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An investigation of Critical Thinking skills in education of Korea

Abstract

This article provides an explanation for why the Critical Thinking (CT) movement has failed to make significant inroads into the Korean education system. The explanation offered here identifies the core values implicit in CT pedagogy and shows how those values clash with important features of Korean culture.

**Key word**s: critical thinking pedagogy, critical thinking movement, Korean culture, individual autonomy, high /low context communication

The transformation that Cederblom and Paulsen trace with the successive editions of their textbook is a broadly based educational movement - known in the US as the “critical thinking movement” and in the UK as the “thinking skills movement” to implement CT instruction across the **curriculum [1].**

As a result of this movement, CT pedagogy has penetrated virtually every academic field. It has featured prominently not only in areas in which one would naturally expect it, such as in science education and academic writing but also in less obvious areas, such as in social work and nursing.

It has spread to the high school and even elementary school levels and has since passed beyond L1 contexts into the realm of TESOL as well.

Universities, local education boards, and private institutions have established centers that offer CT instruction and assist educators and administrators in developing CT teaching strategies. Some universities have established entire academic programs based on CT pedagogy, others have established programs that take as their foundation the development of CT skills, and still others have embraced CT pedagogy in their conceptual frameworks and mission statements. At this point in time, CT is much more than just another undergraduate course; CT pedagogy has become an instructional methodology or a guiding educational philosophy for many teachers, academic programs, and educational institutions throughout much of the Anglo-American world and beyond.

In Korea, however, the CT movement has yet to make significant inroads. While there are limited course offerings in formal or informal logic at the university level, there has been no serious or sustained effort to spread CT pedagogy across the curriculum or throughout the education system in Korea. Nor have many Korean educators or educational institutions embraced CT pedagogy as an instructional methodology or educational philosophy.

A 1998 OECD study of the South Korean education system concluded that it continues to employ formal teaching methods that emphasize the “memorisation of fragmentary information” rather than teaching approaches that foster critical and creative thinking skills.

Critics of the Korean education system have been voicing such complaints for decades, andpartly as a result of these criticisms there have been countless attempts to reform the system. Yet despite such efforts, the dominant educational philosophy in Korea remains focussed more on the transmission of knowledge than on the nurturing of thinking skills. Indeed, the Ministry of Education officials who requested the OECD to examine and report on the Korean education system described it as “excessively geared toward preparation for college entrance examinations” and claimed that the “memorisation of knowledge is the rule rather then the exception**” [2].**

Other critics have concurred that the university entrance exam is “driving the entire educational system,” which has been “reduced to little more than the preparation for and taking of multiple choice exams,” and that this exam-driven education system has “stifled creativity” and “hindered the development of analytical reasoning**” [3].**

There can be no doubt that the university entrance exam has played an unusually important role within the Korean education system and modern Korean society as a whole, and there must be at least some truth to the critics’ complaints that the national obsession with the university entrance exam - an exam consisting solely of multiple-choice questions based mostly on matters of fact has hindered more than it has promoted critical and creative thinking skills.

However, it is ultimately a mistake to explain the relative absence of CT pedagogy within the Korean education system simply in terms of the nation’s system for admission to university.

One problem with this explanation is that it is only at the primary and secondary levels that education is geared toward preparation for the university entrance exam; at the university level, the purpose of education is obviously something other than to prepare students for admission to enter university.

However, even at the university level in Korea, there is little evidence of student-centred teaching methodologies that foster critical thinking skills and encourage students to challenge their teachers or what they teach in any serious way.

In order to explain the relative absence of CT pedagogy at the university level in Korea, one must obviously appeal to something other than, or in addition to, the university entrance exam.

A second problem with the foregoing explanation is that it sheds no light at all on why the entrance exam has remained a permanent fixture of the Korean education system despite such widespread dissatisfaction with it. **Seth (2002**)writes that “Both the public and officials have widely criticized examination preparation as the center of learning. Yet a century of reform efforts has resulted in only an intensification of this phenomenon” [3].

Exactly why has it been so difficult for Koreans to free themselves from what they describe as an “examination hell,” a phenomenon that ultimately oppresses the entire populace? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to look beyond the university entrance exam to the social forces that support and sustain it**[3. 121].**

A third problem with the suggestion that the university entrance exam is responsible for the relative absence of CT pedagogy in Korea is that there is no essential connection between objective-style examinations and teaching

methodologies based on rote memorization. Nor is there any reason why an objective-style examination could not be used to promote critical and creative teaching pedagogies. Indeed, some of the most widely used tests of CT, for example, the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal consist exclusively of multiple-choice questions.

Thus, to whatever extent the university entrance exam in Korea does contribute to the relative absence of CT pedagogy, it has less to do with the fact that there is such an exam and more to do with the specific nature of the exam.

Characterizing CT and CT Pedagogy

Dewey defines CT as the “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” [4].

In using the terms “active” and “careful,” Dewey contrasts CT with “passive,” “unreflective” thought. Furthermore, his definition highlights the importance of the grounds and consequences of our beliefs [4.75].

Moore and Parker define CT as “the careful and deliberate determination of whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgment about a claim” [5].

They also assert that CT involves several skills or abilities, including the ability to listen and read carefully, to evaluate arguments, to look for and find hidden assumptions, and to trace the consequences of a claim.

The foregoing should suffice to demonstrate that while there are variations in the definitions of CT found in the literature there is broad agreement on the skills or dispositions involved in CT. In particular, CT is widely regarded as involving a set of cognitive skills or dispositions that enable one to evaluate claims and arguments and make rational decisions concerning what to believe or do. The specific skills that the foregoing writers agree are involved in CT include the following:

1. Recognizing reasons and conclusions in linguistic

communication.

2. Identifying vague or ambiguous language.

3. Clarifying terms.

4. Identifying hidden assumptions.

5. Tracing consequences.

6. Evaluating claims against evidence.

7. Spotting fallacies.

8. Weighing alternatives.

9. Articulating one’s own views in a fair-minded way.

The list is representative, but is not intended to be exhaustive. For the purposes of this article, it will suffice merely to have a basic idea of the skills that are thought to be involved in CT; nothing in what follows depends on any specific definition of CT.

One may safely assume, then, that the aim of CT pedagogy is to instill or nurture in students skills or dispositions of the sort mentioned above. In order to identify the values implicit in CT pedagogy, it is instructive to ask what further purposes these skills might serve or why it is thought that they are worth nurturing.

CT Pedagogy and Language Skills

Edward T. Hall is credited with drawing the distinction between “high context” and “low context” communication in order to mark the significant difference in the degree to which members of different cultural groups rely on verbal and non-verbal clues in their customary patterns of communication [6].

In high context communication, non-verbal messages can be more important than what is actually said, status and identity are often conveyed non-verbally and require acknowledgement, meaning is largely implicit in the context, directness of expression is avoided, and criticism is generally considered impolite. Low context communication, on the other hand, is more direct and literal, and information is more explicit and verbalized. Hall and others believe that the dominant form of communication in many Western cultures, and in US society in particular, is of the low context variety, whereas high context communication is the norm in many Asian cultures. Interestingly, the distinction between high context and low context patterns of communication seems to overlap considerably with the distinction between group-oriented and individualistic cultures.Consider, for example, Reischauer and Jansen’s description of typical patterns of communication among the Japanese:

To operate their group system successfully, the Japanese have found it advisable to avoid open confrontations. Varying positions are not sharply outlined and their differences analyzed and clarified. Instead, each participant in a discussion feels his waycautiously, unfolding his own views only as he sees how others react to them. Thus, any sharp conflict of views is avoided before it comes out into the open. The Japanese even have a word, haragei, “the art of the belly,” for this meeting of minds, or at least the viscera, without clear verbal interaction. They have a positive mistrust of verbal skills, thinking that these tend to show superficiality in contrast to inner, less articulate feelings that are communicated by inference or nonverbal means [6.47].

The foregoing description of Japanese styles of negotiation is a perfect example of high context communication. Brantley gives a similar account of communication patterns among the Indonesians, and descriptions of the Chinese show that they too adhere closely to the high-context model [6.113].

What about the Koreans?

Kim notes that, as a result of the Confucian tradition that discourages verbosity, “Koreans have become accustomed to communication dependent on a given circumstance” and they tend to communicate “through indirect, implicit and non-verbal means”. Furthermore, he writes that “Koreans tend to obviate the need to explicitly articulate their viewpoints and persuade others,” and that communication in Korea is “geared to promoting bonds rather than enhancing information exchange and developing persuasive skills” [7].

The frequent use of elliptical expressions in Korean is a hotbed on which semantic implications flourish. The gap created by the use of ellipses is a space out of which a depth of meaning far beyond explicit statements grows. Koreans take immense pleasure in expressions such as ishim chonshim (communion with minds), a kind of telepathic communication, a contact of mind with mind unmediated by words .

According to Suh, the great use of ellipses among the Koreans poses serious interpretive problems in the case of written speech, where an extra-linguistic context to guarantee the recoverability of meaning is not readily available. In that case, Suh claims, “ellipsis may end up a loose bundle of unclear sentences which leap over the process of systematic reasoning to non-sequitur conclusions” [8].

The descriptions given by Kim and Suh strongly suggest that the Koreans, like the Japanese, tend toward high context communication, and that the communicative characteristics of both cultures differ sharply from those of English-speaking cultures. This fact is clearly relevant to the second justification for CT pedagogy.

Kim points out that, as a result of their tendency not to explicitly articulate their viewpoints and persuade others, Koreans have found “no pressing need to develop Western-style argumentation, logic, and rhetoric” [8.54]. Suh echoes this point when he notes that the Korean habit of ellipses in discourse reiterates itself in an ellipses in thinking, resulting in a tendency to put into practice “what the heart feels,” while “bypassing the process of deliberating why and for what reason it should be done” [8.96].

As a result, he writes, “Koreans live by feeling, emotion, and attachment (all of which can be summed up in the word *cheong*) while relatively lacking in the so-called ‘Western’ qualities of reason, logic, and rationality” [8.120].

Suh’s point is not that Koreans lack the ability to reason or to think logically, but rather that their typical patterns of communication, which make frequent use of ambiguity and ellipsis, do not manifest the clarity, precision, and logical progression of ideas that are normative ideals in other languages, such as English.

However, these norms of clarity, precision, and logical progression are the very qualities that CT pedagogy attempts to nurture.

Therefore, if it is true that customary patterns of communication among Koreans do not manifest or even aim towards the standards of CT, then the belief that CT pedagogy will improve one’s persuasive powers is false from a Korean perspective. In general, the idea that CT pedagogy will improve one’s linguistic skills and persuasive powers makes sense only within those cultural contexts in which CT skills function as normative ideals of linguistic communication. In cultural contexts in which this is not the case, such as in Korea and Japan, the idea is simply false. Thus, from a Korean point of view, the second justification for CT pedagogy is just as bad as the first.

The Korean education system is not without its merits. However, one of the widely acknowledged weaknesses of the system is its over-reliance on teacher-centered instructional methodologies involving rote-memorization. Since the CT movement addresses this weakness and aims to replace pedagogies that promote intellectual passivity with approaches that nurture students’ thinking skills, one may reasonably wonder why there have not been greater efforts or success in spreading CT pedagogy across the curriculum or throughout the education system in Korea.

In order to understand why the CT movement has failed to permeate the Korean education system, it will not suffice to point to the role of the university entrance exam or other features of the education system itself, for these things too, as we have seen, are just as much in need of an explanation as is the relative failure of the CT movement in Korea.

A deeper, more satisfying explanation is needed, one that examines the values implicit in CT pedagogy in light of the dominant values and practices in Korean society. The explanation offered in our article shows that the values implicit in CT pedagogy clash with important features of Korean culture.

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