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**CRITICAL THINKING IN ENGLISH IN THE INTERNATIONAL CLASSROOM**

**Anthony G Shannon & Farzan Contractor**

**INTRODUCTION**

Australia benefits from the presence of international students. We hope that the benefits are mutual. A difficulty for these students can be the English language, the most used pidgin language in the world. For most of our international students, it is their second language and for many it is their third or even fourth.

Sometimes, it is assumed that they are copying when they are merely employing the safeguard of memorisation. They are less in need of programs for people of non-English speaking background than courses which aid those of limited-English speaking background, the skills of which they acquire gradually. Any native English speaker who has worked in countries where English is not the working language, particularly if the difficulty is compounded with very different symbols, will appreciate the feeling. International students who are non-native speakers of English may struggle with understanding complex academic jargon, reading between the lines, and interpreting nuances in texts or lectures. This is not a matter of revamping courses to make them appear to be more global and, supposedly, less racist and sexist.

This paper then is an attempt to sensitise readers to some of the cross-cultural dilemmas for international students and their teachers in both undergraduate and postgraduate studies which involve critical thinking. Some partial solutions are discussed, such as a better comparative cross-cultural approach. On this basis new insights from previously ‘silent voices’ can generate new theories and possibly ‘paradigms’ from all over the global world. Crucial in this process remains the ongoing dialogue between self-critical participants in a circle of continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their own understandings.

What does critical thinking mean in practice in different fields of study? Critical thinking is often presented as a generic skill, crucial to success at the undergraduate and postgraduate level at universities, however definitions of the concept vary. Critical thinking can therefore only be understood by placing it back into the context in which it is used. This disadvantages many international students, who often have not yet acquired the cultural competencies necessary to read the context, and who are unfamiliar with the concept of critical thinking as a learning experience. There are various cross-cultural issues to absorb to balance and match the expectations of the Western educators and the non-Western students so that the context of enhanced performance is fair to the students and faithful to the standards for which they are striving. As we shall see, the neglect of these issues can contribute to a lost opportunity for all parties.

This paper then seeks to highlight key aspects of the cross-cultural dilemma of teaching critical thinking in the international classroom.

* Is it appropriate that Western paradigms dominate international studies?
* How does the predominant theoretical and practical knowledge apply to non-Western contexts?
* How can there be a genuine two-way flow of cultural exchange?

**PARADIGMS**

In Australia, positivists continue a materialistic approach to natural phenomena and universal logic, a heritage from the European Enlightenment. Hemmingway [13] adds the aspect of ‘values’ to the paradigm concept. Values result from the belief sets of a society. In this respect, paradigms are not neutral and values are a post-Enlightenment commodification often confused with virtues [3].

Whereas cultural differences might be seen as a rich and colourful source of information which needs to be scrutinised very carefully, the instrumental attitude reduces them to problems to be solved for people who are made victims in advance. There is a sense in which a new type of ‘professionalism’ is needed. As Featherstone indicates [7]: “This [professionalism], plus the necessity of moving backwards and forwards between different cultures, various imperfect proto-‘third cultures’ necessitate new types of flexible, personal controls, dispositions and means of orientation, in effect a new type of habitus.”

Of more immediate interest is how these paradigms affect concepts of critical thinking. Table 1 sets out some of the key issues in a taxonomy modified from [5]. It is set out in this way so that readers can relate some of the major issues to the cross-cultural context and some familiar educational terms, rather than try to define critical thinking in any depth. International students may come from educational systems that place less emphasis on critical thinking, and more emphasis on memorization and rote learning. They may also have different expectations regarding classroom participation and academic discourse.

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| **Lower Level** | **Higher Level** | **Complex** | **Deep** |
| **Interpreting** | **Analyzing** | **Evaluating** | **Meta-cognition** |
| **Identifying** | **Synthesizing** | **Verbal Reasoning** | **Self-regulation** |
| **Clarifying** | **Predicting** | **Inferring** | **Applied Epistemology** |
| **Functional Literacy 1-3 [10]** | **Functional Literacy 4-6 [21]** | **Problem Solving [20]** | **Critical Reflection [20]** |

Table 1: Critical Thinking Taxonomy

### SOME NON-WESTERN COMPARISONS?

Whether in academic science, professional knowledge, or fields of discourse, Western outlooks dominate the landscape, but are there non-Western cultural approaches that can reframe our trusted paradigms? As this question raises the issue of Western dominance and pretensions, it is particularly provoking. There are there any opposing or additional non-Western approaches coming from the old cultural systems of India, China, Japan, or from Africa, or South and Central America? The task of answering this question requires extensive research, which has not yet been conducted. This is especially important for those colleges which claim to offer and integrated curriculum, or which wish to capitalise on the rich heritage of the international students.

In India and Pakistan there have been several fairly recent influential thinkers: Aurobindo (1872-1950) Mohammed Iqbal (1876-1938). From the Arabic Islamic world there are Sayyid Qoetb (1903-1966) and Ali Sjari’atie (1933-1977). From India there also comes a ‘Vedantic perspective’, which builds upon traditional Hindu philosophy [4]. In it, leisure is not a teleological concept to be striven for, but rather is found here and now, within ourselves. Leisure is the freedom from the limitations and anxiety felt when we find ourselves back in a ‘consumptive society in which nothing is meaningful’ [8: 36].

China’s long-standing totalitarian regime has pervaded and restricted scientific thinking. The philosopher Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was a Confucianist who promoted radical equality, and a global State without differences in class, races and gender. In Japan, there have been Nakamura Hajime (1921-1999) and Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), a philosopher of mathematics, and Kuki Shuzo (1888-1941) on Japanese aesthetics and phenomenology.

The non-Western scientific and philosophical fields represent societies and religions in the face of global modernisation and decolonisation. Hence, the distinction between modernity and the post-modernism paradigm seems extremely relevant if the host institution is to benefit from the cultural perspectives of the international student. Notwithstanding an often-uttered claim that ‘oriental thinking is less logical, less linear, and less teleological’ than Western thinking, it can be assumed that contemporary non-Western societies are now predominantly occupied with a simple, modernity paradigm. An intriguing issue for further study is whether the post-modern perspective has any foundation in non-Western thinking.

##### **FROM KNOWLEDGE TO WISDOM**

With the rapid and accelerating developments of modern communication technology, there is a danger of confusing information, knowledge and wisdom. The gap between non-Western and Western knowledge is not a neutral one. Foucault states that power is inherent in knowledge [9]. It is not so much that we suppose that only Western-based power dominates non-Western regions, but that Western-based, non-Western modernity thinking also dominates indigenous groups of non-Western people. The paradigms adopted create power relations by non-Western experts for non-Western citizens.

Said designed the concept of ‘orientalism’, to highlight the effects of this power-knowledge field of the West on the non-Western world and the subsequent non-Western resistance to this stigma [16]. Decades ago, Stuart Hall pleaded for an ‘internationalisation’ of cultural studies due to its apparent Anglo-Saxon domination [12]. The Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies confirmed this image during its initial phase by claiming a ‘universal,’ but mainly British, approach to cultural studies.

Accordingly, when speaking of the internationalisation of cultural studies, it is important to integrate the different academic traditions into a dialogical situation (Said [15]). International students may not be familiar with the expectations and norms of Australian academic culture, such as the importance of independent learning, critical reflection, and evidence-based reasoning.

## **RELATIVISM**

We live at a period in history when subjective relativism seems to be becoming the fashionable norm, even at the expense of evidence that was previously a function of enlightenment. How do we find a way to consider this type of knowledge in what, for our international students, is a post-colonial context? Is there a non-Western scientific ‘outsider’ perspective or theory? There is no conclusive answer. One way to access this type of knowledge, however, is to enter a dialogue where all parties involved participate. This provides an alternative to the monologue of the nostalgic anthropologist who searched to gratify colonial needs by idealising faraway, agrarian, non-Western cultures, untouched by modern alienation.

The hermeneutic circle can be closed when Westerners and non-Westerners are involved in a serious game of self-reflexive, mutual interpretations in this ‘hall of mirrors’ where they are reflecting each other’s understandings. The classroom itself can be a metaphor for the entire academic community. How, then, do we as teachers take into account the relevance of Western and non-Western perspectives? How do we mobilise non-Western expertise to share insights?

The first step is to provide a means to exchange backgrounds and perspectives. The next step is to utilise international students so that there is a genuine cultural exchange for mutual enrichment. For many international students, an important motivation for getting a degree is to acquire status in the administrative political system. A problem when training non-Western students, however, lies in the variety of their educational backgrounds. Depending on, for example, previous colonial histories or other political conditions, the students may perceive enormous power distances between teachers and students (cf. [13]) and instructors may perceive (through Western eyes) a lack of critical analysis.

International students may have limited exposure to diverse perspectives, particularly if they have not had the opportunity to interact with a diverse range of people in their home countries or if they are studying in a relatively homogenous academic environment in Australia.

Within the framework of the international classroom, it seems relevant to look for intensive experiences of foreign students and teachers that would make some of the self-evident background assumptions of their life-world debatable. From psychological research, expatriate instructors recognise how intense the culture shock can be and how many questions it raises. However, for our purposes the psychological consequences are less interesting than the earthquake of a life-world that shakes loose some firmly anchored knowledge from different (cultural) perspectives.

The translation of gender-relations, as discussed in Western, feminist science, would be inadequate in a non-Western world [19]. What is required is an entrance to the hall of mirrors, in which a pre-understanding of each other’s life-world could be interpreted and re-interpreted until better understandings replace the original notions. The exploration of these ‘life-world-shocks’ is a good starting point for discovering points of conflict between cultural images, such as these different conceptions of men and women. In a self-reflexive way, all parties involved can combine an emic with an etic approach, imagining what it means to take the role of the other person and relate the conclusions to existing discussions in scientific communities. Bringing these observations forward in the ongoing dialogue between equal partners might improve our post-colonial episteme in the specific music study-area. The international classroom, therefore, can be used to generalise this ongoing dialogical process on a global scale, providing insight between various voices that react constantly in a reflective manner.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

When researchers enter the world of cross-cultural understanding, there can only be a process of growing cultural insights when all the partners involved in the dialogue speak back. In musical metaphors, the polyphonic model of Clifford, in which there is not one (logocentric) megaphone which dictates the possibility of any knowledge, but where each voice is integrated into a composition, provides a structure for this dialogue [14]. The original silent voices in international education can lead us to the embrace of knowledge from non-Western cultures in today’s global world [5,15]. Research is needed to investigate the experiences of a cross-life-world-shock and its consequences for musical knowledge within the international community in actual classrooms (*cf*. [2,14]).

The presence of international students can add an extra layer through understanding other cultures [11]. This shows up in a nuanced appreciation of effective communication [17], a realisation of the ramifications of history [18], analytic empathy for human behaviour [1], so that graduates of a comprehensive education in and through their studies can develop a range of skills in demand from employers in many fields, and thus really feel that they can contribute to enriching the lives of Australians [6]. To overcome some of the obstacles mentioned here, international students may benefit from extra guidance, different in kind from domestic students:

* targeted language support,
* detailed explanations of academic expectations and norms,
* opportunities for group and collaborative learning and discussion,
* exposure to diverse perspectives through guest speakers or field trips.

The presence of international students can help domestic students acquire cross-cultural communication skills and intercultural competence, whereby they can learn to communicate across cultural boundaries and respect different cultural perspectives. When cultural differences are celebrated in an inclusive and diverse learning environment, it leads to a sense of belonging among international students within the institution and hopefully the broader community.

Finally, by sharing their diverse cultural perspectives in the classroom, international students can add another dimension to critical thinking – if it is encouraged.

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1. **\* These papers are for internal discussion within CESA on topics related to the CESA Mission.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)