

Critical Thinking in a Japanese University Current Affairs Course

Sarah Morikawa, Luke Harrington, Kikuko Shiina

Being able to think critically about an issue is a valuable life skill that is often ignored in most language learning environments. While most current affairs classes conducted in English at Japanese universities concentrate on language (lexis and grammar) in order to increase understanding of input materials and issues, this paper supports the inclusion of a critical thinking approach in classes concerned with current affairs. With reference to classroom activities, observations and student feedback, the paper outlines five aspects of critical thinking that could be encouraged in a current affairs class.

Background

Most educators would agree that being able to think critically about an issue, a problem or the information you are given is an essential skill, particularly as the volume of information from the media and other sources that people are exposed to has increased so much. Television news broadcasts and internet news could be said to be moving towards infotainment and away from objective and reliable news. The BBC is not the only broadcaster that makes use of a person's mobile phone footage in its broadcast and although the newsreader states that the footage or the alleged information cannot be verified, the image and its implications remain with the viewer. We also see first person accounts of situations that are published in news media with less emphasis on their reliability than on their sensationalism (Wheeler, 2011).

Thinking critically is not negative as it might at first seem but is rather a positive step towards understanding. When listening to an ordinary news broadcast for example, it is easy to watch with half a mind. Of course, if the news is distant, uninteresting or has no immediate effect on the listener, this is natural. However, an issue sometimes has more meaning for an individual; for example, the average Japanese person was engaged with the issue of the nuclear problems faced by Japan after the Fukushima incident in 2011. At university or school, a student might need to discuss or present an issue in a university class. In these cases, if a person is not able to think critically and investigate beyond the surface information, she or he will be at a

disadvantage due to her or his lack of understanding.

Critical Thinking in English Classes

At this university, in current affairs classes conducted in English, the students are receiving information and participating in their second language (L2). Despite the difficulties involved, the opportunity to introduce, encourage or develop critical thinking (CT) should not be ignored for several reasons. Firstly, whatever language the news is presented in, people will still react to it and should have the opportunity to produce their own ideas, opinions and reactions. This will probably be more fruitful if the discussion develops further than a surface treatment of the factual aspects of the issue at hand. Secondly, although the language of instruction and input is English, the concept of practicing thinking critically in order to improve as a learner is as valid as for classes conducted in the students' L1. The Thinking Classroom (acc 18.10.11) sums it up in the following way. "Effective learners take charge of their own learning processes" (p6) in that they develop their own thinking skills that allow them to investigate topics in their own way. That is, they think for themselves and follow their own way of learning. Furthermore, quoting Bruner (1973) they say that effective learning involves "going beyond the information given", and moving from "passive receiver of information ... into the role of active participant". Practice of such skills in an English classroom will hopefully lead to their greater use in other areas of students' learning.

This transfer of skills may be particularly useful for some students in Japan who may not have had the opportunity to develop their CT skills at school. Students in Japanese junior high or high schools are not usually taught to question what they are told or what they hear from "authority" sources such as the television news or to challenge other's opinions directly in a discussion. As a student in an Advanced English class said, "I felt our...style of discussion – easy agreement, few criticism and fault-finders – were similar, for better or worse". A common form of "discussion" is for each student in turn to state his or her opinion about an issue with the other students listening quietly. From classroom experience, especially at the beginning of term, it is not unusual for students to say they have "finished" their discussion when each student has had his/her turn. Students may also have had little practice in reasoning beyond a two clause statement such as "I think it's a good idea because...", or in assessing their own or others' reasoning.

Current Affairs Materials

Generally, with current affairs materials, those dealing with the news in L2 classes

are most likely to focus on language (lexis and grammar) as these are key to the most basic understanding of the input material. Many published textbooks (Yamane & Yamane, 2011, Onada & Cooker, 2005, and Yamazaki & Yamazaki, 2008) which use video news materials focus on receptive skills and vocabulary improvement and have a final short speaking or discussion section, that involves personalisation of the issue with students often being asked for their opinion or having some control over the research that they could do. However, there is little focus on analysis of the news video used and a dearth of activities that challenge the students to think critically, for example about the accuracy, objectivity or coverage of the input material. It is understandable that receptive skills should be the focus, as these are English teaching materials aimed at improving listening skills and probably promoting interest in the news. After all, it is difficult to think critically about a view or an article or a broadcast if you have not understood it. However, it seems to be a chance missed and this paper advocates the inclusion of a CT strand in a current affairs English classroom.

Critical Thinking

Definitions as to what CT is vary but are often rather involved, complex and difficult to understand. Perhaps a more useable definition for current affairs classes might be Fisher and Scriven's (1997) "Critical thinking is skilled, and active interpretation and evaluation of observations and communications, information and argumentation" (p.21).

In a fifteen week course, meeting once a week, it would be difficult to focus on all aspects of CT, especially given the restraints of language level, in this case, upper intermediate to advanced¹, and the fact that the main aim of the class is English improvement and an increase in current affairs interest. Thus, it is necessary to refine the focus of the CT strand of a news English course to make it achievable for both students and teacher. The aim is to build up a range of skills that will enable students to interpret and evaluate as Fisher and Scriven (*ibid.*) suggest. In each class, a different strand of CT could be highlighted, particularly if, as is the case in this course, one topic is used for more than one week, with a focus not only on receptive but also productive skills. To this end, this essay advocates a focus on the following five aspects of CT. They are not necessarily either mutually distinct or should be introduced in any particular order. For example, prediction can happen at any stage of a class. At the begin-

¹ It should be noted that the qualification for entry to an upper intermediate or advanced level of English is based upon TOEIC score, rather than upon speaking or extensive listening ability.

ning is the traditional stage, but prediction of different people’s reactions or prediction of what will happen before next week could both be equally useful.

Five aspects of critical thinking to be encouraged in a current affairs class.

1. Prediction and interest-raising.

This is an obvious starting point for an English class on almost any topic. Virtually all textbooks have a section at the beginning of each unit or before each text to try to raise student interest in the topic at hand. Asking students to ask their own questions is one way to motivate students to engage with the topic under discussion. This is also a relatively simple way to start the CT strand of a current affairs course. Questioning is widely recognized as being essential for CT. “The key to powerful thinking is powerful questioning” state Paul and Elder (1996), and Kipping (2000) refers to CT as “an ongoing process that usually begins with questions.”

The general problem though is often how to help students to ask meaningful questions. To encourage students to think beyond basic descriptive questions, the following two diagrams could be used. Firstly, the Hilsdon and Bitzer (2007) diagram, incorporated into a worksheet given to students for homework before starting the topic of alternative energy is shown below in Figure 1. It encourages students to think beyond the usual wh descriptive questions that tend to be much more common than the ana-

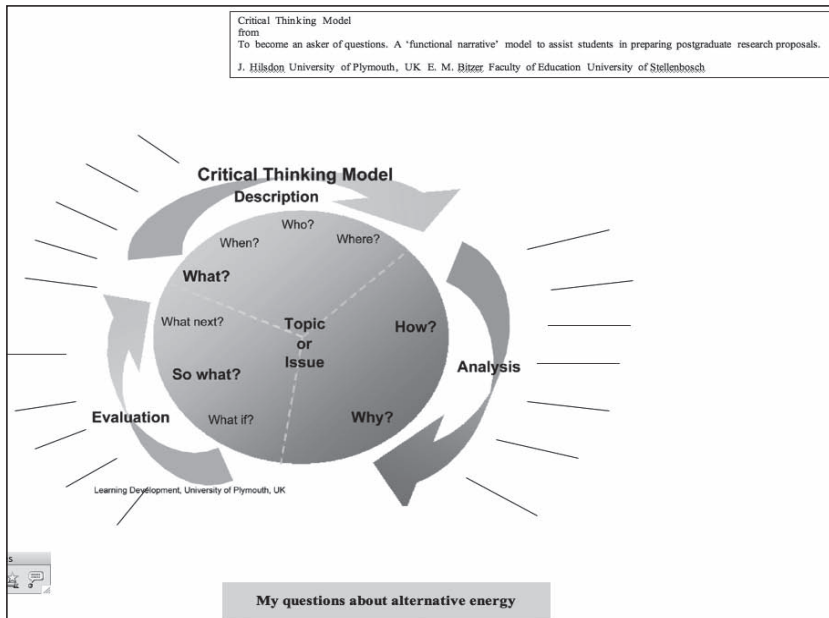


Figure 1

lytical or evaluative questions. Students form their own questions rather than merely answering questions that have been put to them and thus become more engaged in the topic.

Secondly, using a circle Thinking Map, students can brainstorm what they know but additionally focus on *how* they “know” it and/or to what extent they are sure of their facts. This indirectly leads students towards thinking about their own thinking and questioning their own knowledge. The example below (Figure 2) shows the topic in the central circle, space for the students to brainstorm and an outer “Frame of Reference” which according to Herle and Yaeger (2007) can show such information as sources and their reliability or different kinds of influence on the information written in the brainstorming section.

Instruction A is given first, followed by instruction B after the students have finished part A.

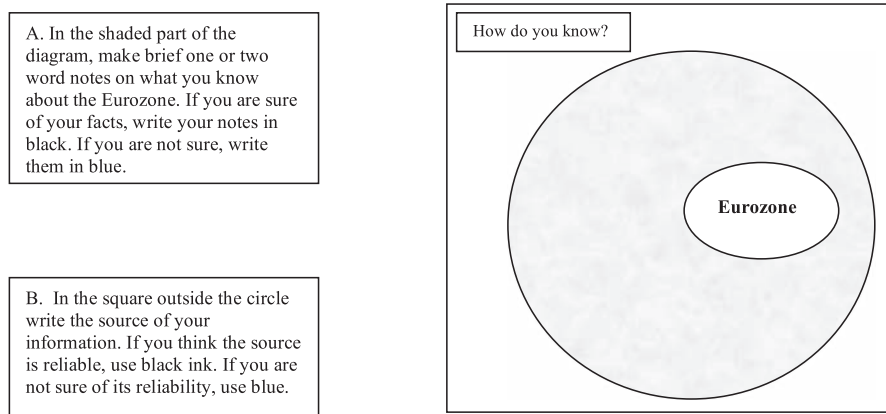


Figure 2

2. Analysing and evaluating the arguments

A basic summary of the analysis and evaluation of arguments can be shown in a simple diagram as in Figure 3 collated from Fisher (2001). This is an oversimplification and the stages do not necessarily happen consecutively but it does give students an idea of the different aspects of argument analysis and evaluation.

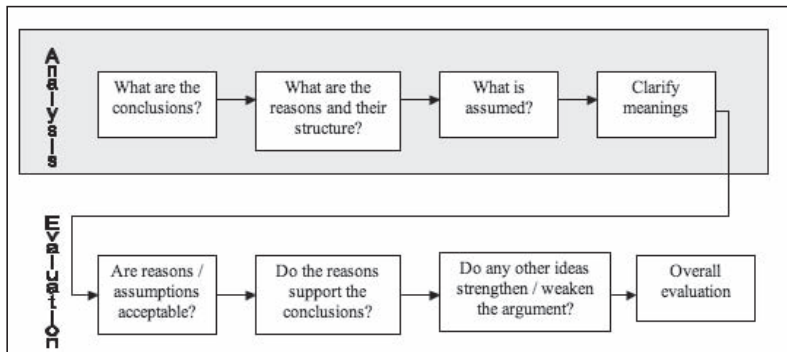


Figure 3

Analysis

As the term progresses, different aspects of arguments can be focussed on. One example could be to give students an article and ask them to find the article's different conclusions and reasons for those conclusions. This could be done with either a written article or a broadcast. The complexity of the reasoning can be adjusted by using easier or more obvious materials, or more complex arguments and by requiring different levels of analysis, for example asking for not only different reasons but also the relationships between them and the presence of intermediate conclusions and whether conclusion are actually stated or merely implied.

An example and an excerpt from a transcript of a BBC news item on the topic of ed-

Finding reasons and conclusions

In these sentences, what are the conclusions and what are the reasons? Underline the conclusions and mark the reasons in each task R1 R2 etc.

1. The Japanese writing system is very difficult. There are a lot of complex characters.(R1)
2. There are three different types of writing in Japanese. (R1) One is hiragana, another is katakana and the third is kanji. There are thousands of different kanji (R2) and there are lots of different ways to read them (R3). All of this means that it is difficult to learn to read and write Japanese.

Why do Finland's schools get the best results?

Learning foreign languages here is seen as key. For these eleven year olds, French is not their second but their third language and when they're thirteen, some will speak a fourth.

But in Finland success is not measured by winners and losers. Learning is more like a team game. The best and worst pupils in any subject are taught together. Controversial maybe, but something they say works.

And it's the teachers here that would make any education secretary go green with envy. They're the key ingredient why in a subject like science, the Finns score so high. Teachers all have to complete a Masters degree.

Figure 4

education in Finland is shown in figure 4. First an easy exercise in identifying reasons and conclusions is given and then students listen to the broadcast and note down any reasons given for the good results of Finland's schools.

The article in question could then be used to consider the aspect of assumptions, for example the assumption that having a Master's degree makes a teacher a better teacher.

Evaluation

With regard to evaluating an argument, students can also be asked to consider whether arguments are good arguments. The idea of a strong or sound argument was new to many students. Five out of ten students in one class specifically picked out this aspect when asked at the end of course feedback which aspects of critical thinking had been new to them. Different texts explain "soundness" in different ways (Talbot, 2009), but generally keeping it simple is best.

The explanation below was given to students and they were asked to judge the soundness of the arguments given in an article.

A SOUND ARGUMENT - The premises (reasons given) are true and they definitely lead to the conclusions. (valid + true)

A STRONG ARGUMENT - The premises are true but only *probably* lead to the conclusions.

"A valid argument is one that guarantees if all the reasons are true, the conclusion will never be false" (Butterworth & Thwaites, 2005, p.59).

As the purpose was to contrast sound and strong arguments, the question of validity was not included at this stage. As with any new task, it is best to give examples first, in this case of sound and strong arguments and the reasons why they are sound or strong, to show students the difference clearly.

For example,

Is this argument sound? For the past twenty-five years, election turnout has been less than 60%, so this year we cannot expect a large turnout.

Clearly this argument is not sound as the basis for the conclusion is merely past experience and it does not take into account any other factors affecting turnout this year. However, it is a reasonably strong argument as there are twenty-five consecutive previous years taken into consideration, not just three or four.

This leads onto another stage in the process of analysis and evaluation of argu-

ments: that of using other ideas to strengthen or weaken an argument. It is relatively easy to ask students to complete activities asking them to match conclusions and reasons but a further step would be to ask them to consider what more information is needed or could be used to strengthen or challenge an argument. Figure 5 shows parts of a handout aimed at facilitating a discussion on monarchy.

<p>Arguments for keeping the British monarchy</p> <p>1. Nations need Heads of State to represent the people. A monarch can represent all the people better than someone who was elected someone who was appointed by a political party someone who took over a country by force This is because a monarch is not involved in politics. etc.</p>	<p>Arguments against keeping the British monarchy</p> <p>1. It sustains class injustice. 2. It is expensive – about £37 million a year (2005). etc.</p>
<p>Supporting/challenging claims - Which of the above points do these claims support or challenge?</p> <p>a. Norway and Netherlands are very equal societies and they are monarchies. b. Politicians are interested in being re-elected. c. The money spent gives Queen Elizabeth a very luxurious lifestyle. d. Many countries in South America have great social inequalities and they are republics. etc.</p>	
<p>Think about the different claims that try to support or challenge the reasons given. Some of them are not very convincing claims. What more information would you like to see in order to believe the ideas?</p> <p><i>Example</i> <i>Argument: Monarchy is not good because it sustains class injustice.</i> <i>Claim</i> : <i>Many countries in South America have great social inequalities and they are republics.</i></p> <p><i>Info needed</i> <i>Which countries in South America have a lot of inequalities?</i> <i>Qus to be asked</i> <i>Is the inequality related to their political system?</i> <i>What kind of inequalities do they have?</i></p> <p>Choose three other claims and write your questions here.</p>	

Figure 5

3. Coverage – What information is not included in a broadcast or article?

Figure 6 shows an example from a current affairs class in which the students have heard a broadcast about an e-coli outbreak and have generally understood the main points of what has happened. They are then asked, using out-takes from the broadcast to think of questions that, if answered, would help them to understand the situation in more depth. Expected questions would be something like for Statement 1: “Is that all exporters or just one or two exporters of vegetables?”, “How did they get that figure?” or Statement 2: “What type of e-coli was in the Spanish cucumbers?”

For each statement, what more information would you like?	
1.	Spain's fruit and vegetable exporters estimate they have been losing more than 200m euros (\$290m; £174m) since the outbreak emerged.
2.	Germany has admitted the bacteria did not come from Spain as initially reported, but said the decision to issue the warning had been correct as a different strain of E.Coli was present in Spanish cucumbers.

Figure 6

Additionally, coverage can be taken to mean whether enough sides of a story, argument or issue have been taken into account. As one student recently said, “I don’t know what all points of view are so I can’t judge whether a discussion is covering all points of view.” A good comment and it seems reasonable not to expect all sides. However, encouraging an awareness that there is more than one side is preferable. Paul and Elder (2006) state “There are typically multiple points of view from which any set of events can be viewed and interpreted. Openness to insights from multiple points of view and a willingness to question one’s own point of view are crucial to “objectivity”” (p.5). This aspect of CT was raised in a class on whaling in which the majority of students are not against whaling. A few are against killing whales. Treating the topic objectively in Japan is sometimes difficult as many articles are clearly biased towards one position or the other. Furthermore, the teacher should avoid heavy persuasion of the students into accepting his or her point of view and should rather present information for the students to evaluate by themselves. As an example, a Youtube video was shown in class demonstrating the differing viewpoints of a collision involving the Nisshin Maru, a ship accompanying the Japanese whaling fleet and a Sea Shepherd boat that sank as a result of the collision. The videos from the ships played at the same time and the students could easily see how playing one or the other could change a viewer’s mind on the cause of the collision. This was followed up by asking students to

scientific	Sustainable use and proper management of all marine resources should be based on scientific findings. Japan's research program in the Antarctic has 4 objectives: estimation of biological parameters to improve the stock management of the Southern Hemisphere minke whale; examination of the role of whales in the Antarctic marine ecosystem; examination of the effect of environmental changes on cetaceans and examination of the stock structure of the Southern Hemisphere minke whales to improve stock management. (5)	At the 2007(IWC) Annual meeting there was considerable disagreement over the value of Japan’s research both within the Scientific Committee and the Commission. As in previous years, there was severe disagreement within the Committee regarding advice that should be provided on a number of issues, including: the relevance of the proposed research to management, appropriate sample sizes and applicability of alternate (non-lethal) research methods. (6)
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Figure 7

consider the pros and cons of the varying viewpoints from which the whaling question can be viewed: economic, cultural, scientific, legal, ethical, food security. Information was then given with sources attached, a short excerpt of which can be seen in Figure 7 above, and students were asked to evaluate the reliability of the sources and the strength of the arguments.

4. Assumptions

The idea of assumptions is raised in the argument section above. Butterworth and Thwaites (2005) refer to assumptions as “missing premises”. They say, “It is a premise [or reason] because it is needed to support the argument. It is missing because, in the author’s mind at least, it does not need to be stated” (p.54). After assumptions have been identified, they can be questioned in the same way as other supporting ideas. However, it is the identification which can prove a problem. This aspect of critical thinking is most easily covered when thinking about input materials such as listening or reading texts. It can be difficult to pick up on assumptions during discussion because of the cognitive load involved, particularly for L2 speakers. As with all aspects of CT, it is necessary to give examples of what is expected (Moon, 2005). The example below (Figure 8) comes from a class dealing with Japan’s aging population. This activity was prefaced by a number of examples of assumptions and discussion about them. For good examples, see Butterworth and Thwaites (2005, 51-55) and Fisher (2001, 54-55).

<p>Assumptions - What are the assumptions behind these statements?</p> <p>A low number of babies now points to a shortage of workers in the future. (assumes that immigration will not increase. assumes that the retirement age will stay the same assumes that more women will not work)</p> <p>So what exactly is behind Japan’s low birth rate? Across the developed world, women are working more and marrying later.</p> <p>By 2050 there will be only two workers for each elderly person. That means there will be fewer people paying tax and more people supported by the state.</p>
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Figure 8

5. Reliability

Measures of reliability vary according to source. Criticalthinking.org.uk, the unofficial guide to the UK’s A-level critical thinking examination, uses the mnemonic RAVEN to help students remember criteria for assessing credibility of evidence, sources, documents or individuals. R stands for reputation, A for ability to see, i.e. whether the

source is “in position to know what they are talking about”, V for vested interest, i.e. whether someone has anything personally at stake or anything to gain by lying, E for expertise, and N for neutrality or bias.

In a class about a government payout to Japanese citizens, students were asked what they thought should be criteria for evaluation of reliability, then the above A level criteria were introduced. The students were given two short articles and having read them and having decided on which statements were fact and which fiction, they were asked to evaluate the reliability of sources and quotations informing the articles. (Figure 9)

Reputation of the source	–What is the source’s history and status?
Ability to see	– Is the source in a position to know information?
Vested interest	– Will the source gain anything by lying or by telling the truth?
Expertise	– Is the source a (relative) expert?
Neutrality	– Is the source biased?
Look at these sources of information and/or opinion from the news articles about the government payout.	
Can you trust the sources?	
Why? / Why not?	The International Monetary Fund
	The Prime Minister
	Morita of Barclays Capital
	“Many Japanese”

Figure 9

Alternatively, UCLA’s Road to Research site gives six criteria for reliability of websites namely: purpose, authority, coverage, accuracy, currency and objectivity. It is easy to ask students to evaluate the articles they found or were given on the basis of these criteria. However, it is difficult for students to do this thoroughly for all criteria. For this reason it may be best to focus on one at a time in more depth, bearing in mind that the main aim of the class is language.

In terms of how reliable a report is the issue of coverage is addressed in section three above. Two other criteria that are simple to grasp and apply but very useful are currency and objectivity including neutrality. Firstly, when focusing on current affairs it is usually preferable for the listening or reading text to be “current” to maintain interest. If using a textbook containing news reports, content is necessarily a little outdated and how relevant it is to recent events and issues will depend on each report. Arguments and facts will change with the times. For example, media arguments for and against nuclear power in Japan, changed rapidly after March 2011. Examples of changing facts would be the number of AIDS patients in Japan or the relative ranking of different schools year by year. For this reason, it is probably best,

although rather preparation-heavy to use current news in current affairs classes and prepare tasks each week, rather than rely on textbooks with ready-made activities, listening texts and transcripts.

Objectivity is another criteria that is essential in both critical thinking and current affairs. In some cases this can just mean the difference between fact and opinion, whereas in others, bias, in various forms, could become a focus.

With regard to fact/opinion, students can be asked to designate a single sentence fact or opinion, or, there could also be a wider choice as shown in Figure 10 with students choosing an option for each sentence. More realistically, parts of articles or transcripts could be provided and students can underline and label different sentences as in this example (Figure 11) adapted from Butterworth and Thwaites (2005:35).

<p>Explanation (Why something happened /happens) A factual statement (accepted as true by everyone) An opinion (one (or more) person's idea) Argument (reasons and conclusions)</p> <p><i>Which of the following are explanations(E) , facts (F), opinions (O) or arguments (A)?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The risk of a nuclear accident is small but the consequences are huge. 2. Ice is not as dense as liquid water so it forms on the surface of a pond rather than sinking to the bottom. 3. Generating electricity by nuclear reactors does not produce carbon dioxide.
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Figure 10

<p><u>Fact or otherwise?</u></p> <p>Fact – A claim that is true (and is widely known to be true) Opinion – A claim about what you think or believe (subjective) Prediction – A claim about what will happen Recommendation – A judgement about what should be done A value judgement – A claim about the worth of something or about whether it is good or bad</p> <p>Japan to Buy Pork to Boost Prices After Demand Drops (http://commodities) Pork wholesale prices have plunged 26 percent from a year earlier to 380 yen a kilogram on average this month in Tokyo, according to government data. Consumers are eating less meat as the recession cut wages and boosted unemployment. Japan's price- support measure may benefit exporters such as the U.S., Canada and Denmark as the domestic premium over imports may widen.</p>

Figure 11

Even if a report is factually accurate and opinions are clearly recognizable as such, rather than being taken for fact, objectivity can still be jeopardised by the report being biased/one sided and by it containing language designed to persuade the reader towards one or another point of view.

To some extent, as every report will have its own starting point and its own focus,

and as it is not possible to show everything in one report, all reports will be necessarily biased; “Objectivity and fairness is an illusion” (Paul and Elder, 2006, p.4). The aim in a current affairs class would be to encourage students to think about the presence of bias and to recognise it when it occurs. Taking bias as the focus of a class means that the teacher will need to find biased reporting or biased articles, either in broadcast or in print. Given some of the media available, this should not be too difficult.

In this example, on the topic of creationism /intelligent design vs. evolution, students were given an article about the two sides which came from a site supporting creationism (Figure 12). It was not difficult for the students to notice at least some of the ways in which the text was biased.

Creationism vs Evolution

What is evolution?

Evolution was popularized by the writing of a book by Charles Darwin called "Origin of the Species," however, Darwin was not the first propagandist for this ideology. Those who adhere to the theory of evolution are called "evolutionists." Evolution must be believed by faith for there is no written account, no eyewitnesses, and no viable proof that this theory is correct. It is based upon suppositions and the humanistic evaluation of man as to how things "may" have come about.

What is creationism?

The term "creationist" refers to one who ascribes to the biblical truth that God created heaven and earth. It is said that a creationist is one that uses blind faith in order to believe that God created all that we call earth. However, the truth is that the Bible gives an account that was recorded through handed-down facts and those facts were then compiled into what we now know as the book of Genesis. This creation "record" has been preserved down through the ages. The Creationist believes in order, design, and therefore an ultimate designer. This view has been constantly born out by the new discoveries of the last century of which the genome is just one. This intricate blueprint, that is unique to each human individual and indeed is the make up of all living organisms, could not be formed by chance or accident. Therefore, a creationist is one who trusts in the veracity of God as creator rather than primeval soup as the origin of life on earth.

<http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/creationist-faq.htm>

Figure 12

A further way that a writer can influence a reader or listener is by using persuasive language, either at the beginning in headlines or within the report itself. Figure 13 shows a few of the headlines used at the time of the Fukushima explosion in March 2011. The use of language such as “Get out now” is designed to heighten fear and a sense of immediate action. This report is also misleading as Britons were not told to get out of Tokyo during the aftermath of the explosion. Similarly the use of “nuke” and “Hiroshima” can lead the casual reader to think of large nuclear explosions. In class, the students were given a number of headlines, some sensationalist and some more sober. They were then asked to sort them and give reasons for their decisions.

GET OUT OF TOKYO NOW

BRITS were told to get out of Tokyo tonight after the Foreign Office elevated its warnings to those still in Japan as its post-tsunami nuclear crisis deepened.
(The Sun 16th Mar)

Japan nuke crisis raised to max

24th April Sun

NY Times

Fukushima and Hiroshima

By ROBERT JAY LIFTON Published: April 15, 2011

Figure 13

Limitations and Evaluation

The above five aspects of critical thinking: predicting and interest-raising, identification and analysis of arguments, coverage, assumptions and reliability, can all be integrated relatively smoothly into a current affairs course. Naturally, the explanations and examples given above are only a few of the possibilities available. Other aspects of critical thinking have not been covered here. One example is accuracy. The accuracy of a video broadcast is difficult to ascertain. In general, with news sources that are perceived as reliable, certain assumptions have to be made that the facts presented, as opposed to opinions, are accurate to the best of the reporter's knowledge.

This report also does not cover important points such as the teacher's attitude towards students' questions or opinions, particularly if they differ from the teachers' own, feedback received from teachers or how to manage student interaction and other facets of classroom management.

Despite the limited nature of the activities outlined above, and in some cases the limited nature of the explanation and justification attached to each activity, it should be clear that there is certainly a place for the use of tasks to raise awareness of critical thinking in current affairs classes. In six elective intermediate classes with a total of 90 students, students have reacted favourably to the critical thinking content. The table below shows the results of the standard department questionnaire given to all classes at the end of each term.

The three questions shown are those that most closely relate to the syllabus and its usefulness.

Scores of 1 mean the students found the classes useful, increased their motivation or were satisfied. A 5 means not useful / not motivating / not satisfied at all.

Table 1. Syllabus questionnaire results

	1	2	3	4	5
A The syllabus was helpful for learning	46	36	8	0	0
B The class increased my motivation and interest in the subject	52	34	4	0	0
C I was satisfied with the class	63	19	8	0	0

In addition some comments by students indicated that they had taken on board some of the aspects of critical thinking introduced in the course. Examples include the following: “Now when I hear something like “they say...”, I always think “Who says?”, “Why does he say so?” and so on.” “I will not only read writings but also think how trustworthy it is from now on.” “Since when I read the handout, I sometimes think that what am I saying is right or not, or what it stands for.” “What impressed me the most is that we should not believe so easily what we read or what we hear.” This last student also said “With English ability that I have right now, I cannot react promptly in English to another’s opinion.” This highlights the fact that it is sometimes difficult for L2 students to discuss any current affairs topic in English, either for language reasons, or because of the lack of background knowledge and to introduce a critical thinking strand may be seen as just too much. However, particularly when dealing with the media, critical thinking is essential in any language and the skills learned in one class may be transferred to another in the way the students quoted above have highlighted. Teachers should aim to promote critical thinking by engaging students’ interest and motivation (Meyer, 1986). Current affairs is commonly a high-interest subject area, especially if students have some input into the topics covered in class and the opportunity should not be missed.

CONCLUSION

It is by no means an easy task to introduce a critical thinking approach into current affairs classes for language learners. However, this paper has demonstrated how such classes can be extended by building on a traditional language focused approach to current affairs towards an approach that incorporates both language and critical thinking skills. The five aspects discussed in this paper (prediction and interest-raising, analysis and evaluation of arguments, coverage, assumptions and reliability) can be used as an introduction to critical thinking in the classroom. This should not be done either too quickly or too densely but can be incorporated gradually and as has been shown, given the right context, selection and use of materials and guidance, could encourage learners to engage in activities and learn more than just language in the language classroom. Ideally, the skills learned will reinforce any similar input from other cours-

es that the students are taking and be transferred to other areas of the students' academic and social lives.

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