Critical Thinking for Teacher Empowerment and Learner Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will present a study of English teachers engaged in task-based language teaching within the framework of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (RBT) in a Content and Language Integrated Learning context. I will explore the following research questions for my paper. Firstly, do teachers develop their own critical thinking while framing MI-RBT tasks that stimulate higher order thinking in learners? Secondly, does critical thinking help to identify learner differences and meet their individual needs? Thirdly, do MI-RBT tasks promote learner autonomy and teacher empowerment through critical thinking across the curriculum? The triangulation of test scores with qualitative and quantitative data collected from the teachers and learners is indicative of a positive hypothesis. MI-RBT-TBLT can thus become a gateway to critical thinking at the grass roots level. Not only will this counter the negative washback of the CBSE examination policy, but it will also endorse learning that the students can relate to their lives, as embodied in the National Curriculum Framework 2005.

Keywords: Teacher empowerment, multiple intelligences, learner autonomy, task-based teaching, learner differences, critical thinking

Introduction: Negative Washback From Testing on Teaching

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 prescribes a constructivist pedagogy (Bruner, 1996) to inculcate critical thinking. In this paper, I will approach critical thinking for teachers and learners through the cognitive frameworks of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1983) and Task Based Language Teaching (Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989). Critical thinking for teachers is the ability

to logically connect learner needs with learning objectives, analyse, compare and evaluate different teaching methods, systematically identify and evolve learning strategies, create and effectively use teaching materials, assess learning outcomes and finally, reflect rationally on all these processes for improvement.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) board exam by allotting 85 per cent weightage to quantitative pen-paper testing of content knowledge and its basic application, leaves little scope for higher order thinking. From 2017, the CBSE discontinued Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), with its qualitative assessment processes that enabled a holistic evaluation of learning outcomes. The consequent product-oriented washback of pen-paper testing puts pressure on the teachers and students right down to the primary level, to produce good exam results. Due to CBSE's disproportionate emphasis on pen-paper testing, these results are mistakenly acknowledged as the outcome of effective learning. Consequently, the exponential spurt in the private coaching industry is due as much to parental pressure on students to obtain centum scores in exams, as to poor teaching in schools.

In a token recognition of the NCF (NCERT, 2005), "capacity building" workshops by the CBSE's regional centres aim to train teachers to implement constructivist theories and practices in their teaching. However, it remains doubtful whether teachers actually acquire the prescribed knowledge and skills. Even if they do acquire them, they do not implement them due to pressure from the school management and parents to focus primarily on exam results. Lecturing, dictating notes and rote learning for exams therefore, take over the critical thinking processes of constructivist pedagogy in the classroom. Thus, year after year, the CBSE exam system produces good test-takers who are not necessarily critical thinkers, capable of applying their knowledge and skills effectively in real life.

The mismatch between teacher training programmes in constructivist pedagogy, and the societal evaluation of schools, teachers and students based solely on exam results, reflects the fact that critical thinking is not seen (Ennis, 1996) as a desirable value vis-à-vis high scores in tests. Ironically however, reflection and critical thinking become crucial necessities, especially in contexts designed to eliminate these processes. Top down evaluation policies and externally imposed teacher-training programmes remain equally ineffective if teachers themselves do not engage in critical thinking at the grass roots. Critical thinking in teachers and learners is also crucial if we want to implement the principles of NCF 2005; in fact, its absence can be held responsible for CBSE's lack of vision in policy framing. The NCF 2005 Executive Summary outlines (p. viii) and reiterates (p. 5) five guiding principles applicable to this scenario.

> The fact that learning has become a source of burden and stress on children and their parents is an evidence of a deep distortion in educational aims and quality. To correct this distortion, the present NCF proposes five guiding principles for curriculum development: (i) connecting knowledge to life outside the school; (ii) ensuring that learning shifts away from rote methods; (iii) enriching the curriculum so that it goes beyond textbooks; (iv) making examinations more flexible and integrating them with classroom life; and (v) nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country. (NCERT, 2005)

The first four principles follow a constructivist approach to curriculum framing, while the fifth principle is indicative of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973). Critical thinking is the first essential skill for change in any situation, be it framing policy, implementing critical pedagogy, or learning for real life. The classroom tools of critical thinking vary widely from Socratic questioning to De Bono's (1985) six thinking hats.

In this paper, I will follow an MI-RBT-TBLT approach to critical thinking (Ennis, 1987) in the classroom. The cognitive dimension of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), later modified by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) into the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (RBT), is an effective tool for promoting critical thinking on six ascending levels across the curriculum. These levels are: knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation and creativity. Howard Gardner's (1983), Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) takes into consideration eight types of intelligence (Verbal, Logical, Visual, Kinaesthetic, Rhythmical, Naturalistic, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal) that learners commonly deploy as individual cognitive gateways. Multiple Intelligence task inputs cater to the cognitive differences between learners (Kornhaber, 2004; Weber, 2005), integrated with the RBT cognitive levels of task outcomes (Armstrong, 1994; Noble, 2004). However, TBLT, in conformity with constructivist practices enables teacher initiative, innovation and autonomy (Prabhu, 1987; Kumaravadivelu, 1993), making it relevant to empower teachers to create teaching tasks and reflect on the learning processes, strategies and outcomes (Nunan, 1988). The MI-RBT-TBLT method therefore, provides the basis for teacher education in critical thinking. Teachers thus trained would be able to frame tasks for diverse learners with increasing levels of cognitive challenge in learning objectives or task outcomes.

CRITICAL THINKING WITH MI-RBT-TBLT

Failure in the implementation of top-down education policy is usually due to lack of teacher education and learning resources at the grass root level. These two basic necessities are simultaneously fulfilled by the materials and method integrated MI-RBT-TBLT approach of teacher education. Teachers must reflect

on the constructivist method and materials to counter the negative washback of arbitrary top-down examination policies, and to improve learning outcomes in accordance with the NCF 2005 guiding principles. The basic contention here is that the skills of critical thinking as the key to effective learning can only be activated by teachers who themselves engage in the process. Teacher education through MI-RBT-TBLT enables teachers to take into consideration learner needs, individual differences, teaching methods, learning strategies and outcomes and assessment while framing tasks. MI-RBT-TBLT is thus presented as a materials and method integrated constructivist tool for critical thinking in teacher education through ongoing action research in the classroom.

According to Nunan (1990), action research in the classroom is conducive for critical thinking. Teachers who engage in MI-RBT-TBLT through action research therefore, get better opportunities for critical thinking than those in the fixed-duration, sporadic, top-down capacity building programmes mandated by CBSE, which lack the resources required to train teachers in over 19,000 affiliated schools. Moreover, language being the common medium of instruction for all subjects, inputs of critical thinking can be incorporated into language learning tasks across the curriculum in what Spratt (2011) described as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). These were the hypotheses of a study briefly outlined as follows.

STUDY IN MI-RBT-TBLT

In a mixed-methods study, quantitatively and qualitatively TBLT was analysed in English lessons, for engaging in higher-order thinking skills along with the cognitive levels specified in RBT and the emergence of learning strategies with MI. This was done for all tasks across the curriculum. The research findings showed that framing problem-solving tasks engaged MI (Gardner, 1995) and promoted critical thinking in teachers as well as the learners who did these tasks (Armstrong, 1998, 2000; Hall Haley, 2010). The three research questions of the study which covered eight dependent variables focused on the practice and outcomes of critical thinking. These research questions were:

First research question: Do teachers develop critical thinking by learning to frame MI-RBT tasks in CLIL?

This was analysed using five dependent variables (DV):

DV-1: Ability and motivation of EG (Experimental Group) teachers for MI-RBT task-framing

DV-2: Effective MI-RBT task structure to engage learners

DV-3: Emergence of teaching and learning strategies

DV-4: MI-RBT task relevance for CLIL

DV-5: MI-RBT task-framing with critical thinking by teachers

Second research question: Does critical thinking in MI-RBT task-framing help identify individual differences and fulfil learner needs?

This was studied using a sixth dependent variable, DV-6:

   DV-6: Individual differences catered to by MI inputs in tasks

Third research question: Does RBT ensure higher order thinking for task outcomes?

This was studied through DV-7 and DV-8.

   DV-7: RBT higher-order cognitive challenge levels in task outcomes

   DV-8: MI-RBT tasks enabling learner autonomy through critical thinking

This study was conducted over one academic year across seven CBSE schools. A total of 20 English teachers and 119 students from five of these schools formed the control group (CG). Another 20 English teachers and 223 students from the two remaining schools constituted the experimental group (EG). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from both, the CG and the EG.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative data was collected through questionnaires, direct and recorded classroom observations, and interviews with teachers and learners. In the EG sample, teacher journals, group discussions and anecdotal records (not present in the CG) provided additional data. This qualitative data was analysed to evaluate teacher awareness and implementation of MI, RBT and TBLT in the classroom, and also the learning objectives and outcomes. It was also used to focus on individual differences and needs, assessment methods, and attitudes and values relating to critical thinking for self-empowerment. The qualitative data supported and qualified the numerical data. Quantitative data from both CG and EG was collected using questionnaires and learner test scores.

Comparison of qualitative and quantitative data from the EG samples with that from the CG samples indicated degrees of change over the study period. The changes in EG and CG participants over the study period in each of the eight dependent variables are quantified by the differences between their scores before and after the study. In the Two Sample F-test used first, the variance between the EG and the CG was found to be significantly high after the study. The observed difference (F_O) between the EG and CG in each of the eight dependent variables was found to be significantly higher than the critical value (F_C) in the Two-sample F-test for Variances. A Two-sample t-test assuming unequal variances was then conducted to compare the differences between the EG and CG participants in each of the eight dependent variables after the research intervention of MI-RBT-TBLT. The difference between the two sets of data being significantly higher than the critical value after the research intervention, it was indicative of a positive

hypothesis. The t-stat observed value (t_O) was higher than the t-critical one-tail value (t_C 1.65) for all dependent variables.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The first research question (Do teachers develop critical thinking by learning to frame MI-RBT tasks in CLIL?), was examined through five dependent variables (DV 1-5 in table 1).

Table 1. *Results of F-Test and t-Test for 1st Research Question*

Dependent Variables	F_O	F_C	t_O	t_C
DV-1: Teacher ability and motivation for MI-RBT task-framing	8.26	1.24	19.93	1.65
DV-2: Effective MI-RBT task structure to engage learners	16.89	1.24	17.70	1.65
DV-3: Emergence of teaching and learning strategies	8.99	1.24	36.20	1.65
DV-4: MI-RBT tasks for CLIL	2.35	1.29	41.97	1.65
DV-5: Critical thinking by teachers in MI-RBT task-framing	5.47	1.43	26.56	1.66

In contrast with the CG sample group, a significant increase (19.9, 17.7, 36.2, 41.9, 26.6) above t-critical value (1.65) was noted in EG teacher ability and motivation for task-framing (DV-1), structural efficacy of MI-RBT tasks framed by EG teachers (DV-2), application of teaching and learning strategies by EG teachers and learners (DV-3), the number of MI-RBT tasks for CLIL framed by EG teachers in collaboration with colleagues from other departments (DV-4), and in EG teachers framing MI-RBT tasks to motivate and engage learners (DV-5). These results indicated an overall positive hypothesis for the first research question on teacher ability and motivation for MI-RBT-TBLT. The tasks engaging learners, fulfilling learning objectives, promoting visible use of teaching and learning strategies were compatible with CLIL, thereby encouraging teachers to think critically.

The second research question (Does critical thinking in MI-RBT task-framing help identify individual differences and fulfil learner needs?), was examined in DV-6 (Table 2).

Table 2. *Results of F-Test and t-Test for 2nd Research Question*

Dependent Variable	F_O	F_C	t_O	t_C
DV-6: Individual differences catered to by MI inputs in tasks	4.99	1.24	34.55	1.65

After the study, a significant increase (34.6) above t-critical value (1.65) in the range of MI inputs in tasks that met different learner needs, in contrast with CG language items in this respect, indicated a positive hypothesis.

The third research question (Does RBT ensure higher order thinking for task outcome?), was examined through DV-7 and DV-8 (Table 3).

Table 3. *Results of F-Test and t-Test for 3rd Research Question*

Dependent Variables	F_o	F_c	t_o	t_c
DV-7: RBT higher-order cognitive challenge levels in task outcomes	12.31	1.24	34.18	1.65
DV-8: MI-RBT tasks enabling learner autonomy through critical thinking	4.99	1.24	34.55	1.65

There was a significant increase (34.2, 34.6), above t-critical value (1.66) after the study, in the range of higher order cognitive challenges posed by the RBT levels of task outcomes. Further, high motivation levels and learner autonomy through critical thinking, peer-collaboration, and technology use, in contrast with the CG sample group in this respect, indicated a positive hypothesis for the third research question.

The quantitative data thus, indicated positive hypotheses for all eight dependent variables of the three research questions, validating the outcome of the MI-RBT-TBLT intervention for EG teaching-learning. This was in contrast with the CG, who did not show the same results.

The integrated listening, reading, speaking and writing test scores of the EG and CG learners before and after the study were analysed to quantify the changes in their language proficiency. The results of a two-Sample F Test for Variances in the differences of EG and CG test scores showed a 3.1 variance, which was significantly higher than critical value (1.3). The Two-Sample t-Test Assuming Unequal Variances also confirmed the observed t-stat value (16.5) as being significantly higher than the t-critical value (1.65), indicating a positive hypothesis. The EG teachers used MI-RBT tasks with integrated language skills in the formative assessment, and CBSE-type of testing items for summative assessments, whereas CG teachers repeated the same questions through drill and rote-learning in both formative and summative assessments. Qualitative data also showed that CG learners lacked the skills and confidence for extra-textual, real-life language use.

TRIANGULATION OF DATA

Triangulation of the test scores with quantitative data and qualitative data (Table 4) leads to the conclusion that MI-RBT-TBLT empowered the EG teachers to think critically and also led to learner autonomy.

Table 4. *Triangulation of Data on MI-RBT-TBLT for Critical Thinking*

EG and CG Qualitative Data	Quantitative Data (t-test value)
DV-1: Ability and motivation of teachers for MI-RBT task-framing EG teachers showed sustained motivation for MI-RBT-TBLT in the CLIL context by supplementing the NCERT texts. CG teachers focused on exam-oriented teaching, with total dependence on the texts and question banks.	19.9
DV-2: Effective MI-RBT task structure to engage learners EG teachers showed learner-centric attitudes and values and invited learner inputs in task-framing and technology use. CG learners showed low motivation for language items from previous test papers.	17.7
DV-3: Emergence of teaching and learning strategies EG teachers displayed a high incidence of direct strategies of language teaching and learning, collaborative problem-solving, proactive leadership in action research, reading/discussing research publications, reflecting on peer feedback. CG teachers displayed no discernible focus on learning strategies, and there was no scope for professional reading, peer observation or reflection.	
DV-4: MI-RBT-TBLT tasks for CLIL EG teachers collaborated with their colleagues across the curriculum for CLIL. CG teachers showed no interest in peer collaboration and only taught NCERT language items.	41.9

DV-5: MI-RBT task-framing with critical thinking by teachers EG teachers focused on the learning processes and diagnosis of remedial needs for the MI-RBT task rubrics. Further, the MI inputs and RBT outcomes in tasks correlated with the learning objectives. EG teachers engaged in critical thinking for peer observation-feedback, anecdotal reports and reflection on task-structure and learning objectives. CG teachers used identical teaching and testing tasks.	26.6
DV-6: Individual differences covered by MI inputs in tasks EG learner needs were identified by MI profiling and individual differences were reconciled through technology-based differentiated learning with a wide range of inputs for all MI profiles. CG practiced group learning with repetitive drilling.	34.6
DV-7: RBT higher-order cognitive challenge levels in task outcomes EG included the entire RBT range, from knowledge to creativity, with an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills in the cognitive outcomes of MI-RBT tasks. CG testing items remain limited to knowledge and application.	34.2
DV-8: MI-RBT tasks enabling learner autonomy through critical thinking EG learners shared responsibility in decision making, showing high intrinsic motivation. They monitored their learning through reflection, teacher evaluation and peer feedback. CG learners expressed a keen sense of competition, an extrinsic motivation for high test scores, and a passive compliance with teacher instruction.	34.6

The t-test values for the eight dependent variables 19.9, 17.7, 36.2, 41.9, 26.6, 34.6, 34.2 and 34.6 were significantly high. Triangulation specifically highlights the effect of MI-RBT-TBLT across the curriculum in the CLIL context (DV-4: 41.97) and teaching-learning strategies used by teachers and learners (DV-3: 36.20). The qualitative data identified the reason for this as the frequent

collaboration of EG English teachers with colleagues teaching content subjects. This resulted in MI-RBT-TBLT across the curriculum in the interdisciplinary discourse for CLIL. The high incidence of critical thinking in MI-RBT-TBLT to engage learners (DV-5: 26.56) can be attributed to the higher order thinking skills in RBT. This reduced the dependence on the NCERT texts. The t-test scores in higher-order thinking by learners (DV-7: 35.18) and learner autonomy (DV-8: 34.55) indicate that RBT enabled the teachers to facilitate critical thinking in learners through cognitive outcomes of tasks. Triangulation, therefore proved that increased critical thinking was the root cause of all the other positive outcomes in EG teachers and learners after the MI-RBT-TBLT intervention.

The MI-RBT-TBLT Method

The first essential step of MI-RBT-TBLT is teacher orientation in the concept of MI, integrated with RBT in task-based language teaching. The modified MI-RBT task-framing design (Table 5), adapted from Armstrong's (1994) initial and Noble's (2004) subsequent model helps in task-framing:

Table 5. *Task-Framing Design*

Multiple Intelligences	RBT Cognitive Levels					
	Know	Understand	Apply	Analyse	Evaluate	Create
Verbal						
Logical						
Visual						
Kinaesthetic						
Rhythmical						
Naturalistic	Task 1			Task 2		Task 3
Interpersonal						
Intrapersonal						

Note: The Task-framing design has been adapted from Armstrong (1994) and Noble (2004).

With this grid, the teacher may plan a language task with any MI input and RBT cognitive outcome at any level, from Knowledge (lowest) to Creativity (highest). Task 1 (Table 3) for instance, is an oral/written descriptive presentation of various leaf modifications, located at the intersection of Naturalistic Intelligence with Knowledge. Task 2 raises the cognitive outcome to Analysis by presenting reasons for the leaf modifications. The cognitive outcome of Task 3, conceiving of metamorphoses to enable survival under new conditions, is at the highest

level of Naturalistic Intelligence-Creativity. Collaborative tasks add Interpersonal Intelligence. The different combinations in the MI-RBT-TBLT grid can thus enable critical thinking at graded levels in learners as well as teachers.

The predominantly learner-oriented MI helps focus on learner-centric TBLT principles (Campbell, 1997; Hall Haley, 2004). Interrelating learner needs with RBT-specific learning objectives and outcomes through feedback and reflection (Ellis & Ellis, 2007), are crucial aspects of critical thinking required for teachers to metacognitively conceptualize their role as facilitators (Brown, 2002; Beglar & Hunt, 2002). Only then can they accordingly reconstruct their classroom practices (Krashen, 2008), instead of remaining passive recipients of NCERT materials.

CONCLUSION

We found that MI-RBT-TBLT was self-sustaining after the study as a result of an intrinsic motivation for critical thinking in EG teachers and learners, and even integrated with the NCERT curriculum in a CLIL context. This study revealed that MI-RBT-TBLT is a proven gateway to the complex processes of critical thinking that are essential for teachers to transform themselves from passive recipients of top-down educational policy, materials and methods into active contributors, thereby making curricular reform a ground reality. Moreover, by framing tasks that facilitate process-oriented learning strategies rather than product-oriented examination outcomes, one can counter the negative washback of testing. Integrating the learning objectives of NCERT textbooks with teacher-framed MI-RBT tasks would make CCE a pragmatic as well as a holistic assessment option. Overall, MI-RBT-TBLT can become a catalyst for the more democratic processes of curricular reform that are effective in practice as well as theory, by enabling teacher empowerment and learner autonomy at the grass root level.

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