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**Memorization**  
**A Constraint for Integrating Thinking Skills**  
**Into Indian ESL Classrooms**

**R. Joseph Ponniah, Ph.D.**

# Memorization A Constraint for Integrating Critical Thinking Skills Into Indian ESL Classrooms

R. Joseph Ponniah, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

This paper examines the learning experience of students in ESL classrooms in India. In ESL classrooms, students are trained to use the rote-learned material as chunks to meet the requirement of examinations. This practice of learning an L2 will not allow them to critically think and present their thoughts in English. Consequently, they find it difficult to speak and write on their own. If they are given enough input inside and outside classrooms, they can develop fluency in the target language. The study reveals that they listen to L1 most of the time in classrooms and they are not given enough input in L2. Therefore, it is suggested that a new methodology, which gives input in L2 and which encourages students to generate ideas, is essential to replace the existing method of drilling them to memorize dictated notes.

## Memorization and Critical Thinking

Learning a language is a thinking process that allows learners to grow and shape their personalities. The thinking skill is the essential part of education to make it relevant in the rapidly changing world. It affects all forms of communication, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. In ESL classrooms, students are dumped with various concepts and theories: Language is taught as a subject and not as a tool for communication. Consequently, learners resort to rote learning and memorization.

Learning by heart to meet the requirements of examinations has become a common practice and it is accepted as a strategy to learn the target language.

Memorization is the process of establishing information in memory. Relying on it for acquiring language skills will not give productive results.

If critical thinking is integrated into ESL classes, it will give many opportunities not only to learn the language but also to think and make appropriate verbalization of thoughts and new ideas.

The term *critical thinking*, however, has many definitions. One pragmatic definition by Buchanan is simply as “what you generate, you know” by Buchanan (2007). In order to cultivate critical thinking, teachers have to motivate learners towards ‘how to think’ rather than ‘what to think’ in the language that they are learning and using. If learners are

taught to think critically in the language they are learning, then it will enhance their abilities to read, write and think with clarity in that language.

## **The Impact of Memorization of the Rules of Grammar and a New Approach to Grammar**

Learners memorize many rules of grammar. The application of the rules is either conspicuously missing or inadequately dealt with in the written and the spoken language of learners. They have learned enough grammar rules and they do copious exercises on grammar. But they break all the rules when they are asked to develop an idea into a paragraph or write a passage on their own. This is because, they rely on memorized chunks and they have not internalized the application part of the rules of grammar.

Learners cannot be fluent in L2, if they concentrate more on grammar rules. If teachers focus on lexical approach of the target language, it will help learners understand how the language works. For example, as Thornbury, in an interview to BBC World Service (2004), suggested, teachers need to pay attention to high frequency words including grammar words such as have, am, is, been, does, being, etc., and teach how these words are grouped together, using copious examples and practice. Then, it will give an opportunity for learners to think while they are learning.

## **ESL classrooms**

The established education system poses a few problems in adopting a right method of teaching English because the teaching is focused on to meet the requirements of examinations and not to hone the communication skills of students. In most of the schools and colleges, particularly in rural and semi urban areas, the bilingual or the translation method of teaching is adopted.

The other characteristics of ESL classrooms in India are:

1. The English language classes are treated on par with other subject classes.
2. The size of the classes and the allocation of time are major constraints
3. Even if a new methodology is introduced, the size of the class that varies between 40 and 60 becomes a major constraint.
4. Heterogeneous group of students, especially drastically varying mixed ability of students in classes is another constraint.
5. Dictating notes and memorizing the dictated notes are practiced in classes. A new approach to the teaching of the language is practically absent.

It is obvious that the existing ESL classrooms will not encourage students to think critically or creatively.

It is important for teachers to motivate students to involve in creative thinking activities such as giving interpretation to what they learn, inferring and thinking of alternatives for existing theories, facts and information, etc.

By theories I do not mean theory construction in high sciences. Offering alternatives through conjecture and speculation even for an every day event, experience and object is a sort of informal theory construction, which all of us tend to do. Creative language learners will certainly develop their ability to analyze and interpret ideas in novel ways. Cotton (in Lakshmi 2007:42) describes creative thinking as “a novel way of seeing or doing things that is characterized by four components: (a) fluency (generating ideas), (b) flexibility (shifting perspective easily), (c) originality (consisting of something new), and (d) elaboration (building on existing ideas).” This method of learning a language will make learners critical thinkers.

## **The Study**

A sample consisting of 45 students from an undergraduate class is taken for the study. The students, who had their school education from rural and semi-urban areas, have joined an arts and science college, which is located in the southern part of India. The study is based on my working experience as an ESL teacher and the learning experience of the students at higher secondary schools and the first semester at the college. The data used for the study comes the feedback collected from the students at the beginning and at the end of the first semester. The feedback, collected with an intention to promote learning of the students and to evaluate my teaching, is used for the study.

## **Analysis of the Feedback**

The feedback shows that the bilingual or the translation method of teaching, which gives the meaning of the text in the mother tongue, is adopted at schools. The students are trained to memorize the dictated notes. The data of the feedback reveals that the students, whose medium of instruction was English, memorized the dictated notes after understanding the meaning. The students who had their education through mother tongue resorted to rote learning.

As the students were trained in listening to lectures through the translation method at school, they expressed their difficulties in understanding lectures in English in the initial stages. After attending a few lecture hours, they began to understand lectures delivered in English and they showed positive attitudes in listening to lectures.

After 25 to 30 hours, students initiated themselves into discussions by contributing their creative ideas. However, many students still relied on notes for taking examinations and only a few gained confidence in writing on their own. Yet students did demonstrate inhibitions in constructing sentences on their own and in expressing their ideas while writing. Thus, there is an urgent need to incorporate remedial lessons early in the course to that critical thinking could be fostered. For this it is important that we make them aware that the reproduction of the memorized chunks will not help them in learning a foreign language in the real sense.

## Suggested Solutions to Problems in ESL Classrooms

The study shows that students need a new methodology, which will encourage them to generate ideas, to replace the existing method of drilling them to memorize dictated notes to meet the requirement of the education system. They must be trained initially to unlearn the established beliefs and relearn new approaches to learn the language. They should be given a lot of input such as listening to lectures, stories and watching films and comic strips. Input in the target language is essential to acquire implicit knowledge. If teachers are successful in giving enough input inside and outside classrooms, then the learners will become effective communicators. The wider issues of teacher training to achieve adequacy in all language skills in ESL classrooms need to be dealt with. It is also important that the ESL teachers be trained in Critical Thinking processes using English.

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