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## Introduction

“We’re not teaching students how to learn and think for themselves: We’re just training them to pass tests!” Many people will recognize this general criticism of education systems around the world. In one way, it represents a long-standing debate about the real purpose of education: Is it to transfer knowledge, or to teach students how to think and learn?

The importance of getting learners to think for themselves was recognized in the early twentieth century, when social scientists and reformers such as Dewey (1910), Sumner (1940), and Glaser (1941) identified critical thinking as an educational skill upon which more emphasis should be placed. This was perhaps a reaction to the rigid education systems of the previous century, which were aimed, it was thought, at producing citizens who would conform to certain social and economic structures. Certainly, this was the view later put forth by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who contrasted critical thinking with naïve thinking, the former being necessary for transformation and real social change, the latter for maintaining a status quo (Freire, 1970).

At the same time, the call for more critical thinking reflects a very modern-day issue: The current pace of change means that we cannot easily predict what future skills will be demanded of today’s learners. How can those who frame educational curricula and programs—governments, businesses, and education specialists—prepare students for jobs that have not even been invented yet (Institute for the Future, 2017)? It is no coincidence, then, that in the last fifteen years or so there has been an increased focus in education—from university courses to primary school programs—on the development of thinking skills, critical thinking being the most prominent, rather than on the accrual of knowledge.

This focus on critical thinking in the twenty-first century also reflects the impact of the Internet, and the growing importance of digital and media literacy to the workforce of the future. In a world where information is so readily accessible, the emphasis has shifted from the acquisition of knowledge to the evaluation of information. More than ever, people need to be equipped to distinguish between information that is accurate and information that is ill-founded or poorly researched at best, and fabricated or misleading at worst. Such concerns are present in all areas of education. English language teaching (ELT) is no exception.

The first appearance of explicit critical thinking tasks in ELT tend to be found in materials designed for English for Academic Purposes programs (e.g., *Northstar*, 1998), but implicit forms of critical thinking have been present in ELT for much longer. Examples include writing tasks that begin with a critical evaluation of

a written model, grammar analyses using an inductive approach, reading tasks that involve the synthesis of information or ideas, along with speaking tasks that ask learners to consider their own and their audience's assumptions about a topic. What began as implicit inclusion has now become explicit with many course materials and language schools eagerly mentioning critical thinking as an educational goal in their marketing, even though they may be less explicit in their definition of what the term actually means or how it might improve a language learner's performance.

With so much current emphasis on critical thinking as a key component of effective learning, we have set out in this book to explain the *What, Why, and How* of critical thinking in ELT: *What is critical thinking and what does it actually look like in an ELT context? Why is it relevant to language learning? And, How can we create critical thinking activities to enhance learning?*

The first chapter establishes a definition of critical thinking and a working model for applying critical thinking in the ELT classroom. The second chapter explains why integrating critical thinking into ELT lessons is crucial for effective learning. The chapters that follow all focus on the practical use of critical thinking in the ELT classroom, giving examples of critical thinking activities at different levels of proficiency (from A1 to C1), and suggestions for how teachers can incorporate these into their lessons: Chapter 3 deals with critical thinking activities in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; Chapters 4 and 5 suggest ways to integrate critical thinking in receptive and productive skills lessons; the penultimate chapter examines how critical thinking relates to the communication of ideas in modern media (visual, digital, etc.). The final chapter focuses specifically on the creation of critical thinking activities and addresses questions commonly asked by teachers about the practice of critical thinking in the classroom.

Each chapter features a section called "Ask Yourself." This is a moment to pause and reflect on what you have read, question your own ideas, or even share your thoughts with others. (It would be a poor book on critical thinking that did not challenge you to question its content or assertions!) Possible answers to "Ask Yourself" questions are given in the Appendix so you can compare notes. Some of the content of "Ask Yourself" includes data and comments from our own survey on how ELT teachers and educators view the role of critical thinking in their teaching. We would like to thank everyone who took part in this survey for sharing their ideas.