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Reflection on the roles of the EAP teacher and ‘designed- in’ tasks in cultivating or inhibiting students’ critical thinking behaviours

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ABSTRACT

EAP teachers are challenged with the responsibility to ‘ [...] employ tasks, processes and interactions that require students to demonstrate critical thinking skills’ (BALEAP, 2008, p. 6). Opportunities to nurture these critical thinking skills in our students present themselves in the *designed- in* pedagogic tasks, as well as our contingent, spontaneous interactions with or between students in our classroom practices. Conversely, the planned tasks or our own teaching may inhibit students’ critical thinking behaviours by, for example, presenting a one dimensional approach. This paper reports on a reflective inquiry task with EAP teachers to explore how our own teaching and that of the planned course materials cultivated or inhibited students’ critical thinking behaviours on an intensive EAP 8 week writing course. Three teachers and one course coordinator made on-going observations during delivery and categorised these against Davies and Barnett’s (2015) model of critical thinking: the skills perspective of critical thinking, developing a critical disposition, and the critical pedagogy perspective. The analysis finds that the planned in pedagogic tasks prioritise the skills perspective e.g. the application of a set of skills such as analysis and synthesis. The less assessable tenet of cultivating a critical disposition was also afforded much attention, particularly through teachers own contingent classroom practices. In setting out to explore these questions, the constraints of delivering such provision needed to be considered. A secondary aim was therefore to explore how to meaningfully reflect on and research our teaching in an intensive EAP environment. The approach taken here was very much non-invasive. Self- reflection and peer-review of materials are the everyday tasks of teachers, and providing a focus for this led to new perspectives on the course which are not gleaned from mainstream end of course evaluations.

KEYWORDS: Critical thinking, English for Academic Purposes, self-reflection, pedagogic tasks

INTRODUCTION

The ability to think critically is highly valued as an outcome of higher education and as such it has long been recognised that EAP teaching (English for Academic Purposes) should aim to cultivate this attribute. Opportunities for academic language learning and critical thinking are seen as 'mutually supportive' of each other (Wilson, 2019, p.2), Furthermore, it is recognised that the EAP teacher has a responsibility to create opportunities for students to demonstrate critical thinking skills through '... tasks, processes and interactions' (BALEAP, 2008, p. 6)

How to integrate a critical thinking pedagogy in the time- constrained EAP classroom has been the subject of further discussion though with Bruce (2020) and Heber and Kuncel, (2016) amongst others, cautioning against an approach characterised by courses in generic, logical reasoning i.e., instruction on how to apply critical thinking to problems across a wide variety of domains. Instead, the need for a more 'situated' approach to the teaching of critical thinking, focusing on developing students' academic discourse competence for the tasks and genres that they will encounter in the target academic discipline has been called for.

Given the key focus on critical thinking on many preparation courses and the time constraints brought about by intensive EAP modules, the impetus for this scholarship was to explore the ways in which critical thinking was developed on an 8-week EAP course for novice learners of academic discourse. This was examined from two perspectives:

- 1) 'Designed in' planned pedagogic tasks
 - a) Where and how do the current materials/course design cultivate critical thinking?
 - b) Where and how do the current materials/course design inhibit critical thinking?
- 2) Contingent, spontaneous teacher-student interactions or peer to peer
 - a) Where and how does your teaching cultivate critical thinking?
 - b) Where and how does your teaching inhibit critical thinking?

Davies and Barnett's (2015) model of critical thinking was employed to provide a common frame of reference.

THE CONTEXT

The context for reflection was a module in academic writing which sits within an established EGAP Pre sessional English programme. The syllabus is organised according to separate skills although Speaking and Listening are integrated and the approach to one summative written assignment is Reading- into- Writing using a prescribed set of source material. Materials are bespoke, rather than commercial, and

developed in-house. The course was delivered completely online with a blend of live online classes and asynchronous guided independent study.

In each group there were around 10 students from the Middle East and mainland China working towards entrance to postgraduate programmes of study. Their level of English was intermediate [IELTS 5.0-5.5]. Critical thinking is not exclusive to Western culture; however, as Bali argues (2015) evidence of the practical challenges in teaching international students whose political or religious backgrounds do not foster critical debate cannot be dismissed.

THE APPROACH

Reflection on the experiences of teaching a module and an appraisal of its outcomes is usually the reserve of end of course practices. Through online evaluations or debriefing meetings, teachers' views on what worked and did not work are solicited and discussions on future actions evolve. These practices, although ritualised, have an important part to play in QA and QE processes. Understandably the day-to-day challenge of delivering intensive courses reduces time for participation in meaningful ongoing observation and self-reflection, although informal exchanges with peers reveal to us new aspects of teaching and help question our assumptions.

This term though I wanted to go beyond the end of course appraisal and engage my colleagues in an observation task from the outset. This seemed a timely point to refocus attention on our course content given a shift to more synchronous (online) teaching this term compared to a previous emphasis on asynchronous learning. It also signalled a return to discussions around pedagogy which were not solely about mode of delivery i.e. the transition to online teaching, which has been the protagonist for much of the last two academic years.

I explained the aims of the ongoing task in the course induction to the small team of 3 dedicated and highly skilled EAP lecturers. I selected Kate Wilson's 2016 research article 'Critical reading, critical thinking: Delicate scaffolding in English for Academic Purposes' as pre reading material to allow us to explore how critical pedagogy can be realised in the context of a short EAP course. This particular article was chosen for several reasons. It evokes Davies and Barnett's (2015) model and probes deeply into the aims of 3 teachers in engendering critical dispositions, revealing commonalities and disparities in their teaching practices. My own teaching style relates quite closely to one of teachers in the study, and I thought that my colleagues may also recognise some shared practices within the descriptions. In addition, I could also relate to the performance or responses of the students in Wilson's study. The difference between our context and that of Wilson's case studies was that the focus was only on critical reading pedagogy. Moreover, it is an ethnographic case study where the researcher observed

behaviour in a non-directed way. In our context, I involved myself in the reflection task alongside my colleagues, observing my own contingent behaviours and critiquing my own materials.

Being mindful that my colleagues would be reticent to engage in a critical reflection of materials which the coordinator (myself) had developed, I established openness early in the induction by identifying what I thought to be some of the limitations of the current course. These were not specific to the development of critical thinking skills, but other aspects e.g., assessment. Early acknowledgment of my limitations may have established a channel for genuine reflection, whilst not diminishing support for the course.

Apart from the provision of the pre- reading material, and the two perspectives with sub questions and the two main questions to prompt observations during the course, there was no further input. I did not, for example, specifically prepare my colleagues for the second question: how our own teaching, that is the contingent, spontaneous tutor- student or even peer- peer interactions cultivated or inhibited critical thinking. At the end of each weekly procedural meeting, I reminded colleagues of the task and inquired into how the notes/observations were going. We decided not to discuss or share notes mid-point as this would tacitly influence our personal observations and a richer reflection would be gained if teachers approached this individually rather than collaboratively. Again, I was mindful not to impose too rigid a framework or instructions as the day-to-day operational needs of such an EAP course mean teachers are occupied and scholarship is best approached non-invasively.

OBSERVATIONS

Towards the end of the course, I scheduled a meeting to discuss our observations. This felt very much a big reveal given our decision not to discuss reflections prior to this. Our observations are summarised in two mind maps below (*Figure 1 and 2*). These are categorised according to Davies and Barnett's model (2015) which identifies three different pedagogical approaches to teaching critical thinking, the most common approach relating to logic and argumentation, - 'The skills perspective on critical thinking'. This perspective includes a taxonomy of lower and higher order skills such as selecting main ideas, synthesising sources of information, identifying topic sentences etc which 'offer teachers something concrete and practical to teach to their students' (Wilson, 2016, p. 252) and notably are assessable. The second involves developing critical dispositions in relation to oneself, others, and the world. A critical disposition can be defined here as an attitude towards or capacity for open mindedness, being curious, showing scepticism, questioning assumptions, being prepared to listen to other points of view, appreciating differences etc. Hence, these first two perspectives define critical thinking as a 'composite of skills and attitudes' (Davies and Barnett, 2015, p.14). The third approach is 'critical pedagogy,' which aims to cultivate students' critical awareness of the world and act on this

to make changes and improvements, therefore it is more transformative in nature. This may be enacted by, for example, developing the ability to identify less overt meanings behind claims, and how such concealment may mask powerful social forces which inhibit human freedom and equality. Notably, Wilson (2016) remarks that critical pedagogy has been less present in mainstream EAP teaching, which Haque (2007) argues may be due in part to the positioning of such EAP programmes within departments of applied linguistics/languages, rather than departments of education where a stronger tradition of critical pedagogy lies. The main issue in the adoption of a critical pedagogy approach in EAP is how appropriate it is for mainly skills based short intensive programmes of instruction in particular. Wilson (2016) usefully outlines how this approach has been implemented with an example of a course where students used tools of critical discourse analysis to examine how newspapers promoted their perspectives. However, the primary focus of most EAP writing courses is on the discursive and textual elements of genres of writing relevant to the students' intended studies, rather than addressing content from a socio-political perspective. This is not to dismiss the value of critically examining our own and our students' understanding of our worlds in the EAP classroom, and as Haque (2008) forewarns 'a purely pragmatic approach to EAP (...) may not prepare them for the politically fraught hidden curriculum of pursuing academic degrees'. (p.101)

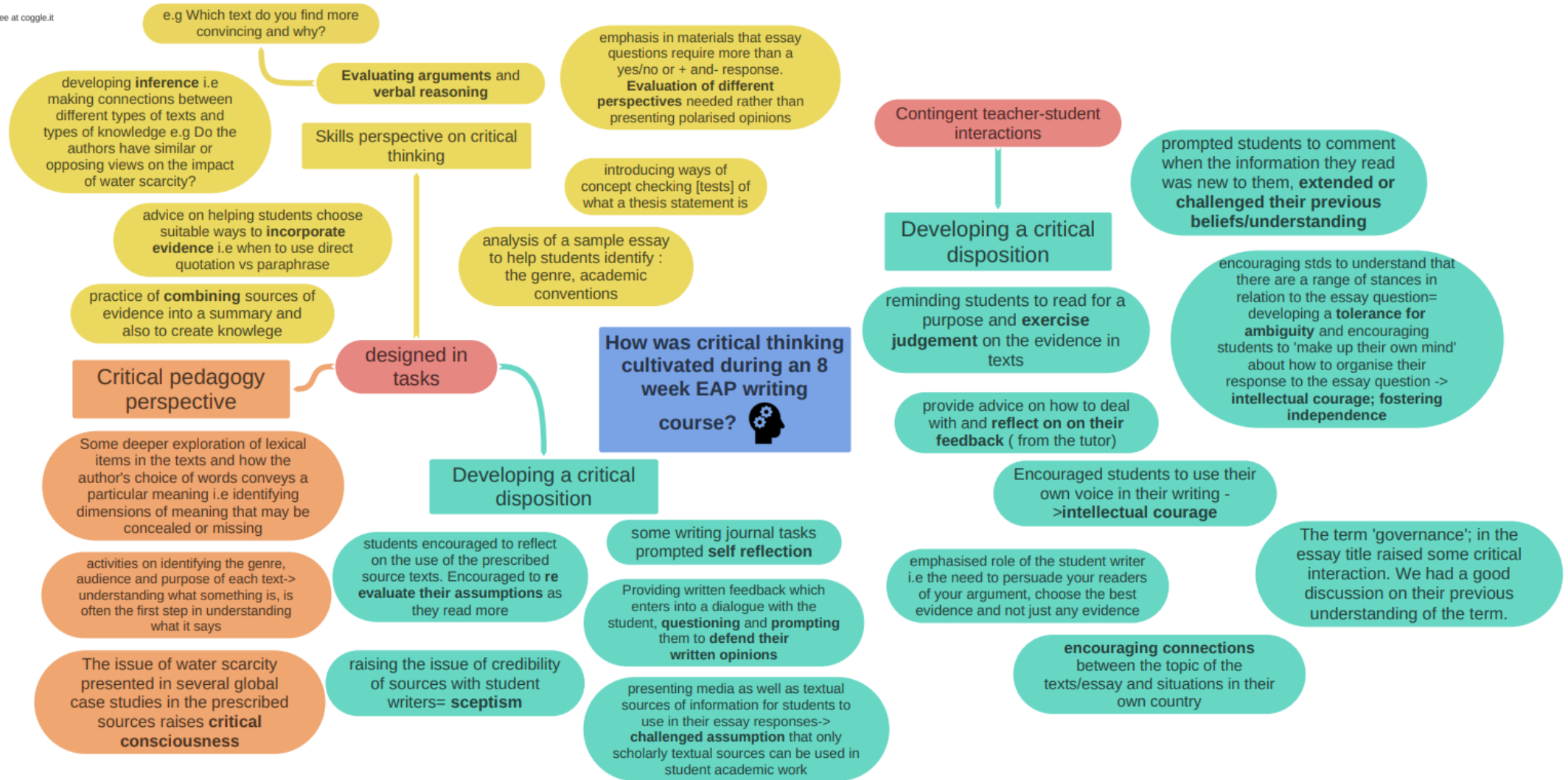


Figure 1: How was critical thinking cultivated during an 8 week EAP writing course

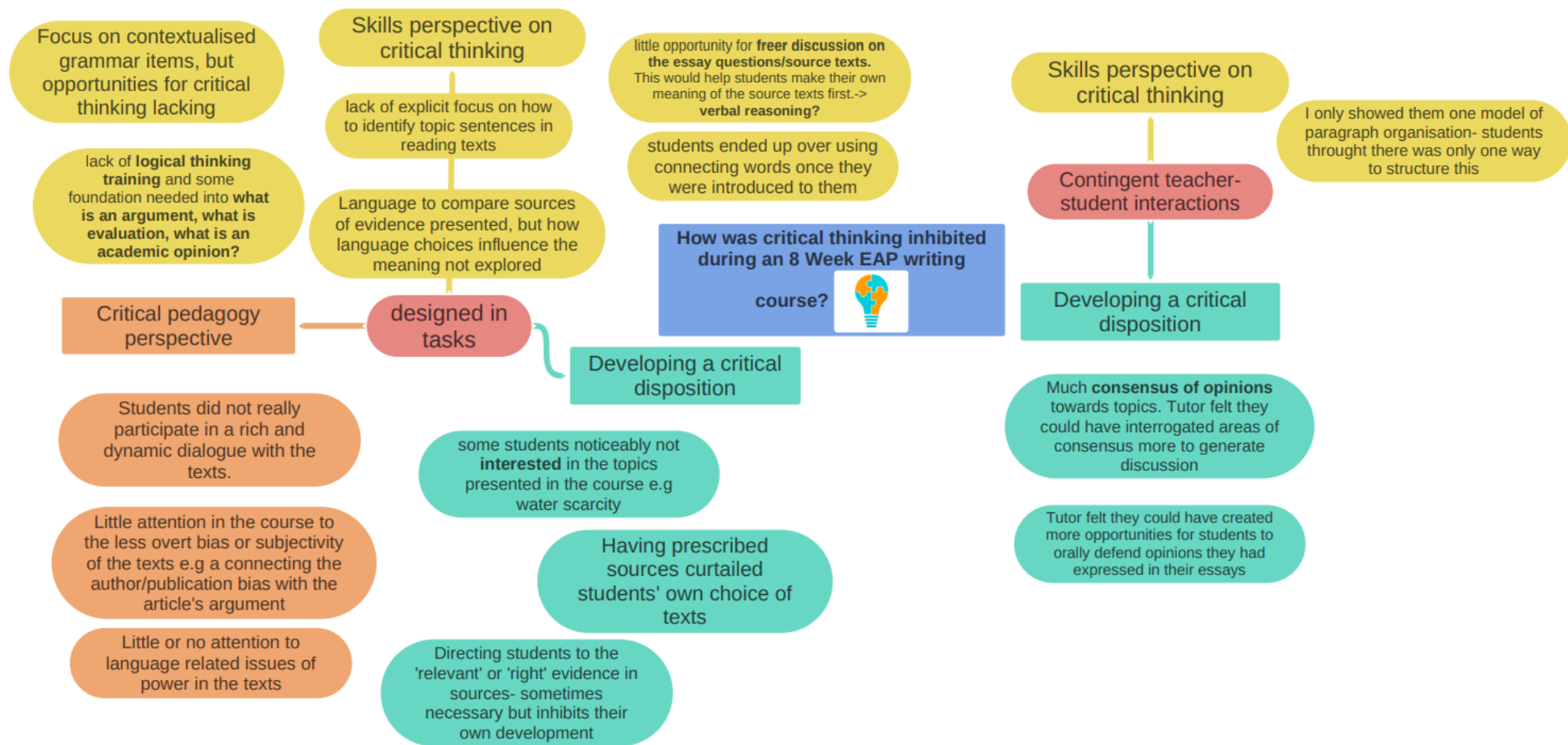


Figure 2: How was critical thinking inhibited during an 8 week EAP writing course

DISCUSSION

Much commentary related to how the 'designed in' course materials developed or inhibited critical thinking, and less to the actions of the individual teacher. There are several possible reasons for this. Primarily, it is challenging to observe and reflect on the impact of our own spontaneous interactions. Indeed, without a recording of each lesson to review, I found it difficult to pinpoint my own reactions or contingent teaching moments. Secondly such moments may have been limited compared to in-person teaching where subliminal cues, and classroom strategies tacitly assist in promoting critical thinking micro-interactions. In the digital environment, students' connections with each other may have been weaker resulting in them being less inclined to challenge others' ideas. Our observations, in particular, on how we *inhibited* critical thinking were limited, with only one of two teachers commenting further on this area. In subsequent small-scale studies, I would pursue this question, but provide more guidance e.g. a cross-comparison of teacher feedback may prompt reflections on how different styles of commentary impact critical thinking.

Categorising the observations in Figures 1 and 2 reveals that critical thinking was indeed approached through a 'composite of skills and attitudes' (Davies and Barnett, 2015, p.14). In studies into university students' critical thinking gains over time, Huber and Kuncel (2016) argue that it is more difficult to develop our students' critical dispositions than teach critical thinking skills, as it is an attitudinal construct. Yet their investigations reveal gains in students' critical thinking dispositions over 4 years. Our own observations here show that as educators we place much emphasis in the EAP classroom on cultivating the critical dispositions of our students in our design and teaching of EAP, and although Huber and Kuncel's (2016) investigations reveal that gains are by no means immediate, they underline that time spent here is of value.

Our observations also reflect the slow adoption of the critical pedagogy perspective in mainstream EAP, remarked upon by Wilson (2016). Indeed, our understanding of this approach was less clear than that of the skills and dispositions perspectives. My colleagues were only furnished with Wilson's article as pre reading, which includes a brief summary of critical pedagogy. Notwithstanding, this ignited some discussion on the content we present to students and whether we were mindful of the voices it represents or under represents from historically marginalised segments of society.

Two colleagues commented that the prescribed nature of the course, for example, the inclusion of preselected reading texts meant that students were unable to exercise autonomy. This is something which Bali (2019) has framed as 'pedagogy of choice' and argues that as well as enhancing inclusivity and engagement, it promotes critical thinking. As an advocate for choice, I have provided opportunities for students to select activities, content and assessment on various modules. The key is

helping students to gradually develop their capacity for making informed choices. Lower levels of language proficiency, coupled with the stage in their HE UK journey and the intensity of short EAP courses mean this capacity is hampered. On this particular EAP writing course, the pre-selected sources serve as a model of appropriate samples of texts. Such models may help them develop their own selection skills in later parts of the programme or their main degree courses. The rationale for the prescribed reading sources is set out to students and teachers, which is a key principle of transparency in teaching.

CONCLUSION

The on-going reflection and our final group discussion led to a consideration of how to integrate critical thinking pedagogy in the EAP classroom through designed tasks, and examine our own roles in cultivating critical thinking behaviours. Incorporating this into a short EAP writing course, alongside managing our students' online participation with its own andragogical implications, was challenging. We can see from the categorised observations that such courses over prioritise some skills whilst overlooking other tenets of critical thinking.

Our final meeting centred on a wider discussion of how to best induct such a student demographic into exercising evaluative judgement. There was much support for an initial training in identifying arguments, evaluation and developing logical reasoning, especially as some students come from family backgrounds that are culturally not as familiar with university education i.e. they may be first in family to study at this level, and taking up challenge to authority is a new position.

Having taught on such generic 'Critical thinking for University' in sessional courses with self-selecting students, I can testify to the creativity they provide for both teachers and students. These courses were additional to the students' main study diet of modules, and intended to raise consciousness. Despite the enjoyment factor, Huber and Kuncel's (2016) research finds that such 'bolt on courses' in problem solving, logic and reasoning provide little transferability in developing critical thinking skills. Bruce (2020) also cautions against separate, discrete activities, only loosely related to the needs of the student, especially given the time constraints of such EAP provision. He maintains that the place for critical thinking is through the expression of evaluative judgements, a competence which learners develop through appropriately related activities guiding them on the target genre. Although our discussions did acknowledge the need to keep this proposed 'training' relevant to the content of the course, we need to weigh this up against time spent on tasks, processes and interactions which equip students with the academic discourse competence to process and produce extended texts.

Meaningful engagement in reflective inquiry during intensive teaching periods, although a laudable aspiration, is difficult to instigate given the pressure on colleagues. Through this small scale on going task though, I have realised that if approached realistically there are clear gains in observing and recording our perceptions in real time. It also served to transform some of the more mainstream conversations we have both during and at the end of the course.

With thanks to my three colleagues for their valuable participation.

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