# ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN THE TEACHING OF THINKING: A CASE STUDY

K. EVELYN BENJAMIN

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K. EVELYN BENJAMIN

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the writing in this thesis is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

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EVELYN A/P KULANDAISAMY
M20021000488

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching of thinking skills has increasingly gained attention from educators in general in the last few decades. It is now seen as a vital component which needs to be incorporated into the teaching of school subjects with the aim of producing citizens who are able to conduct complex thinking process on their own to solve problems and make good decisions. This attempt to teach thinking skills at the school level obviously brings implications on educational planning and implementation at all level to accommodate this change. Preparing teachers to teach thinking skills is an important aspect to be dealt with. This case study which investigated ESL teachers' perceptions and practices on the teaching of thinking utilized a survey research design. The findings of the study indicated that English Language teachers valued the teaching of thinking skills and had a high sense of efficacy in teaching thinking skills to their students. The study has shown that teachers' practice of teaching thinking skills is related to their level of knowledge and course attendance. Teachers in the study also preferred infusion approaches to the teaching of thinking in their language classrooms. The results also indicated teachers' practice of infusing lower order and higher order thinking skills were satisfactory. Teachers were also found to exhibit behaviours that promote thinking skills in students. The study also revealed that there were no significant relationship between English teachers' perceptions and practices in the teaching of thinking skills in their ESL classrooms. Thus, in this study it can be said that teachers' perceptions and practices were not dependent on each other in teaching thinking skills.

## ABSTRAK

Pengajaran kemahiran berfikir telah mendapat perhatian para pendidik secara amnya sejak beberapa dekad yang lepas. Kemahiran berfikir telah menjadi satu komponen utama yang perlu diintegrasikan merentasi kurikulum dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran semua mata pelajaran. Tujuan pengajaran kemahiran berfikir adalah bertujuan untuk melahirkan warganegara yang berkebolehan untuk melakukan proses berfikir yang kompleks agar mempunyai kemahiran untuk menyelesaikan masalah dan membuat keputusan yang baik. Langkah untuk mengajar kemahiran berfikir di peringkat sekolah telah membawa implikasi terhadap perancangan pendidikan dan perlaksanaan di semua peringkat untuk menghadapi perubahan ini. Kesediaan guru untuk mengajar kemahiran berfikir ini adalah satu aspek penting yang perlu diberi perhatian. Tujuan kajian kes ini adalah untuk mendapat persepsi dan strategi pengajaran guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris dalam pengajaran kemahiran berfikir. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah soal selidik. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan yang guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris menghargai pengajaran kemahiran berfikir dan mempunyai 'sense of efficacy' yang tinggi terhadap pengajaran kemahiran berfikir. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan yang kemahiran guru dalam mengajar kemahiran berfikir dikaitkan dengan tahap pengetahuan dan kursus kemahiran berfikir yang pernah dihadiri. Guru-guru dalam kajian ini juga lebih berminat untuk mengintegrasikan kemahiran berfikir dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran mereka di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris mereka. Guru –guru juga telah menunjukkan perlakuan yang dapat mencungkil kemahiran berfikir di kalangan pelajar. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan yang tidak terdapat sebarang hubungan di antara persepsi guru dan amalan guru dalam mengajar kemahiran berfikir. Kesimpulannya, persepsi guru dan amalan guru dalam mengajar kemahiran berfikir tidak saling bergantung antara satu sama lain.

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Introduction

The development of a good person, one who has moral, intellectual, and spiritual excellences, has been the mark of a successful education. This personality is the fruit of knowledge, the wisdom and intelligence that are cultivated through education that is both formal and informal. Essentially, the highest faculty of man that would enable him to possess knowledge, wisdom and intelligence is his mind, which has been endowed by the Creator for the purpose of thinking. Therefore, one of the goals of education is to develop the human mind to become morally righteous, intelligent, wise and thoughtful, as much as the education of his soul and his heart and the development of his physical body.

One of the aims of schooling in the early 1900s was to develop what was known as mental discipline by which the mind is given exercise in thinking. In fact

Plato's Academy and during the Medieval Age, logic was included as one of the quadrivium of music, grammar and rhetoric. Logical thinking was emphasized and Mathematics was a prerequisite for it to the extent that it was written on the entrance of the Academy, "Nobody shall enter this place without a knowledge of mathematics" (cited in Rosnani Hashim & Suhailah Hussein, 2003, pg. 1).

This important landmark of an educated person is again raised today as a major issue in education after many studies have begun to reveal symptoms of decline in students' ability to think well, especially when schools began to focus on the mastery of subject content rather than the processes of deriving the products. The ability to think well is critical to an individual's success in life. At one point of time, thinking was very closely associated with analytical intelligence, and consequently, the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) was considered as the criterion of success. However, in recent years psychologists like Sternberg (1996) have begun to discover that success is not wholly determined by IQ but also by what are termed as creative intelligence and practical intelligence. Thus, today thinking is analyzed to be much broader, than logical thinking alone, as it includes creativity and practical-contextual thinking. The ability to think critically and creatively becomes more crucial in the Age of Information and Globalization whereby individuals have to sieve through tons of information which is not necessarily relevant.

At this juncture, some would be tempted to ask these questions: Do we really need to teach students to think? Isn't thinking a natural consequence of teaching and learning in general? Do not people think spontaneously without being

taught? These are some of the important questions which need to be addressed in the area of teaching thinking. We, indeed, do think without being taught how to think. We classify, analyse, generalize, analogize, deduce, induce, form and test hypotheses, make decisions, and solve problems. We do these things long before we encounter organized efforts to teach us how to think effectively.

However, the evidence regarding our limitations as thinkers and the various ways in which our thinking commonly goes astray is well documented (Goleman, 1995). When we say we want to teach students to think, what we really mean is that we want to improve the quality of their thinking. We want to teach them to think more deeply, more consistently, more productively, and more effectively than they otherwise might (Rajendran, N. 1999).

It is true that the last three decades have seen a growing educational interest in thinking and the ways it can be enhanced in the classroom (Rajendran, N. 1998; Marzano, 1991). The current interest in teaching thinking skills has also been intensified by the onset of the information Era, duly supported by recent advances in cognitive theory (Adams, 1989), and international comparisons of students' higher-order cognitive skills. However, the teaching of thinking has been in different forms in schools for a long time. The cultivation of critical reasoning ability has been an objective of teachers of philosophy, logic and rhetoric, among other subjects, for centuries. Aiding students to use their minds more effectively is presumably a major reason for teaching literacy, numeracy and other basic skills (Rajendran, N. 1999).

In addition to these, thinking is also needed in our practical daily lives. The basic practical things that we do will become efficient and effective if good thinking precedes those activities. This statement can be understood better with an example of Baker and Baker (1994). Let us say Joan was doing her ironing when she realized that she ran out of skirt hangers. She thought for a moment, looked around and then attached two clothes' pegs with rubber bands to an ordinary hanger. Her action showed that she had thought well. On the surface it may not be so remarkable but when analyzed this can be considered as good thinking. This shows that thinking is an important everyday necessity be it at work or at play, and it therefore, should be given emphasis in the school system.

## 1.1 Need for the study

Little attention has been given to teachers' own understanding and conception of what the teaching of thinking is all about. This is evident from the fact that only a few studies have been conducted on teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the teaching of thinking in the context of the ESL classroom. Their beliefs, attitudes and teaching methods in developing students' thinking have been ignored (Yildrim, 1994). Studies on the teaching of thinking should help to improve the practice of the teaching of thinking in ESL classrooms in schools. Thus, one of the ways to achieve this goal is to examine the teachers' own perspectives and practices about the teaching of thinking in the ESL classroom.

Teaching students to think would mean to improve the quality of their thinking so that they would be able to adapt to any future adversities. Their thinking should be consistent, productive, meaningful and effective. What makes good thinking is when the mental activity is purposeful, or is experiences via a problem or a task one has set upon oneself. The mental activity is also experienced in relation to some difficulties one has been worrying about. What we know of good thinking can actually be derived from two separate disciplines: philosophy and psychology. According to Ruggiero (1988) (cited in Rosnani Hashim & Suhailah Hussein, 2003) the two disciplines mentioned above developed two very different models of teaching thinking, namely the creative thinking model and the critical thinking model. Both models have remained insulated from each other. The creative thinking model focuses on the production of ideas and treats thinking as a skill. It teaches thinking very methodologically consists of sequences or organized lessons. The critical thinking model is the most referred model by business, the professionals, and the education when they argue that schools should teach students to think.

Both the disciplines may have developed different models of teaching thinking, but they share the same concern that thinking should be taught in schools. Previously, the focus of education was to provide students with basic knowledge and skills on the three R's: reading writing and arithmetic. This is essential at the elementary level, but at the secondary level students should be taught more than the three R's. However, the focus of education at the secondary level centered on the acquisition of content rather than improving student's thinking. Thus, poor writing, reading and mathematical skills at the secondary level are actually caused by

students' poor performance in "higher-order skills" (Beyer, 1987b). Hence, educational research in the early 1980's claimed that schools were not giving enough attention to teaching of thinking and improving higher-order skills among students (Boyer, 1983).

There has been a lot of discussion on education about thinking skills such as critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, problem-solving skills and decision-making skills. Many studies (Onosko, 1989; Yildirim, 1994a, 1994b; Howarth, 1996) were conducted to investigate the teaching and application of these thinking skills in classrooms. The thinking movement has also gained prominence and support from various sectors as they try to equip individuals with the skills needed to deal constructively with any kinds of information and conditions that may typify the future.

The goals of teaching thinking are not just for students to become proficient in thinking, making decisions and solving problems in the classroom. Rather, the teaching of thinking should develop the acumen to acquire the ability to know and understand and the ability to make wise judgement. Students must be taught to think about when, why, why not and how else. Students must be able to make use of these abilities outside their classroom, in their daily lives according to the context of their situations. Thus, the current task of a teacher includes helping students make sense of their world and opening up new worlds of knowledge and experience. In doing this, the teacher needs to bridge the larger world of ideas and public knowledge with the students' private world. Information and experience offered to the students

remain meaningless if they do not connect and become a part of the students' world. To do this, the teacher must do more than impart information or leave students to find out for themselves. Teachers need to be concerned with the reasons and principles behind the facts rather than just the facts themselves. Teachers should not be cowed or motivated by standardized tests that call for a regurgitation of isolated, trivial, contextless bits of information. Instead, teachers must teach students to always evaluate the credibility of sources, ask for evidence and insist upon rigorous examination of claims. Rather than depending on ready-made simplistic sound bites, we must allow our students the time to consider all points of view. Teachers should no longer rely on teachers' editions and publishers' guides when teaching but instead we must encourage our students to figure things out for themselves. Teachers must be prepared not to have answers for our students and, instead, support their forays into confusion and contradiction. The focus must be on the journey rather than the destination, on students learning rather than on teachers on teachers teaching. When teachers emphasize thinking rather than facts, students not only learn more, but also perform better on standardized tests (Hirsch, 1987) (cited in Kincheloe, J.L. & Weil, D. 2004).

The issue of developing good thinking among students has also captured the attention of Malaysia, a country that aspires to attain the status of an industrial country and a world centre of educational excellence. Malaysia has also begun to emphasize the importance of promoting and developing students' thinking skills in its schools as a move towards the development of effective manpower and human resources for national development.

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia formulated the National Education Philosophy with the aim of producing a good and balanced individual. The Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM), being the mechanism to realize the National Education Philosophy, emphasizes the development of the self. Its curriculum content includes knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values which are necessary to develop the potentials of a student in a holistic and integrated manner so that he will become a balanced person intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that through the traditional education system, students in Malaysia mainly absorb and memorize large quantities of rote-learned materials. For example, when asked to write about 'Pollution' students merely list out facts from published sources or write down everything they know about the topic. Little or no effort is made to think that is to understand what the arguments are and whether there are other possible ways of resolving the problem of 'Pollution' specific to the Malaysian scenario (Yogini Yogarajah, 1991).

The increasing emphasis on creative and critical thinking skills in educational circles reflects the growing concern that traditional education is no longer sufficient - that it does not provide the right platform in producing citizens who are not just knowledgeable or skillful but actually better able to learn new information of all kinds. The study was undertaken as the need to teach thinking lies

in the hands of the teachers themselves. The problem at hand was that little attention has been given to teachers' own understanding and conception of what the teaching of thinking is all about. This is evident from the fact that only a few studies have been conducted on teachers' perceptions and practices toward the teaching of thinking. Their beliefs, attitudes and teaching methods have been ignored (Yildrim, 1994). Studies on the teaching of thinking should help to improve the practice of the teaching of thinking in schools.

Thus, to address the problem at hand, the study to examine teachers' perceptions and practices in the teaching of thinking was undertaken.

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## 1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main concern of this study is to examine English Language teachers' perceptions of teaching of thinking and their actual practices in the scenario of the Malaysian ESL Classroom. The study is conducted among English Language teachers in secondary schools in Tapah, Sungkai, Slim River and Tanjong Malim, Perak which represent the Batang Padang District. The study attempts to identify the teaching approaches and strategies that teachers claim they have used in promoting students' thinking. This study is also interested in investigating the thinking skills and levels of critical thinking skills that teachers claimed they emphasized. In particular, this study sought answers to the following questions: