WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING
AND ITS ORIGIN

ABSTRACT

The paper presents a brief overview of critical thinking, its origin, its deep roots coming from ancient philosophers and its development in the 21st century. Critical thinking is a method of teaching which can be used in every domain of knowledge and belief. The use of critical thinking in teaching and learning a foreign language is discussed below.

Critical thinking is comparatively a new method of thinking, teaching and learning, but the intellectual roots of critical thinking are as ancient as the teaching practice and vision of Socrates 2500 years ago who discovered, by a method of probing questioning, that people could not rationally justify their confident claims to knowledge. He demonstrated that a person may have power and high position and yet be deeply confused and irrational. He established the importance of asking deep questions that probe profoundly into thinking before accepting ideas as worthy to belief. His method of questioning is now known as “Socratic Questioning” and is the best known critical thinking teaching strategy. In his mode of questioning, Socrates highlighted the need of thinking for clarity and logical consistency.

Later Socrates’ practice was followed by the critical thinking of Plato, Aristotle and the Greek skeptics, all of whom emphasized that things are very different from what they appear to be and that only trained mind is prepared to see through the way things look to us on the surface to the way they really are beneath the surface (the deeper realities of life).

In the Middle ages, the tradition of systematic critical thinking was embodied in the writings and teaching of such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas who heightened our awareness not only of potential power or reasoning but also of the need for reasoning to be systematically cultivated and “cross-examined”.

In the Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries), a flood of scholars in Europe began to think critically about religion, art, society, human nature, law and freedom. One of them was
Francis Bacon, in England, who recognized that the mind cannot safely be left to its natural tendencies. He laid the foundation for modern science with his emphasis on the information-gathering processes. His book “The Advancement of Learning” could be considered one the earliest texts in critical thinking. Some fifty years later in France, Descartes wrote the book “Rules for the Direction or the Mind”, which can be called the second text in critical thinking. He developed a method of critical thought based on the principle of systematic thought. He argued that every part of thinking should be questioned, doubted and tested. In the same time period Sir Thomas Moore developed a model of new social order, “Utopia”, in which every domain of the present world was subject to critique. The critical thinking of these Renaissance and post Renaissance scholars opened the way for the emergence of science and for the development of democracy, human rights, and freedom of thought.

Another significant contribution to critical thinking was made by the thinker of the French Enlightenment: Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire and views had Diderot. They all valued disciplined intellectual exchange in which all views had to be submitted to serious analysis and critique. In the 19th century, critical thought was extended even further into the domain of human social life by Comte and Spencer. Applied to language, it led to the field of Linguistics and many deep probings of the functions of symbols and language in human life. In the 20th century our understanding of the power and nature of critical thinking has emerged in increasingly more explicit formulations. W. G. Sumner recognized the deep need for critical thinking in life and in education. He said: “Criticism is the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. Critical thinking is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power” 1.

The history of critical thought is that the basic questions of Socrates can now be much more powerfully framed and used. In every domain of human thought, and within every use of reasoning within any domain, it is now possible to question. In other words, questioning that focuses on these fundamentals of thought and reasoning are now baseline in critical thinking.

1. W. G. Sumner “Falkways” p. 632
But what is critical thinking, after all? There are many ways to define it. According to Richard Paul, "It is a system for opening every system (that exists). It opens up business, chemistry, sports, history and professional practice. It opens up Ethics and enables us to see through ideology. It enables us to put things into intellectual perspective. A system that opens up systems is one way to think of critical thinking." Everyone thinks. We have no choice about that. But not everybody thinks about their thinking. And not everyone who thinks about their thinking thinks about it well. It’s a way of thinking that enables a thinker to think regularly at a higher level. In other words, it transforms thinking in two directions. We must think more systematically and more comprehensively as a result. And thinking more comprehensively we think at a higher level. Not because we are at a higher level as a person, but because we are able to put things into the background and see in it a larger, more comprehensive framework. If we think about the tasks of developing critical thinking, we don’t that task is going to be easy without facing barriers to critical thought, amongst which are following: our tendency to think with ourselves at the centre of the world, our tendency to think within the confines of our social groups, our tendency to create pictures of the world that deceive us and others, our tendency to think of ourselves as broad, deep but in touch with reality when, if only is understood, we would see ourselves as narrow and limited. For example, let’s consider the phenomenon, which is world-wide, of patriotic history. Patriotic history, at least in conception of patriotic history, consists in telling the story of our past in such ways as to make us look much better than we are and to take whose who have to come into a conflict with us and represent them as worse than they were and are. In other words, patriotic history is dishonest history that makes us unjustifiable, feel good about ourselves. This is what most societies want of their historians. Tell us about the past so we can see how heroic we are. Fine and good, but what does that imply about others. If we are the chosen people, then everyone else is not chosen. If we’re number one, then others are unimportant or of lesser importance. And so, to penetrate history critically, to see its dangers, and to see its values, and to be able to think with a different sort of framework, is certainly crucial to our well being.

2. Richard, Paul, Dir. of Research and Professional Development at the Centre for Critical Thinking, Berkeley, CA
Critical thinking is not one isolated skill. It’s an orchestrated way of thinking that enables you to decompose your thinking at any moment. It encompasses basic structures integrated together into a whole. It assesses thinking for its quality, for its clarity, for its accuracy, for its precision. It raises thinking to a higher quality. It makes it better. Critical thinking is a way of teaching, a way of learning, a way of being in the world in which the thinker self-monitors and self-assesses.

Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions. If there were no questions asked by those who laid the foundation for a field, for example, physics or biology, the field would never have been developed in the first place. In fact, every intellectual field is born out of a cluster of questions to which answers are either needed or highly desirable. Every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate thought. It’s true that only students who have questions are really thinking and learning. Moreover, the quality of the questions students ask determines the quality of the thinking they are doing. If we want to engage students in thinking through our content we must stimulate their thinking with questions that lead them to further questions. It is important to remember the fact that there is a special relationship between critical thinking and Socratic Questioning, because both share the common end. They both lead us to think systematically, deeply and a keen interest in assessing the truth of things.

The goal of critical thinking is to establish a disciplined level of thinking to our thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, to monitor, assess and reconstitute our thinking, feeling and action. Socratic discussion cultivates that inner voice by providing a public model for it.

Example: Imagine that you have been employed at a new job for the past six months. Although you enjoy the challenge of your responsibilities and you are performing well, you find that you simply cannot complete all your work during office hours. To keep up, you have to work late, take work home, and even occasionally work on weekends. When you explain this to employer, she says that, although she is sorry that the job interferes with your personal life, it has to be done. She suggests that you view these experiences as an investment in your future and that you should try to work more efficiently.
She reminds you that there are many people who would be very happy to have our position.

These are the questions required for critical thinking:
What is the purpose of the passage?
What is the author trying to accomplish?
What issues or problems are raised?
What data, what experiences, what evidence are given?
What concepts are used to organize these data?
How is the author thinking about he condition?
Is the employee’s thinking to tell the employer about her problems justified?

What perspectives can we see in employee’s future actions? etc.

The article is very brief information about Critical Thinking, which is a wide and deep method of teaching not only any language but also the way of thinking in every domain of knowledge and belief. Critical Thinking is the disciplined art of ensuring that you use the best thinking you are capable of any set of circumstances. The general goal of thinking is to “figure out the lay of the land” in any situation we are in. We all have multiple choices to make. We need the best information to make the best choices. Critical Thinking requires to work on your thinking continually, to make your thinking the object of thought, to make your behavior the object of your thinking to make your beliefs the object of your thinking. It is important to realize that serious study of thinking about thinking is rare. It is seldom found in the thinking of our culture. But if you focus your attention on the role that thinking is playing in your life, you may come to recognize that, in fact, everything you do, or want, or fell is influenced by your thinking. And if you become persuaded of that, you will be surprised that humans show so little interest in thinking.

REFERENCES
6. Dr Linda Elder and Dr Richard Paul (2008), “Becoming a Critic of Your Thinking” C. A.