanese educators I met during the course of this study, I encountered a way of thinking that allowed much goofing off one moment in order to engender disciplined, hard work the next; a mindset that viewed boisterous rowdiness (unacceptable in U.S. classrooms) as a necessary antecedent to quiet concentration; and a perspective that accepted rote practice as a catalyst for creativity. (p. 121)

Sato's discovery of Japanese teachers' somewhat positive and open-minded attitude toward something that does not yet seem to exist in the current condition of the students (e.g., students' disciplined attitudes in classrooms; their creative writing abilities), may indeed capture the well-known Eastern tolerance of ambiguity and elusiveness in reality. What it may even further remind one of is the tacitly ubiquitous Buddhist concept of *Ku* (potentiality) in the East. What this Buddhist concept of *Ku* allows is the invariable potential for all things to exist inherently in the universe, even if these things seem invisible and non-existent to one's eyes. Ikeda and Toynebee(1989), in his dialogue with Arnold Toynbee, explains the concept of *Ku* as follows:

If the universe is interpreted in terms of no more than the concepts of nonbeing and being, one is forced to say that life was and still is being generated from nonbeing. Buddhism takes a different stand and posits the existence of a state of nonbeing that contains inherent possibilities of becoming being and thus transcends both the concept of being and the concept of nonbeing. Buddhist thought interprets this state as the true entity of the universe and calls it *Ku*. (p. 271)

Sato's (1996) investigation seems to imply that the Japanese educators' teaching principles are based on such a concept of *Ku*. Students' unruly attitudes in classrooms are seen not strictly as unacceptable and deserving of punishments, but instead are taken as a potential opportunity to raise the students' level of concentration. If a student writes her essay copying exactly how the textbook writes, the teacher does not necessarily see it as evidence of a lack of creativity, but rather, sees it as an important step for the student to

develop basic writing skills with which she will eventually be able to express her own voice in future. What underlies this consideration is the Japanese teacher's flexible outlook on the student's academic performance: even if the students do not manifest their strengths at one point, it does not mean that their strengths are non-existent forever; it only means that the students need appropriate opportunities and sufficient time in order for them to exert their full potential. Sato's point is echoed by Lewis (1995), who observed that Japanese elementary school teachers, in comparison to their U.S. counterparts, emphasize the process more than the product of children's learning:

How do we judge whether a classroom lesson is successful? For many lessons, our judgment depends on whether children acquire particular skills, information, or concepts. I think this is true for many lessons taught in Japanese as well as American schools. But I often felt a second strong force operating in Japanese classrooms: an emphasis on process. The point wasn't just to obtain a correct answer. The point was also to feel certain things while learning, to be engaged in wholehearted way, and to reflect on one's work, whether or not these led to correct answers. (p. 162)

Lewis's (1995) and Sato's (1996) insightful re-conceptualization of dichotomies between Eastern collectivism versus Western individualism may in fact lead Western ESL teachers to appreciate non-Western ESL students' academic achievements in a fresh way—a way which integrates concepts that “Americans tend to separate in school settings,” such as “success and failure, repetition and creativity, uniformity and diversity, individual and group” (Sato, 1996, p. 147). While not writing an essay clearly and straightforwardly enough, to the Western ESL teacher's mind, can appear as though the student is defective of critical ability, the reality might not be such. As shown above, the student may simply lack sufficient language competence to write a sound L2 paper, or he/she may be presenting critical thoughts subtly and indirectly. What should be suggested on this note is not the entire implementation of Eastern critical approach in the Western academic context, for such a task would be neither reasonable nor possible to accomplish. Instead, what can be

suggested is that the Western ESL teacher becomes tolerant of non-Western students' potentially inconsistent intellectual and mental capacities, which are perhaps not so commonly observed in Western students' academic performances. As Sato states, students may feel more comfortable and secure in demonstrating their own unique critical abilities if the teachers' instruction was based on a "delicate balance between individual and group needs, between structure and freedom, and between seeking uniformity for equality's sake and diversity for equity's sake." (p. 147)

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

One of this paper's principal pedagogical implications is that non-Western ESL students' apparent indirect, circuitous, and ambiguous thought expressions is not necessarily a sign that they lack the ability and consciousness to think clearly, logically, and critically. Though their thought patterns may differ from those of Western students, the non-Western students are still inherently capable of developing and exercising critical thinking. Important suggestions for Western ESL teachers can be made not to conclude or preconceive so deterministically that non-Western ESL students' apparent "bad" writings or "bad" communication styles exemplify their lack of certain intellectual abilities required in the Western academic setting. The paper suggests that such Western ESL teacher's presuppositions about non-Western students' critical abilities can cloud and limit the teacher's understanding and evaluation of the non-Western students' academic performance.

What the paper also demonstrated was non-Western ESL students' adequate critical abilities, which are, however, oftentimes inexplicit or latent. In order for them to become conversant in direct, straightforward, and deductive styles of writing and communication, the non-Western students should be given sufficient opportunities and time for training and practicing to use such a particular mode of thought.

To give some practical suggestions on how ESL teachers can train non-

Western ESL students' critical thinking, the study showed how students exert their critical abilities more fully and effectively if the topic in question concerns their own society and culture. For instance, Japanese ESL students are more interested in and thus become more vocal about the issue of immigrants in Japan than about the same issue in the U.S. By the same token, Chinese ESL students may feel more enthusiastic and critical about the issue of one-child policy in China than about abortions in the U.S. One effective way to train non-Western ESL students' critical thinking, therefore, is to give them such topics of their own interests for discussions and paper assignments. What may be even more important is that ESL teachers become sensitive to and aware of issues that are popular and controversial in the students' own socio-cultural background. Instead of asking students to absorb American culture almost single-mindedly, a two-way and fair exchange of socio-cultural knowledge between the ESL teacher and students may be more effective and ideal in bringing out the non-Western students' potential as critical thinkers.

Speaking of the need to train students in critical thinking, important suggestions were also made for ESL teachers to attend more to the process, rather than the outcome, of students' learning. Although the teacher is in a position to evaluate students' academic performance at certain necessary times, he/she should not determine or limit the student's lifelong intellectual and mental growth. A flexible and open-minded outlook on the student's potential can make the student feel comfortable and secure in displaying his/her unique critical abilities. What may be important for the ESL teacher is to become tolerant of inconsistencies and ambiguities that might be seen in the students' academic performance, and walk patiently and emphatically with the students through their learning process.

To give some specific examples, when Japanese or Chinese ESL students submit the inductive, four-step style paragraphs for an argumentative paper assignment, the ESL teacher can first seek the unstated intentions and motivations of the students in addressing the particular topic in question. If necessary, holding a one-to-one conference with the students to clarify some

confusing points, or perhaps consulting some non-Western colleagues who share the same socio-cultural background as the students for alternative interpretations of the students' essays may be of a great value. What is important is to detect and respond accurately and sensitively to the students' critical cues that are perhaps buried in their inexplicit and subtle styles of thought expressions. Once the ESL teacher grasps what the students intend to address, the teacher can then guide the students through the deductive pattern of thought by asking the students, step by step, to state the general theme of their arguments first, which is to be followed by specific examples. Writing papers in English can be problematic for non-Western ESL students because such an order of helping students is usually reversed; students are asked to think and write deductively before they even know what they want to be deductive about! Though time-consuming and painstaking it could potentially be, the most necessary task for ESL teachers, therefore, may be to assist non-ESL students in clarifying their points first and figuring out some ways to present their critical thoughts most effectively.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of ESL instruction is, with no doubt, to help students acquire their target language. If students are expected to exercise critical thinking so that they can express their thoughts and viewpoints more effectively in their L2, ESL teachers should also assist their students in mastering such a mode of thought. What is more important, however, is that ESL teachers, as much as their main task is to teach the language in classrooms, are also educators who are involved with the lives of students and who thereby have the right and responsibility to be concerned with and consider most importantly the students' life-long happiness. When seen from this perspective, students' satisfactory acquisition of L2 and improvement in critical thinking skills should be the *means*—not the *end*—to expand their intellectual as well as mental capacities through which students will

eventually be able to attain a life of their own choice and to make meaningful contributions to society. Such a holistic outlook on the goal of students' language acquisition and improvement in critical thinking should help ESL teachers become more sensitive to the kinds of suggestions that are necessary for the students' intellectual as well as mental growth, which in turn help them become effective, responsible and contributive critical thinkers in society.

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