Action research

Integrating Critical Thinking by P4Cs Into EFL Classes Through Integrated Language Skills

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Abstract: This research aims to provide empirical evidence on the impact of integrating Philosophy for Children (P4C) strategies with English language teaching for EFL learners. While existing studies have extensively outlined the educational benefits of P4C across various educational contexts, limited research focuses on its application in ESL or EFL settings. Therefore, this study investigates the positive effects of integrating P4C into EFL classrooms, specifically in conjunction with integrated language skills activities. A total of 12 students, evenly divided between Istanbul and Muğla, participated in the study. The P4C group engaged in language skills activities integrated with P4C in their classrooms for four weeks, and the impact of these lessons was assessed using questionnaires. The study's results demonstrate that P4C interventions significantly reduced students' levels of English speaking anxiety, enhanced their motivation to learn English post-intervention, and improved both their receptive and productive language skills. These findings underscore the potential of P4C integration in EFL instruction, offering promising implications for language pedagogy and learner outcomes.

Keywords: Philosophy for Children (P4C), critical thinking, English as a foreign language (EFL), integrated language skills

1. Introduction

In Turkey, many students are confined to learning a foreign language solely within the confines of foreign language classes. Outside the classroom, they have limited opportunities to utilize the language or engage in practice. Within language classes, another challenge is encountered: the Foreign Language Exam (Yabancı Dil Testi - YKS/YDT), assessing grammar and reading comprehension, often neglects the essential productive language skills of speaking and writing, as well as listening comprehension. Additionally, numerous students perceive foreign language courses at school not as an opportunity to acquire language proficiency, but as an obligatory subject entailing an enduring process filled with incessant rote tasks and mandatory examinations.

This situation can be largely attributed to grammar-focused teaching methods and test-oriented study approaches (Chung, 2006; Wang & Savignon, 2001). However, language acquisition necessitates more than mere mastery of grammar rules—it entails learning a new way of life, enhancing self-expression, and developing critical thinking skills. In the 21st century, acknowledged and recommended by academics, educators, and leading figures in the business world, are the essential skills known as 21st-century skills, imperative for success across diverse sectors such as employment, economy, and education. At the forefront of these skills lies critical thinking, closely intertwined with analytical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Flavell, 1976). A student equipped with critical thinking skills comprehends what, why, where, when, and how to undertake tasks, thus positioning themselves for success both in school and subsequent professional endeavors (Flavell, 1979). Many academics have proposed instructional methods to cultivate critical thinking in students, with Lipman's philosophical approach being one of these recommendations. Matthew Lipman, a philosophy professor, is a pioneer in the critical thinking movement in the United States.

During his tenure as a university professor in the 1960s, Professor Lipman recognized the inadequacy of his students' reasoning skills. He observed that the students were learning

what was presented to them but struggled to think independently. He had no doubt that something fundamental was amiss in their primary education. Subsequently, Lipman realized that university classrooms were too late to learn proper thinking. Stemming from this realization, Lipman initiated the pedagogy of Philosophy for Children (P4C). He established the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy with Children (IAPC) and collaborated with numerous academics to develop the P4C program, which is now utilized in over 60 countries (Philosophy Foundation, 2022). According to Lipman (2003), the domains addressed by philosophy encompass our natural curiosity, desire to learn, and mystery. Philosophy engages individuals in a quest for understanding and aids them in comprehending many concepts.

In the instruction of English as a foreign language, educators strive to create a learning environment that engages students with meaningful tasks encouraging genuine language usage (Raoofi et al., 2014). Consequently, one of the most popular activities in foreign language instruction is encouraging students to communicate and exchange ideas. The present study builds upon the strengths of Lipman in developing the skills necessary for logical inquiry and associating abstract thinking with real-world problems. Additionally, it aligns Lipman's approach with the context of learning English as a foreign language.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted with a total of 12 students, 6 from Istanbul/Büyükçekmece Atatürk Anatolian High School and 6 from Muğla/Fethiye Fatih Anatolian High School. The participating students are enrolled in the 12th grade language class.

The implementation of the study occurred outside regular class hours, during lunch breaks, or after school, in sessions lasting 40 minutes each, with willing students. The study spanned over 2 weeks and consisted of a total of 4 sessions.

Participating students completed two online surveys: a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test comprised 2 multiple-choice questions and 11 agree/disagree statements (on a five-point Likert scale). The post-test included 3 multiple-choice questions and 11 agree/disagree statements (on a five-point Likert scale).

Half of the students who participated in the survey indicated that their public speaking anxiety diminished after the study.

Half of the students who participated in the survey expressed confidence that they could substantiate their advocated ideas after the study.

A significant majority of the students who participated in the survey indicated that they believed there was a notable improvement in language skills after the study.

3. Results

Upon reviewing the results of the comparative analysis of responses from participants of two different schools, it is evident that P4C sessions are beneficial in enhancing students' English language and critical thinking skills. The students reported a decrease in anxiety and difficulties related to their English language skills and critical thinking before the implementation.

P4C is a multifaceted program consisting of several components or elements. The current research findings are applicable to all programs. As previously mentioned, it was found that P4C had beneficial cognitive effects on high school students over an academic year. Therefore, we can conclude that P4C is an implementable program that all teachers worldwide should consider. The review of research studies found P4C to be highly reliable (Tian & Liao, 2016).

However beneficial and crucial in significantly enhancing students' critical thinking skills, P4C may not be applicable in primary and middle school level language teaching, preparing children for meaningful discussions, no matter how beneficial it may be or how much it improves students' critical thinking skills. While they may be experts in describing their pets, engaging in deep conversation might remain an elusive goal. It requires students to express their thoughts on concepts at a higher discourse level, presenting itself as a limiting aspect of the study.

4. Discussion

Facilitators may encounter certain challenges when implementing P4C strategies in EFL classrooms to enhance students' critical thinking skills through integrated language skills. One of the most commonly encountered issues is student responses.

Some students may prefer to avoid engaging in lengthy discussions and instead opt for short answers like "I don't know" or "I agree with my friend". In this situation, pressuring students for longer responses or to change their answers would not be appropriate. Instead, facilitators should accept the brief response and provide necessary guidance in the subsequent sessions. Asking another question about the same prompt or allowing the student to seek assistance from a peer would be a suitable approach.

At times, when a facilitator poses a guiding question, they might receive a completely irrelevant answer. In such cases, the facilitator should refrain from negative intervention and allow the conversation to flow. The topic is typically determined by the group, known as group dynamics. Students enjoy engaging in activities related to their interests and preferences. The facilitator can generate new questions about a new topic or students can create their own questions. The application was carried out with a small number of students, but the method may vary from class to class when implemented in crowded classrooms. While we may face challenges, we can also achieve many positive outcomes. For example, there might be students who shy away from speaking in front of the class, lack confidence in their language skills, and tend to withdraw further. However, observing their peers' ability to speak up might encourage them to give it a try.

Keywords can be written on the board to encourage students to speak and write. Additional stimuli, such as videos, pictures, songs, stories, or inviting individuals fluent in English (if possible), can be included in the lesson.

This approach can be applied not only in foreign language classes but also in many other subjects, as it enhances 21st-century skills. In fact, it should be used in various subjects. After all, education is holistic, and it is the responsibility of all teachers to ensure students acquire these skills. This method can be shared during meetings with teachers in our schools, and conducting a sample session with teachers' participation can convince educators from other disciplines about the effectiveness of the method, encouraging them to use it in their lessons.

Although this method may appear to be more useful for developing productive skills, it also enhances receptive skills, such as listening and reading, through the texts we read, dialogues we listen to, or conversations we engage in. It guides the students in giving correct answers to appropriate questions.

We should consider and design P4C applications as long-term processes. Sudden and rapid changes should not be expected overnight. Even if we cannot base our lesson plans entirely on P4C, we can allocate a portion of the lesson to such activities.

Theme-based outcomes can be a disadvantage for this method. Many outcomes are specific to a particular skill. Therefore, it may require adjustments to fit the outcomes in the program.

The facilitator should always bear in mind that being respectful and showing close attention is the unchanging rule of a P4C session. Consequently, they should accept the responses from the students and continue with the sessions. However, it's important to remember that every teacher knows what's best for their students. Teachers are better aware of the dynamics of their classrooms

5. Conclusions

This research paper sheds light on the challenges faced by Turkish students in their foreign language education, emphasizing the shortcomings of traditional grammar-focused teaching methods and test-oriented approaches. It highlights the importance of imparting not only language proficiency but also essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and analytical thinking. Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children approach is explored as a means to bridge this gap, adapting it to the context of English language learning.

The study conducted with a total 12 high school students demonstrated promising outcomes. It was evident that P4C sessions had a positive impact on students' English language skills and critical thinking abilities. Students reported reduced anxiety related to public speaking, increased confidence in articulating their ideas, and a notable improvement in their language skills.

The study suggests that P4C can be a valuable addition to foreign language education, enhancing students' critical thinking skills and language proficiency. However, it also

recognizes that implementing P4C may present challenges, such as student responses and the need for adjustments in crowded classrooms. Nonetheless, the potential benefits, including improved speaking and writing skills, receptive skills like listening and reading, and enhanced 21st century skills, make P4C a promising method to be considered not only in foreign language classes but across various subjects.

The research paper also underscores the importance of a long-term approach and flexibility in implementing P4C, acknowledging that it may not be suitable for every educational context. It encourages educators to explore and adapt this method to suit their specific needs and dynamics.

In essence, this study offers valuable insights into the potential of P4C to transform foreign language education by fostering critical thinking and language skills. It opens the door for further exploration and adaptation of innovative teaching methods to prepare students for success in an ever-evolving global landscape.

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