

# Interpersonal Aspects of Thinking Skills in an Intercultural Language Learning Context

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## Abstract

*Asking and answering certain types of questions are thought to develop thinking skills in all types of classrooms. Previous research has demonstrated that asking higher order questions and answering with elaborated responses are associated with high achievement in first, second, and foreign language contexts. Typically more attention is paid to question frequency or achievements inferred from individual performances than to the dialogues in which asking and answering occurs. This paper argues for a focus on the construction of responses in interaction as an alternative to the investigation of questions, effects of training or individual measurements of performance. Drawing on interactional data from an adult English as a Second Language classroom, it is argued that constructing an answer to a critical question appears to be a highly collaborative and evaluative affair. The thinking skills literature suggests that responding to higher order questions is an individual higher cognitive function, however it is argued in this paper that in attempting to construct evaluative answers language learners are involved not only in a cognitive task, which may or may not be helpful to language learning, but also in a complex social task in which perspectives need to be negotiated, stances taken and identities navigated. It is suggested that higher order thinking cannot be separated from the social and cultural knowledge through which it is brought into being. It is argued that any implementation of thinking skills in an English language teaching context ought to consider interpersonal and social aspects, particularly in intercultural settings.*

**Keywords:** *Thinking skills, Evaluation, Stance-taking*

## Introduction

Thinking skills and the concept of criticality have become prominent in a range of educational contexts worldwide. Policy makers and employers require flexible and generic transferable skills from learners who have completed educational programmes (U.S. Department of Education, 1991; Biggs, 1987; Roberts, 2002). It is often cited that the increased competition in a global economic market requires participants within organizations to demonstrate critical problem-solving skills and to adapt to changing environments (Harvey et al., 1997). This general trend for an increase in the implementation of thinking skills is also evident in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts. Waters (2006, p.319) suggests that the "importance of thinking for language learning" and making connections between new and old information is "widely accepted". Despite this apparent common fact, he argues that some English language learning contexts do not include the types of activities which might promote particular ways of thinking. Waters (2006) suggests that the lack of thinking activities in classrooms around the world may be the result of a lack of awareness about how to conceptualize levels of thinking. Although the importance of such concepts may be agreed on a rhetorical level, the implementation of such concepts into classroom practices may have rather less widely accepted effects and far reaching consequences. Dogancay-Aktuna (2005, p.101) argues that implementations "based on behaviour quite different from students' and teachers' previous experiences and expectations can lead to problems". Atkinson (1997) calls for caution in any wide-scale implementation of thinking skills or proceduralized versions of criticality in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Atkinson (1997) argues that critical thinking is a social practice, which is difficult to define because of its implicitness in particular contexts. As a culturally based concept, it can hold different positions in different cultures. Puolimatka (2004) argues that the development of individuals capable of oppositional thinking and making criterion-based evaluations, which are features of higher levels of thinking in certain taxonomies, are rather more concerned with the ideals of liberal education than sustainable global economic

growth. Puolimatka (2004) suggests that the development of a critical individual is dependent upon pre-existing social conditions rather than an increase in thinking proficiency. It seems that culturally embedded concepts such as critical thinking, or the implementation of approaches to improve thinking, have the potential to cause concern for educators if the impact and consequences in inter or cross-cultural contexts are not thoroughly explored. Rather than suggesting guidelines and exemplars of how English language teaching professionals can conceptualize thinking activities in ELT materials, the cultural and social aspects of such moves and their application in intercultural contexts could be more deeply pursued using appropriate frameworks (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005).

This paper does not cast doubt on the possibility of certain approaches or interventions to improve performance in a range of contexts around the world, as is evidenced in the next section. This paper aims to highlight how answering a question assumed to promote higher levels of thinking, involves drawing on the personal, social and cultural knowledge of speakers in interaction. Answering a higher order question is a joint social task, not an individual cognitive one. It involves collaboration and stance-taking. The implications for language teaching are a raised awareness that such activities are not necessarily about improving individual cognitive functioning. They are concerned with fundamental aspects of interpersonal communication and social functioning, which involve the negotiation of common ground, evaluation, and stance-taking. Moreover, any approach to the implementation of thinking skills, particularly in an intercultural context ought to position itself in a critical pedagogic framework, which reflects the understanding that language education is not a neutral, ideologically empty activity (Simpson, 2009). For teachers and educators this suggests engagement with a critical approach to intercultural communication and second/foreign language teaching (Corbett, 2003).

## Thinking skills and higher order questions

Levels of thinking are often conceptualized in hierarchical frameworks. Although a number of frameworks are available, Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives is one such frequently cited and adapted framework. Waters (2006) draws on the levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy and these adaptations to explicate how language learning activities can be matched to different levels of thinking. Initial levels in the taxonomy are concerned with recalling and recognizing information. Further levels are concerned with going beyond the recall and recognition of information to the evaluation of information; judging something as good or bad. It is at these higher levels, as conceptualized by these frameworks, that it is claimed that students connect old and new information to become active thinkers and improve language knowledge and use (Waters, 2006). Previous studies in first, second and foreign language contexts have demonstrated positive effects of implementing interventions on the basis of such frameworks and taxonomies (Redfield & Rousseau, 1981; Ayaduray & Jacobs, 1997; Alcon, 1993). Interventions often involve asking and answering higher order questions in educational contexts. Higher order questions are identified in such studies according to the characteristics of taxonomies, or through question forms (or stems). An example of a list of questions stems is given in Appendix 1. Asking a higher order question is intended to stimulate higher order thinking, to place students in a position where they are required to move beyond recalling and recognizing information, to a position where they analyze, synthesize and evaluate information (Black, 1985; King, 1990). Results of such interventions often show an increase in achievement on measures of individual performances following training or exposure to such questions (Redfield & Rousseau, 1981). A study by Alcon (1993) involved two groups of language learners; one group received training in higher order questions and the other group received regular class instruction. Both groups of learners listened to a story, discussed it, and produced a written summary. A greater level of achievement was recorded in the group who had received training, measured by performance on an individual written summary. Alcon (1993, p.73) suggests that "the higher achievement in the training group indicates that the use of high cognitive questions [...] in classroom discussion promotes the kind of verbal interaction which facilitates comprehension and written production in the foreign language". Although the importance of spoken interaction in accounting for this effect is highlighted, no qualitative examination was made of the learners' dialogues in the study. Inferences of performance on written summaries were preferred to demonstrate the higher level of proficiency achieved as a result of the intervention. Similarly, in an investigation of higher order questions and elaborated responses in an English-medium secondary school in Singapore, Ayaduray and Jacobs (1997, p.567) suggest that "questions can be used to develop effective learner strategies and thinking skills". Their study illustrates that given explanation and instruction learners produce a greater number of higher order questions and elaborated responses.

They report that “the quality of the elaborated responses also improved [and] the experimental class also showed more variety, including more expressions of judgment” (Ayuduray & Jacobs, 1997, p.566). These studies involve learner dialogues as part of the experimental process though there is no focus on the interaction in which learners construct responses determined to be at a high level of thinking.

To some extent the studies on higher order questions cited in the previous section are not necessarily about research on question asking and answering, or learning through dialogue. They are concerned with interventionist approaches designed to improve performance through training. It would appear that less attention has been paid to the investigation of how learners construct responses and more attention has been paid to resulting performances. This is perhaps unfortunate as there is no clear indication of what goes on between learners when they are involved in such discussions and why it ought to be beneficial for participants. In addition, there are no aspects of the investigations which examine any sustained effects of training, an issue raised by Atkinson (1997) on the doubts of transferability of thinking skills to new contexts. Claims made on the relationship between questioning and better performances are not disputed, as the above studies have demonstrated. Although effects may be quantifiable, issues remain as to why and how asking and answering particular kinds of questions should produce such effects. It seems that in most studies the occurrence of questions is prioritized and unravelling the meaning constructed in a response is of much less concern. This is perhaps illustrative of the current preoccupation of form over meaning (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003), or the dominance of the view of language as a monologic system which serves to pass information from one individual to the other. In studies of interaction question forms are often given priority over the sequential examination of interactional data (Schegloff, 1984). Perhaps too, in language education, there is a focus on form and individual measures of achievement. Corbett (2003) notes that a perspective prevalent amongst language teachers is one which is concerned only with language education as the transmission of communication, rather than on the complex construction and negotiation of social functions, and social and cultural identities. A clearer understanding of the construction, context, and social and interpersonal aspects of learner responses could offer an opportunity for more explanation.

### Higher order thinking: evaluation

As noted in previous discussion, asking and answering a higher order question is believed to encourage high levels of thinking, such as evaluation (Bloom, 1956). Evaluation may be viewed as the weighing up of evidence in relation to logical connections or designated standards (Fisher, 2001). It can also be viewed as the assessment and judgment of the value of something. From the point of view of the study of discourse, evaluation is defined as:

*the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. The attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values. (Thompson & Hunston, 1999, p.5)*

Thompson and Hunston (1999, p.24) argue that evaluative expression reflects a speaker's values or the values of a particular group or community to which the speaker identifies her/himself as belonging. They further suggest that parameters of evaluation, such as certainty and goodness, appear to be orientated towards speakers' experiences of the world. These parameters appear to be experiential and “real-world orientated”. This suggests that the knowledge gained through an individual's experience or socialization can play a role in the way that evaluations come into being. Furthermore, Thompson and Hunston (1999) note that evaluation is concerned not only with identifying the positive or negative aspects of something, but also how important something is judged to be, or how relevant it is perceived to be. This suggests that the construction of evaluation in interaction with others can be dependent upon the contingent action of ongoing dialogue. Du Bois (2007) suggests that in the process of evaluating something (an object in the communicative field or a previous utterance) speakers simultaneously evaluate the object, position themselves in relation to the object, and align themselves to other speakers. Du Bois (2007, p.162) offers an understanding of the action of stance as a stance triangle in which three acts (evaluation, alignment, and positioning) act as one “tri-act”. As a publically observable act of assigning value through communication with others, Du Bois (2007, p.139) argues that stance-taking is “one of the most important things we do with words”. Expressing the public attitudinal positions of speakers, acts of evaluation index wider sociocultural knowledge and have consequential effects on interaction (Englebretson, 2007). It would appear that understanding social and discursive aspects of evaluation have been overlooked in previous studies of the implementation of higher order thinking, of which evaluation is highlighted as a key aspect to improve ways of thinking. These dis-

course and social aspects are important for teachers and educators to note because a clearer understanding of the process of evaluation through spoken interaction has the potential to make explicit the often assumed and implicit personal, social, and cultural knowledge of classroom interactions.

### Asking learners to evaluate in intercultural contexts

In its broadest sense, intercultural classroom contexts are those in which more than one culture may be represented through material or task or the socialized experiences of participants. Acts of evaluation in intercultural language learning contexts may need consideration for a number of reasons. Firstly, Waters (2006, p. 326) suggests that evaluative activities in adult English language learning classrooms can be an opportunity for self-expression which “fosters a healthier, more ‘adult’ psychological frame of mind”. Exactly how a healthier frame of mind is to be understood here is unclear. However, notions of the individual and the social system present in an intercultural context may contrast greatly. There may also be a diverse range of expectations held by teachers and learners regarding the functions of self-expression (Atkinson, 1997; Carson, 1992). Secondly, although there is no support from evidence of learner discourse from evaluative activities, Waters (2006) suggests that evaluation activities can be achieved through a level of language which is no more complex than that used at lower levels of thinking. This implies that the only complexity of value to be considered is at the level of syntax, rather than the pragmatic and social complexities of language use. As argued in the previous section, evaluative actions in interpersonal communication involve the public expression of attitude or values, the positioning of an individual in relation to an object or topic, and the alignment to others in interaction (Du Bois, 2007). It might be suggested that while the linguistic means through which these processes are evidenced may be no less complex than at other levels of thinking, the social functioning involved is complex. In this regard, the benefits for language learners in intercultural contexts may be in the opportunity for stance-taking and perspective sharing. In fact, the importance of perspective-sharing in language learning has been argued as a means to greater social functioning (Hall, 2006). Studies of communication suggest that common ground, that is, the information that speakers believe that they share, is fundamental to understanding and responding to utterances in a communicative context (Clark, 1996; Clark & Schober, 1992). Clark (1996) suggests that a communal common ground is information that is believed to be shared universally, and a personal common ground is the information inferred from experience shared with one another through conversation or a joint perceptual experience. Whilst it is not assumed that language learners in an intercultural context will not share a communal common ground, it is neither assumed that they will. Speakers may or may not appeal to knowledge on the understanding that it is shared by others in the communicative context. It might be assumed that personal common ground is more likely to be shared because it is constructed from the jointly shared conversational and perceptual experience of the task, or classroom.

### Constructing a response

In order to examine how responses are constructed to higher order questions it is necessary to draw on interactional data in which higher order questions and answers occur. The following discussion draws on an extract from a corpus of spoken interaction from an adult English language learning context (O’Boyle, 2002). In the extract below three speakers are given task material containing information about a list of company employees. The task material instructs the group to reach an agreement to fire an employee in order to save money. The group begins by discussing the list of employees and whether or not they should be asked to leave, at the same time, clarifying vocabulary items with one another. They also seek clarification from the teacher on unknown lexical items in the material. The speakers agree and disagree with one another about whom they should fire.

#### Extract 1

1. Akari: - we can't decide <looks at the teacher>
2. Pau: John
3. Eli: It's got to be John
4. Akari: Lets go with= John and be responsible
5. Pau: = make elections, and Akari what do you make elections?
6. Akari: Ok it has to be John-



7. Pau: - yes and you
8. Akari: but it's gonna be
9. Eli: Yes
10. Pau: and John
11. Teacher: Ok so John's the one. So, can I ask, how does the age of the employee affect your decision?
12. Pau: John can change easily because he is only 24 and young strong man=
13. Akari: =and also very lazy, he's not doing anything
14. Pau: yes so lose money the company might be losing money. How can I say in English  
<looks at teacher> John the company is losing with with=
15. Akari: =with John
16. Teacher: because of John
17. Pau: yes
18. Eli: So the company is losing money because of John but also it may be because of Bill because he is also doing very little (.) but look at the ages 50 and 24 (.) John has more possibility to get a new job than Bill because he's 50 (.) Bill is old and when you're fifty you don't have a very good chance of a new job (.) people don't want to hire old people, er... fifty's not old but=
19. Akari: =Yeah
20. Eli: but it's old in the market (.) but maybes John is a good friend or so (.) I don't know

### Criteria of elaborated responses

As a starting point to the discussion of this extract, line 11 and the extended turn in lines 20-26 will be explored. Using the criteria of previous studies, the question asked in line 11 can be termed a higher order question (see Appendix 1). From previous studies the preferred response to a higher order question is an elaborated response. This has been defined as a response which provides a "detailed description of how to do something, clarifying a concept, providing rationales, generating examples, or relating new material to prior knowledge" (King, 1990, p. 672). In lines 20-26 Eli produces what can be defined as an elaborated response. Eli clarifies information from the previous exchange [21: So the company is losing money because of John]. Eli generates examples of how age could affect the decision [21-22: John has more possibility to get a new job than Bill]. Eli then provides a rationale [22: when you're fifty you don't have a very good chance of a new job] and relates new material to prior knowledge by inferring her prior knowledge of what it means to be 50, and relates it to the material in this communicative context [23: people don't want to hire old people]. Based on previous studies, this extended utterance can be interpreted as an elaborated response. However, this type of interpretation can offer no account of the impact of interaction on the construction of this response. Moreover, it cannot suggest an explanation of why verbal interaction with others is necessary to achieve these goals of higher order thinking.

### Joint elaborated responses

If the assumption that answering a higher order question is an individual affair is removed, then it is possible for a sequence of utterances to form an elaborated response. If taken separately the initial responses by Pau and Akari to the question in line 11 do not demonstrate the criteria for an elaborated response. However, if the shorter initial responses by Pau, Akari, and the Teacher in lines 13-19 are taken together, and the same criteria as before is applied, then these lines can be interpreted as an elaborated response. They clarify a concept, i.e. how best to convey the phrase: "John the company is losing with" [16-19]. The responses provide rationales [13: John can change easily because he is only 24 and young strong man] and relate new material to prior knowledge [13: he is only 24 and young strong man]. Pau includes the evaluative adjective 'strong' which is not included in the task material. Pau is inferring his prior knowledge of what it means to be 24, i.e. he believes that a male employee at the age of 24 is not very old and strong. The responses of three participants if taken together display features of an elaborated response. This suggests that speakers can literally jointly con-

struct an elaborated response. This indicates an alternative position to that which views communication as exchange and that which views the operation of higher order thinking as an individual affair.

### **Evaluation and stance-taking in interpersonal communication**

Through close examination of the extract this section aims to demonstrate *a)* the presence of stance-taking, and *b)* how Eli's response, regarded as an elaborated one, is made up of the previous utterances of others and her stance to them. Stance-taking appears throughout this extract (e.g. lines 1-10, 13-19, 20-26) will be examined with reference to the understanding of stance by Du Bois (2007). In order to investigate the construction of responses in relation to higher order questions, the initial focus will be lines 13-19. In line 13, Pau contributes the evaluation that the employee is "only 24" and a "young strong man". This has been noted earlier as an evaluation based on Pau's world view of what it means to be 24. In line 14 Akari aligns herself to Pau's position signaled by "and". However, she further evaluates the object of Pau's stance as "very lazy" on the basis of the information in the task material. Pau chooses to align himself with Akari's stance signaled by "yes" and adds a reason for this alignment "the company might be losing money". The initial stance taken by Pau assigns positive values to the object of evaluation in response to the teachers question in line 11. Akari's stance however assigns negative values to the same object, yet the alignment between the two speakers remains because Akari first aligns to Pau's positive stance, and then positions a negative stance to which Pau aligns. These participants evaluate the object of attention and align themselves to the positions taken by each other. As a result of the interaction and stance-taking they have produced four evaluations of the same object:

Object: John

Ev1: can change easily

Ev2: only 24, young strong man

Ev3: lazy, not doing anything

Ev4: causing the company to lose money

These evaluations are taken up by Eli in her utterance in lines 20-26. What is interesting to note is that the only additions made by this speaker concern the evaluation of age. In the main, she uses and responds to the previous evaluations of others to address the question asked by the teacher.

Object: Bill

Ev1: can't change easily

Ev2: old

Ev3: not doing anything

Ev4: causing the company to lose money

Eli first aligns herself to Pau's evaluation with "so the company is losing money because of John" before taking an alternative stance "but it may be because of Bill". Eli uses the same evaluation but changes the object, thereby forwarding a different position to the ones already present in the interaction. Again, Eli uses the same evaluation offered by Akari in line 14 that the employee is not doing anything and instead makes another employee, Bill the object of that evaluation. Furthermore, Eli responds to Pau's earlier evaluation in line 13, "John can change easily", aligns herself to it and expands the evaluation by comparing features of the two employees: "John has more possibility to get a new job than Bill". From lines 20-22 Eli responds to the previous stances taken by others and uses the evaluations which they have constructed in order to take an alternative stance. This section of her response draws on shared personal common ground held with the other speakers. Clark (1996) defines personal common ground as the elements gained through interaction with others in the conversational experience alongside elements from the shared perceptual experience of the task material.

From lines 22-26, Eli's personal, social, and perceived cultural values are incorporated in her evaluations *a)* in an employment context 50 is old and *b)* when you are old it is hard to get a job because employers do not want to hire older workers. These evaluations are illustrative of how a speaker draws on sociocultural knowledge or vantage point of the world and value system as the basis for evaluation (Hunston & Thompson, 1999). The language which she uses to convey her understandings of the world are given in a generalized form; generic "you" and "people" [22-23 "when you're fifty" and

“people don’t want to hire old people”]. Scheibman (2007) suggests that generalizations are a stance based on an appeal to solidarity, presupposing that the listeners will share the same expectations and fill in the same intended meaning. In this extract the evaluation which is assumed to be shared and based on generalizations, while appealing to a group solidarity is presented with little opportunity for other speakers to position themselves to this evaluation or align with the speaker. Although the overlap in line 25 by Akari indicates an alignment to some degree it is unclear whether the “Yeah” marks an acceptance of Eli’s reassessment of 50 being “not old” or an alignment with her previous evaluations.

This section of her response draws on what she understands to be universally held positions, described by Clark (1996) as communal common ground. By appealing to generalizations the speaker demonstrates a perspective which she presents as already shared by others. Thompson and Hunston (1999) argue that evaluative expression reflects a speaker’s values or the values of a particular group or community to which the speaker identifies her/himself as belonging. It might be suggested that evaluations which appeal to a communal common ground can be difficult to contest without significant effort or disruption to the perception of group solidarity. A re-examination of Eli’s extended turn [20-26] indicates the impact of interaction on the construction of her response. It evidences the perceptual experience of the task, the conversational experience with others, and the sociocultural values of the speaker.

In an intercultural context the sociocultural values and previous socialization experiences of speakers may not be shared. Evaluations which are “real-world orientated” (Thompson & Hunston, 1999) or appeal to a communal common ground may be difficult to contest without significant effort or disruption to the perception of group solidarity. Depending on the educational goals of particular language learning contexts, an opportunity to make the knowledge which is assumed to be shared, open to examination may be a pedagogic goal. Equally so, such opportunities for challenge and contest may be avoided. This recalls the concerns which Atkinson (1997) raises regarding the complexity of what is being asked of learners and teachers in the implementation of thinking skills in language learning contexts.

## Conclusion

Particular conceptualizations of levels of thinking assume a solely cognitive outcome of asking and answering a higher order question. Drawing on interactional data, this paper suggests that the construction of a response is a social and collaborative activity in which speakers engage with the words of others and their experiences. The responses examined in this paper are evaluative, expressing the value systems of the speakers (Hunston & Thompson, 1999). Such sociocultural perspectives brought to attention in dialogue with others may be contestable from different vantage points present in language learning contexts where more than one culture is represented. It is argued that in order to respond to higher order questions, language learners are being asked to do more than connect bits of information to improve language performance. They are being asked to establish their opinions/beliefs through spoken interaction and take a stance to publically present their perspective. They are involved in the most fundamental social aspects of communication through the processes of evaluation, positioning and alignment (Du Bois, 2007). The benefits for language learners may reside in the opportunity to participate in the interpersonal aspects of stance-taking in a shared attentional space (Tomasello, 2003). It might also be suggested that such a shared space allows speakers to make their meaning more precise, assisted by the utterances of others. While research has become saturated with advice on how taxonomies can be conceptualized in relation to classroom materials, little is offered on the practices that learners need in order to navigate social functions and the construction of social and cultural identities. Understanding how evaluations and positions can be communicated in such a way that will afford an opportunity to converge or diverge alignment, may be an outcome from which all educational contexts might benefit.

## Appendix 1

### Question stems

How would you...?

What do you think would happen if...?

What is the difference between...and...?

How are...and...similar?

What is a possible solution to the problem of...?

What conclusions can you make about...?

How does...affect...?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of...?

## Appendix 2

### Transcription conventions

:        elongation of sound

(.)      pause

-        incomplete

=        latched

< >    additional information



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