

# A Self Determination Perspective on Japanese College Students Developing an Appreciation of the Role, and Application of Critical Thinking Skills.

Guy Smith

Komazawa University.

Author contact: guysmith@komazawa-u.ac.jp

## Abstract

In the rapidly evolving global age of information the mental aptitudes required by young people have been considerably transformed in just a few decades, and as we continue to struggle to adjust to this new age, teachers face new challenges in preparing students for “the real world”. EFL educators in Japan preparing their students to be more effective contributors in the global society may consider that teaching English, the current foremost global language, to be not just a matter of words, grammar and expressions, but also to include the practicing and acquirement of potentially practical and valuable real-world skills in and through English, skills such as sound research techniques, and the use of digital tools or effective presentation skills, which will likely be to the considerable benefit and advantage of our learners in their future endeavors. However, whereas instructors themselves readily appreciate the value of such tangible and advantageous skills, learners themselves may often display indifference to or be unreceptive to the acquirement of such. Fellow instructors often talk to me of apathy, disinterest and passiveness holding back genuine progress in student engagement with challenging tasks and multi-layered material. In this paper, I discuss why educators should consider the acquirement of a stronger proactive stance and willingness towards engaging critically with texts is important for Japanese college students. I look at in what ways the influences of culture and globalization are impacting on the aptitudes students need to cultivate in order to navigate successfully, and be effective in the global modern information driven society, and finally modern currents and findings in the psychological meta-theory Self Determination Theory (SDT), are examined in roles of helping students learn to appreciate the value of becoming more informed and active critical thinkers.

**Key words:** Critical Thinking, Self Determination Theory, Global, Identification, Motivation

## Critical Thinking (CT).

While thinking skills and aptitudes have been described in various terms and styles by different educators and observers (e.g. Robert Ennis in *Critical Thinking*, 1996; Mayer and Goodchild in *The Critical Thinker*, 1990), Paul and Elder (2001) describe CT straightforwardly as, “Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improve it.”(p.2)

CT, then, involves the ability to assimilate information, analyze and sort this information into comprehensible and manageable amounts, and then

to apply and exercise that enhanced knowledge. With the freely accessible and prodigious amounts of useful, somewhat useful, and completely useless information encountered by those of us living in the modern information society, such thinking and reasoning skills play a vital part in us being able to avoid being adversely influenced or manipulated by various local and global media, government and business forces, and in taking informed, responsible and moral social action.

The perceived importance of developing critical viewpoints and thinking skills that second language learners need in order to play a responsible role in

the global community, the importance of developing a critical stance towards the facts, figures and ideas we encounter in the media, and the ability to be receptive and understanding of current global movements and trends in thinking can be seen in the proliferation of textbooks available to teachers in Japan (e.g. *Puppet on a String* (2010) by Jonathon Lynch, *Decide for Yourself* (2012) by Roberto Rabbini from Cengage, *MegaGoal* (2012) by Manuel Dos Santos and Jill Korey O’Sullivan from MacGraw-Hill, *Academic Encounters* by Kristine Brown et al from Cambridge University Press) that offer learning units that introduce and build the student’s understanding of and effectiveness in CT skills. Roberto Rabbini’s *Decide for Yourself* (2012) listed above as one textbook incorporating CT skills as an important feature of learning in its units of study describes such thinking skills as an approach that “invites us to accept the facts, even when those ideas, opinions or data do not align with certain preconceived notions.” (p.7) and which “propels us on a delicate balance between an utter openness to new ideas and the most rigorous skeptical scrutiny of everything” (p.7). The key ideas of CT as identified by Rabbini are those of invitation and choice. We can decide to actively monitor information and make informed judgments or we can elect to take a passive stance and allow ourselves to be more or less manipulated. We have the freedom to choose to ignore certain facts, opinions and data that refute ideas we may wish to protect and preserve, or we can opt to open our minds and reflect on the correctness, or perhaps otherwise, of both our own and other people’s attitudes and beliefs.

As Paul and Elder continue to describe a CT thinker as one who,

- raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively and comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions and practical

consequences

- communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems

Thus, as a consequence of the second and third statements above, another important outcome of CT is not only in developing effective self-reflection in following correct modes of thinking and behavior, but also in reflecting on and understanding why other parties may display flawed, rigid or prejudiced viewpoints. Applying CT means we become more able to analyze the assumptions, reasons and motives that compel people to think, speak and act in a certain manner. This dialectical stance towards our own and other’s attitudes and beliefs, importantly, leads to understanding and empathy rather than intolerance and condemnation. Harvard College Professor of Psychology Steven Pinker (2011) in his analysis of the declining rates of violence in the world, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*, and our decreasing tolerance of the destructive effect of violence, in its many forms, on our lives and in society over history, argues, that, “people are *capable* of reason, and that a community of people who choose to perfect this faculty and to exercise it openly and fairly can collectively reason their way to sounder conclusions in the long run.” (p.181). In other words, our ability to reason critically and modify behavior is one of the chief dynamics behind the decline in violence and the emergence of a vibrant global society in which the possibility of a another major world war seems to most people comparatively remote, a period we live in termed by Pinker (2011) as, “the long peace”.

The global society, while connected by links of trade, music, sport, technology and science consists of many different peoples from diverse cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, next we investigate 3 views of how culture may play a role in the development and recognition of the important function CT skills play in participating effectively in the global community.

### 3 Views of Culture and Critical Thinking.

Although “peoples of world share an astonishingly detailed universal psychology” (Pinker, 1997,

p.32) thought processes are also to an extent shaped by experience, observation of the world and others around us, by the language system one finds oneself in (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan, 2001) and other *culturally specific* factors. For example, according to Self-Construal Theory (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), people in the East and West have differing perceptions of themselves in relation to their social group. Thus, we can view our methods, ways and habits of thinking as in part a consequence of culturally and environmentally specific factors and influences.

CT in Western society and culture can be traced back to such Greek philosophical schools as those of Aristotle and Socrates, and followed through history in such influential thinkers as Thomas Aquinas, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Kant and many others applying CT and the scientific method to science, finance, politics, medicine and other fields of research and application. Does the fact that contemporary CT practices largely find their foundations and principles grounded in the Western thinking tradition mean that learners from other cultural backgrounds may find the practice in some sense alien, difficult to understand, a struggle to apply and utilize? Is CT, which often involves a conflict of ideas and constructive criticism less applicable or significant in more collectivist type societies, where group accord is more valued, such as those societies found in Asia and South America? In fact, as CT has certainly been most profoundly developed through the Western thinking tradition it is not a large jump to see that such styles of thinking may not be readily pigeonholed in a culture with a different conceptual developmental history to that of the Western one.

Atkinson (1999) in *TESOL and Culture*, while acknowledging the problematic nature of defining culture in today's globalizing world, and in the emergence of borderless societies propagated by the Internet and Social Networking Services also argues for the importance of a recognition that in fact, culture does remain an important concern for instructors and for individuals, he says, "much of what one regards as one's makeup may also have cultural roots" (p.642), and comments further that members of a society are "individuals in context

– they do not exist separately from their social worlds." (p.642) Atkinson also highlights the importance for understanding individual difference within what we define as cultural or social groups in stating, "cultural descriptions that account for individual heterogeneity and difference within cultural groups are absolutely necessary for a well- rounded understanding of culture." (p.641). He sums his position up in stating "articulated knowledge of who students are individually-culturally leads logically to the need to develop *appropriate pedagogies* – approaches to learning and teaching that dynamically respond to that knowledge. (p.643)" Thus, EFL/ESL instructors need to be aware that their individual students may or may not possess the same cultural assumptions as they do, and thus adopt active strategies to teaching and learning (e.g. as in teaching CT skills) which take into account these differences and continually query and consider the effectiveness and appropriateness of these strategies within the situational and cultural frame of context.

Focusing more closely on the Japanese context Kubota (1999) approaches the development of critical thinking from the perspective of a fluid and evolving Japanese society in which preconceptions of the Japanese character and certain modes of thinking are questioned. For example we may consider a typical view of Japanese culture as being in her words comprising a society "group orientated with a strong emphasis on harmony" (p.11) and that in general "the Japanese underemphasize self-expression and creativity" (p.11) while on the other hand the West is typified using expressions such as "individualism, self-expression and critical thinking" (p.12). However Kubota quotes evidence and research that shows, in fact, the reality is not quite so simplistic. She points out that Japanese elementary school classes in actuality "demonstrate an educational emphasis on developing analytical thinking skills through the use of language" (p.24) and that furthermore, "Japanese students were encouraged to express their agreement or disagreement and to elaborate their opinions more than their US peers were" (p.24) In her outline of a stance reflecting equitable views of culture without endorsing assessments of one as inherently superior or inferior,

Kubota encourages teachers to practice a *critical multiculturalism* in which instructors can work to give students a voice in which they are able to be active in both identifying and challenging unequal power relationships. In the view of critical multiculturalism students do not, and should not, sacrifice their own unique cultural roots and valuable heritages to develop a voice in the dominant majority, but instead become empowered through attainment of strategic skills (such as CT) to act on an equal footing with the mainstream, while maintaining their unique identity. (For an summary of forms of multiculturalism see Weinschenk, 2008)

In tracing rational thinking and critical thinking in China and India Soraj Hongladarom (2006) illustrates that, in fact, Eastern cultures do have identifiable traditions of critical thinking albeit not as emphasized as those found in the Western setting. He cites examples of significant scientific achievement in both India and China in ancient and medieval periods as evidence, and views the developmental path of Eastern societies as having weakened, (but not eliminated) the development and influence of CT. From Thailand he sees a strong need for the revaluing of CT skills and a need “to convince the members of my culture of the value of critical thinking and its important role in educating Thai citizens for the increasingly globalized world of today and tomorrow” (p.7) .

While the arguments above approach the CT and culture issue with different arguments, all three commentators acknowledge the importance of young people becoming effective, responsible and tolerant contributors to, and members of the global community.

### **Globalization and Participation in the Global Community.**

Edwin McDaniel in 1996 described the changing world in the following words, “Growing international economic interdependencies and expanding multinational security alliances have significantly increased the importance of effective intercultural encounters. Individuals from diverse cultures are interacting with each other more and more frequently

– in professional, diplomatic, and social venues” (1996). This development has only increased in intensity since McDaniel wrote these words, as the Internet, and Social Media continue to play larger and larger roles in our daily lives.

English has been described as a “gatekeeper” (Kubota, 1998, p.304) and certainly in many world policy organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the UN English is currently the dominant language. Many large and small corporations, multinationals and business groups around the world use English as a common global business tongue. Some companies in countries where English is not a native language have companywide policies enforcing the use of English in the work place, such as the online shopping giant Rakuten in Japan ( see *Workers Told, Ditch Local Languages for English*, CNN.com, 2012).

While in the past Western powers may well have had political and economic agendas in propagating English as a global language (Phillipson, 1994 and Tollefson, 2000), now it would appear that in the words of Jay Walker on TED, “English is becoming the language of problem solving.” The role of English as the current global language for discussion and debate of important issues, necessitates the importance of teaching students to cultivate, strengthen and apply critical thinking skills in and through English, and constitutes one of our main goals in preparing young people to be active in a global role (Huit in his 1998 *Critical Thinking: An Overview* notes that it seems CT skills are best practiced as students work with specific material, rather than as a distinct skill set).

Even if we consider that such skills may only play a more or less important role for a certain individual in a certain society, the rapid globalization of the world we live in means that young people should at the least be equipped with such skills in case they are called upon to utilize them in future careers, and find themselves needing to participate and voice their opinions in the global field of business, art, political, science, technology, medical, media, art, music, or health. The list is long and the chances high that whatever career students embark on will eventually include interaction with an audi-

ence outside the domestic field. For those students who will never actively be involved with the global community avoiding interaction with information presented by global movements in politics, music, art, health and other areas of knowledge is to all extents impracticable, and developing the skills to handle the flow and content of information in a responsible and astute manner is central to informed and responsible action. Frechette (2002) recognizes the formidable difficulty of trying to control information flow in a society which has become deluged with it and in many ways has come to depend on the smooth access and application of information, commenting in *Developing Media Literacy in Cyberspace*, “Unlike measures to block or filter online information, students need an empowerment approach that will enable them to analyze, evaluate, and judge the information received.” (p.13)

As in Kubota’s advocating an enablement and empowerment, Frechette also views the floods of information and the increasingly intertwined global community as a challenge to be faced in assisting young people immersed in today’s information driven society to develop appropriate thinking skills in order to be assertive, confident, unbiased and responsible in playing of roles in the global community. However, what if the young people themselves are not interested?

### **The Problem.**

In classes I regularly introduce lessons exposing students to texts with satirical content in order to gauge how closely students are or are not critically evaluating material. Satire as a medium offers a clear and unequivocal opportunity to differentiate between the surface and intended message, and it thus allows instructors to be able to easily gauge whether students are as Critical Thinking.org hopes “processing” incoming information and visual stimulus and “guiding behavior” (making decisions and coming to conclusions) as they interact with the study material. I have found many of my Japanese tertiary students, irrespective of their level of English skill tending to be passive in processing challenging input on any deeper level than the surface

and directly apparent meaning, leading to a somewhat superficial and often incorrect interpretation and understanding. However if students are directly focused on such understanding, when for example given questions or leading inferences by the teacher that require them to look closely at, engage with, and question the material, they tend to do well in critically examining and considering texts with layers of meaning. For students to reach a point in which they approach texts with a critical thinking stance less dependent on explicit cues is one they need to develop to be more effective thinkers and doers in the global community. On the other hand, if students always have to have their thinking “turned on” in order to interact intelligently with texts, listening input and discussion they will be putting themselves at a serious disadvantage in quickly and effectively understanding, managing and exploiting information. Being slow, unwilling or unable to grasp layered meaning and then comment on it intelligently means that even if students have the best of intentions they will struggle to act on those intentions, be slow or unable to persuade other people, and struggle to refute specious arguments that they may find it necessary to do so. How can we encourage young Japanese university students to be more willing (and by extension, also more able) to engage with challenging material critically consistently, and without without constant prompting from an instructor, or other external prompt? In the next section I look at how psychological theory can interact with the classroom environment to help us understand how we might encourage our students to be more willing to actively switch on their critical thinking skills.

### **A Framework for Pro-active Engagement: Self Determination Theory and Identification.**

Self Determination Theory (SDT, Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2002) is a personality theory that proposes three basic psychological human needs, these being autonomy (a feeling that we have choice and are responsible for our own actions), competence (a feeling of being effective) and relatedness (a feeling that we are connected to other fellow human be-

ings and social groups). Wellbeing, motivation and growth in the individual are supported or thwarted to the degree by which the environment provides support for the basic needs mentioned above. An organismic and holistic theory, SDT assumes the self to be “Endowed with an innate striving to exercise and elaborate their interests, individuals tend naturally to seek challenges, to discover new perspectives, and to actively internalize and transform cultural practices” (Deci and Ryan, 2002, p.3). SDT has been widely investigated in numerous areas including education (Niemic, et al, 2006), sport (Ryan, Williams, Patrick and Deci, 2009) and video games (Przybylski, Rigby, and Ryan, 2010). While SDT recognizes the importance of Intrinsic Motivation (IM) in activating behaviors, it also acknowledges the important self-development by which external regulations become part of the self through a process of internalization (Hodgins and Knee, 2002). In STD, internalization is the area of the mini-theory Organismic Integration Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1991), which explores and studies how and why people assimilate experiences and events in their lives into their concept and belief system and modify their behavior. (See Honda and Sakyu, 2005, for an investigation into the validity of SDT in Japan)

The stages of Internalization becoming ever closer to being internally regulated could be examined as a time line of one behavior as in the following example. Initially a behavior might be performed by a child in order to avoid some form of punishment, next the child might perform the behavior in order to avoid feeling shame, as the child understands more of the world the behavior becomes endorsed as personally significant and the child identifies very closely with it, the final stage of external regulation would be in the child recognizing the behavior as being completely in line with his/her values, beliefs, and desires (the final stage would be the behavior becoming completely self-determined and due to intrinsically motivated causes). Thus, ways of thinking and behaving gradually can become to a greater or lesser extent part of the person’s personality makeup, as the behavior or attitude is integrated, or not, into the individual’s perception of self.

Identification as a part of the internalization process refers to a awareness that an activity has some personal importance or significance for us. For example, 1 hour walking every day in the park may be important for us because we view regular exercise as important for maintaining good health, so we walk, rain or shine, to stay in shape. In this case the motivation to walk comes primarily from the understanding that exercise, whether we personally view it as pleasurable or not, has important consequences for our health.

Intrinsic Motivation, the most self-determined source of motivation, refers to an interest in the activity for its own sake, described by Dornyei (2001) as “a behavior for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction such as the joy of doing a particular activity or satisfying one’s curiosity” (p.47). In the example above walking could be attributed to internal motives, a person may enjoy strolling for its own sake and not for any perceived health benefits. A child completely lost in the enjoyment of building a sand castle on the beach is being motivated by IM as the drive comes completely from enjoyment of the task, and thus stems from internal motives. IM is a very powerful driving force of behavior and consequently has a strong and immediate effect on interest and motivation. However, interestingly, Identification, which originates more in an external locus of regulations, can actually be a *stronger* predictor of active participation in some spheres of human behavior. A study (Koestner, R and Losier, G.F, 2002) found that active participation in voting was better predicted by people feeling that voting was personally important for them rather than having an intrinsic interest in politics per se. The study above mentioned by Koestner and Losier has also demonstrated that in predicting overall academic achievement and resolution Identification has a stronger and more lasting motivating effect on students than IM alone. Students who are motivated through IM may only spend time and effort on areas and tasks that have a personally interesting feature to them and when faced with other tasks which are equally important to an academic course, but not personally interesting, may expend little or no effort on such undertakings. On the other hand, a student

who is motivated through strong identification acknowledges the importance of tasks that may not have immediate relevance and interest for them, but may be important for their progress and success in a course of study. Such a student will expend effort to master areas designated by a significant other (such as an instructor, lecturer or coach) as an investment in their future.

Strengthened Identification can be brought about through various modifying processes, however we can highlight 3 as especially relevant for educational purposes guiding our students towards becoming more likely to engage with material critically without explicit prodding from an outside influence. These factors explained by Deci and Ryan (2002) are, the engagement in a behavior in the desire to feel a relatedness (as in being similar to or in gaining approval from) with the significant other, the existence of a meaningful rationale for the behavior, and for participants to feel they are effectively mastering skills, mostly through their own efforts. While students are very unlikely to be intrinsically interested in all of the activities we introduce in our classroom, despite our best efforts, we can try to encourage them to see the learning tasks as important skill and knowledge building for their future.

In line with Self Determination Theory research we can have a positive effect in the classroom on our student active self-regulation in regard to appreciating and applying CT skills by,

1. Exposing the student to the significant real life role of such skills and emphasizing the value of CT skills
2. Creating role models familiar to the group who exhibit CT skills effectively.
3. Allowing students to see their progress in acquiring CT skills as primarily autonomous

While it is not within the scope of this article to look at actual classroom tasks and activities by which we can facilitate the switching on of critical thinking skills, some general guidelines can be deduced from the research and exploration of SDT ideas. Working from the above principles, firstly it is important that young people be given explicit examples of how CT can help them to be more

effective both in personal and societal domains. Within the area of Media Studies many examples can be found that will demonstrate the pitfalls of not applying rational and discerning thinking habits how, for example, media spin, bias, staged content (as in when actors reenact real events), manipulative advertising, stereotypes and so-on can confuse and control our behavior, and thus demonstrate the advantages of acquiring the ability to see through such manipulations. Secondly, within the situational context of the group itself, i.e. the young person's peers, role models need to be found and displayed to the group as examples of success in applying CT competency, and thus indicating to other student's their potential ability correspondingly. By identifying and presenting to the group peers who are effective and successful critical thinkers within the group itself other participants will naturally model their behavior on the significant other (leader, peer or teacher). Motivation in and genuine affirmative initiation of certain behaviors, in fact, has been found to be "catching" if the participants regard the modeled behavior as freely and positively endorsed by a significant other. This process is described in Wild and Enzles' (2002) social contagion model of motivation where the authors investigate how, "the social contagion of motivational orientations toward learning could spontaneously spread from person to person during social interactions." (p.145) In this way, positive behaviors when endorsed by significant others (in this case the admired peer) will be likely to spread throughout the group.

Thirdly, learners should then be encouraged to first engage with less challenging tasks to impress themselves with their own faculty in effectiveness in applying CT skills. Subtle scaffolding of progress by the instructor can help students to gain in confidence in their ability to effectively apply CT skills.

### **Conclusion.**

As pointed out by Long (2003), Japan is directing efforts in education to foster young people more familiar with CT skills and more effective in applying them as one of its strategies to cultivate human resources more able to play a role in the ever globalizing international community. The Ministry

of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) states as one of its goals for the future direction of education being that “talented people who can understand and solve problems, continually renewing knowledge and skills, are in demand” (2002) and to “foster Japanese citizens educated to live in the international community.” (2005). None of us would argue with the expediency of this for Japan, however we need to be aware that demonstrating to young people the desirability and utility of such skills is at least as important as that of teaching them. Enabling young Japanese people to be more willing to engage positively and critically with the ever more free, open and information driven global community, not only means that young people will be able to make a greater contribution to society but will also be considerably more immune to manipulation by media, business and government departments. Moreover, young people with the power of social media tools, the internet, and today’s lightning fast dispersion of information will be the future drivers of change in global transformation and innovations, both social and technological. Forbes.com in its article *The World in 2033: Big Thinkers and Futurists Share their Thoughts* lists conflict, religion, the global workforce, body invasive technology, biotechnology, education, and climate as just some of the issues likely to be having profound implications for future societies and the individual. Future generations need to be equipped not only with thinking skills that develop open, rational, and tolerant viewpoints, but a willingness to engage with these new, challenging and controversial issues. Self Determination Theory offers us guidelines in assisting students towards more self-regulation in the process of acquiring CT skills, and in helping students become more aware of the value of engaging actively and thoughtfully with global and local issues likely to be challenging us as a global community in the near future.

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The Critical Thinking Community at [CriticalThinking.org](http://CriticalThinking.org)

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