

# Is Critical Thinking an Appropriate Educational Philosophy for Korea?

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## 1. Introduction: critical thinking is coming to Korea

In the preface to the third edition of *Critical Reasoning*, the authors point out that when the text was first published in 1982 it was one of very few texts designed to help students improve their ability to evaluate critically what they hear and read in a variety of everyday contexts (Cederblom & Paulsen, 1991, p.xi). However, by the time the second edition was published in 1986, courses in informal logic and critical thinking had become common in universities throughout North America and had even been installed as graduation requirements at some of these universities. Since then, course offerings and enrollments in this area have continued to increase, and there has been a broadly based movement to infuse critical thinking instruction across the curriculum. As a result, critical thinking has not only permeated the curriculum at the university, high school, and even elementary school levels, it has also passed beyond L1 contexts into ESL classes as well. At this point in time, critical thinking is clearly much more than just another undergraduate course: it is an educational philosophy.

It is, however, a *western* educational philosophy. In many Asian countries, and in Korea in particular, critical thinking is not an important part of the curriculum or standard teaching methodology. The dominant pedagogical model in Korea is unabashedly paternalistic: teachers, who are regarded as experts, deliver knowledge to students, who are expected to absorb it. Students are not, in general, encouraged to challenge their teachers or what they teach. From a historical point of view, this pedagogical model derives, at least in part, from Confucianism, which has led to the development of a number of paternalistic structures within Korean culture. However, what sustains this pedagogical model in the present era, more than anything else, is the Korean university entrance exam. Indeed, so much of the educational system in Korea revolves around this one exam that Michael Breen has recently described it as “the tail that wags the educational dog” (1998, p.66). The exam is of enormous importance to the life of every Korean student: for it, above all else, determines a student’s personal relationships and future position in society. For this reason, students spend most of their pre-university educational period preparing for it (and the subsequent period living with the consequences of it). But it is an objective-style, multiple-choice exam that allows no room for shades of gray, for disagreement, or for debate. It is therefore not surprising that the education that prepares students for this exam does not promote or encourage critical thinking?there is neither the time nor the need for it.

At the university level in Korea, there is much more opportunity for instruction based on critical thinking, yet even here it is not widely practiced. One reason for this is that the majority of university instructors in Korea, having themselves been educated by a system that does not encourage critical thinking, have little experience or training in using it in the classroom. But even for those instructors who do have experience in critical thinking pedagogy, there are serious difficulties involved in using it at the university level. For after eighteen years of instruction that is decidedly uncritical, it is unrealistic to expect students, at that point, to adapt to a methodology that encourages them to think for themselves, to challenge their teachers, and to debate with other students. Moreover, for many students in Korea, once they enter university, the hitherto purpose of learning?to prepare for the

all-important entrance exam has vanished, and along with it, so has much of the motivation for learning of any sort.

However, things are beginning to change, and there are several reasons why we can expect to see critical thinking become a more conspicuous part of education in Korea in the near future. One reason is that there is, within Korean society, a widely felt need for educational reform, including, in particular, an overhaul of the university entrance system. Sooner or later, most Koreans believe, the system will change, and when it does, there will be greater room for changes to the high-school curriculum and teaching methodology.

In the meantime, thousands of students each year travel abroad to receive what they believe to be a higher quality education. This is especially true of those students seeking graduate degrees. In many fields now, a degree from a foreign university is considered to be of greater value than one from a top Korean university. For this reason, faculty positions at Korean universities are increasingly being given to those who have completed their graduate studies abroad, including foreigners. The majority of these holders of foreign graduate degrees complete their studies in the U.S.; a smaller, though significant number go to Britain and Canada. During their graduate studies, most of these students are educated with the critical thinking pedagogy that permeates the western educational system. When they return to Korea and begin teaching at universities or elsewhere, the educational philosophy that they have experienced abroad naturally affects their teaching styles. Thus, these holders of foreign degrees function, whether intentionally or not, as missionaries for the cause of critical thinking.

Yet another reason why critical thinking pedagogy is on the increase in Korea is simply that in embracing the ideology of globalization, Korea is now absorbing western—especially American—culture. Critical thinking is an integral part of that culture, not only in terms of the formal education that westerners receive, but also in terms of the public debate and other patterns of communication shaped by critical thinking. So as it absorbs western culture, Korea is bound to absorb the philosophy of critical thinking as well.

There are, then, reasons to believe that the education in Korea is moving in the direction of the western style pedagogy based on critical thinking. This is not, however, to say that the Korean educational system *should* be moving in that direction. For it would be a grave mistake to assume that because critical thinking is a dominant educational philosophy in western society it ought therefore to play the same role in Korean society. Before we can decide whether or not Korean educators ought to embrace critical thinking as so many western educators have, we need a better understanding of what critical thinking is and what social values it is likely to promote. The following two sections address these questions.

## 2. What is critical thinking?

Moore and Parker (1989) define critical thinking as “the careful and deliberate determination of whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgement about a claim” (p.3). They also assert that critical thinking 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. Similarly, Cederblom and Paulsen (1991) define critical thinking as a collection of procedures that enable one to make decisions concerning what to believe, an ability that they contrast with passive

reading or listening and mere disagreement (p.1). Though they do not, in their definition, explicitly state which skills are involved in critical thinking, the content of their book makes it clear that they have the same sorts of skills in mind as do Moore and Parker, skills such as finding hidden assumptions, tracing consequences, and evaluating arguments.

Thomson (1999) describes the following three abilities as “important aspects of critical thinking”: the ability to understand and evaluate arguments, the ability to make well-reasoned decisions, and the tendency to be fair-minded (p.2). She also claims that there are certain distinct skills involved in the assessment of arguments and in good decision-making, skills such as those described above: recognizing reasons, conclusions, and unstated assumptions, drawing conclusions, appraising evidence, and analyzing words, phrases, and concepts. Tamthai (2000) does not define critical thinking, but he does characterize what is involved in the teaching of critical thinking, and his characterization is very much in keeping with the foregoing definitions. Thus, he claims that teaching critical thinking is a matter of teaching students how to carefully consider conclusions drawn from evidence, how to derive various consequences of such conclusions, and how to explore and weigh alternatives to those conclusions (p.191).

It would be easy to go on producing further examples in this vein, but the foregoing should suffice to demonstrate that there is, if not complete consensus, at least broad agreement over what critical thinking is and what skills or abilities it involves. In particular, each of the authors just mentioned regards critical thinking as consisting of a set of skills that enable one to evaluate arguments and make rational decisions concerning what to believe or do. The specific skills that these authors agree are involved in critical thinking include the following:

1. recognizing reasons and conclusions in written or spoken communication,
2. identifying hidden assumptions,
3. tracing consequences,
4. evaluating claims against evidence,
5. spotting fallacies,
6. weighing alternatives, and
7. clarifying terms.

Let us assume, then, that the primary aim of critical thinking instruction is to instill or foster the foregoing skills in students. And let us now ask what further purposes these skills might serve or why it is thought that these skills are worth teaching.

### 3. Why should we teach critical thinking?

The full title of Moore and Parker’s 1989 text is *Critical Thinking: Evaluating Claims and Arguments in Everyday Life*. As the subtitle suggests, the book is intended to promote an ability that will help its readers in their everyday lives. “The ability to think critically,” they write, “is vitally important. In fact, our lives depend on it, since the way we conduct our lives depends on what claims we believe?on what claims we accept” (1989, p.3). The implication here is that critical thinking is essential to rational decision-making and the ability to make rational decisions is necessary for one’s very survival. In a similar, but slightly more modest tone, Cederblom and Paulsen (1991) claim that critical thinking promotes substantial social values, such as defense against our vulnerability as citizens in

a society increasingly ruled by experts. Thus, they write that, “Even though we might not be experts, we can mitigate our status as amateurs by honing our reasoning skills” (p.6).

Lipman (1991) also sees a connection between critical thinking and self-defense. Thus, he writes that, “whenever we make a claim or utter an opinion, we are vulnerable unless we can back it up” (p.117). When our opinions come under fire, to what do we appeal? In answering this question, says Lipman, we are led to see that claims and opinions must be supported by reasons. Closely connected with the idea of one’s defense against vulnerability is the idea of personal freedom or autonomy, and this is a connection that Lipman (1991) makes explicit when he writes that students must be encouraged to become critical thinkers “as a step towards their own autonomy” (p.118).

The focus of Thomson’s 1999 text, *Critical Reasoning in Ethics*, is on the role that critical thinking can play in resolving personal and social ethical dilemmas. According to Thomson, critical thinking is important because it enables one to make ethical decisions for oneself, which serves the additional goal of enabling one to take further control of one’s life (1999, p.1). Brown and Keeley (1994) echo this last claim when they write that critical thinking improves one’s self-confidence by increasing one’s sense of “intellectual independence” (p.2).

Further support for this connection between critical thinking and autonomy or independence is provided by Ruggiero (1995), who writes that, “We are not individuals automatically; rather we *become* individuals by our willingness to realize our potential and our effort to be “self-aware, self-critical, self-enhancing” (p.39). In particular, Ruggiero believes that critical thinking promotes independence by helping one to avoid blind conformity and self-deception. Ruggiero also believes that critical thinking serves the following two positive functions: a) it helps to clarify or refine ideas and thereby leads to better ideas, and b) it improves one’s ability to persuade others of one’s ideas. “The best idea in the world,” Ruggiero writes, “is of little value until others are persuaded of its worth” (p.142).

This last point is one that is also emphasized by those, such as Chaffee (1985) and Hammond (1989), who promote critical thinking within the context of improving linguistic skills. Indeed, the primary aim of Chaffee (1985) is to develop students’ reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities along with their ability to think, but these are not regarded as entirely distinct aims: rather, it is assumed that by improving the latter skill one automatically improves the former skills. Thus, Chaffee writes that “since language and thinking are so closely related, how well we do with one is directly related to how well we do with the other” (p. 244).

Critical thinking has also been justified in terms of the role it plays in promoting ethical attitudes and behaviour. In 1994, California Governor Wilson directed the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to determine the extent to which teacher training programs prepared candidates for teaching critical thinking in elementary and secondary schools. In the report that was eventually prepared, the authors wrote that critical thinking research “reflects the common perception that human thinking left to itself gravitates towards *prejudice*, over-generalization, ..., rigidity, and narrowness.” They go on to say that critical thinking instruction seeks to minimize these errors in thinking. Similar remarks have been made by Singer (1995) who suggests that our ability to reason or think critically is

precisely what leads us to renounce the forms of discrimination that are objectionable, such as racial or sexual discrimination (p.222).

Finally, critical thinking has also been justified on the basis of explicitly political considerations. Lipman (1991) claims that the following sort of argument has been endorsed by a great many thinkers, not least of whom is John Locke: democracy functions best with reasonable citizens, and critical thinking improves reasonableness, so critical thinking promotes well-functioning democracies (p.244). Lipman himself seems to support this line of reasoning, as does John Dewey, who was one of the leading proponents of the idea of revolutionizing education for the purpose of fostering effective democracies.

Let us sum up the foregoing with a list of the benefits that have been cited in support of critical thinking. According to the authors recently considered, critical thinking:

1. provides one with a means of self-defense against manipulation,
2. promotes one's individual autonomy,
3. protects one against self-deception,
4. helps one to resolve ethical dilemmas for oneself,
5. enables one to take greater control of one's life,
6. enhances one's self-confidence,
7. increases one's intellectual independence,
8. improves one's linguistic skills,
9. increases one's persuasive power,
10. reduces prejudice and discrimination, and
11. promotes well-functioning democracies.

Clearly, the foregoing claims are not independent of each other. Indeed, the first seven claims are, to a large extent, variations on the same theme—that of individual autonomy. Furthermore, given that democracy is a social arrangement that is based upon, and intended to promote, social equality and individual autonomy, there is a definite connection between the first seven claims and the last two. The principal difference between claims 1–7 and claims 10 and 11 is that while the former speak of autonomy from the point of view of the individual, the latter relate to the social dimensions of individual autonomy.

Claims 8 and 9, which belong in a different group from the rest, are obviously related to each other. For the sort of persuasion mentioned in claim 9 is persuasion by means of language, as opposed to emotional manipulation or physical coercion. The idea is that by becoming a critical thinker one can improve one's mastery of the language and thereby use language more persuasively. It is worth noting that this idea makes sense only within a context in which critical thinking is widely practiced. For critical thinking skills are helpful in persuading only those who are already critical thinkers; those who, for one reason or another, eschew critical thinking are unlikely to be moved by carefully constructed, thoughtful argumentation.

We may summarize this section of the paper by noting that while proponents of critical thinking have offered a variety of claims on its behalf, these claims can be organized around three basic concepts: autonomy, democracy, and language. In response to the question "Why should we teach critical thinking?" proponents of critical thinking have

provided the following three answers: a) it enhances individual autonomy, b) it fosters well-functioning democracies based on social equality, and c) it improves one's linguistic skills (and, hence, one's ability to persuade).

#### 4. Is critical thinking suitable for Korea?

Having examined what critical thinking is, and what values it promotes, we are now in a better position to consider whether critical thinking pedagogy is suitable for Korean students and Korean society. Let us consider this question with respect to each of the foregoing justifications of critical thinking, beginning with the last.

##### 4.1. Critical thinking and language learning

The idea that critical thinking will improve one's linguistic skills and one's ability to persuade others seems to be culturally specific. For not all cultures value critical thinking to the same extent, and in those cultures in which it is not highly valued, critical thinking is unlikely to enhance one's command of the language or one's ability to command others through language. Consider, thus, Reischauer and Jansen's description of Japanese attitudes towards critical thinking and oratory prowess:

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 way cautiously, 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. (p.136)

According to Reischauer and Jansen, "the sharp analysis of conflicting views" and "the clarification of positions" are not encouraged?and are even actively discouraged?in Japanese styles of negotiation. But these behaviors are clearly associated with critical thinking. Indeed, the sharp analysis and clarification of varying positions is exactly what we expect of a critical thinker. Furthermore, not only is critical thinking avoided by the Japanese, according to Reischauer and Jansen, they even have a "positive mistrust" for it and the patterns of communication it gives rise to. The same thing could perhaps be said of the Koreans, many of whom believe that "a wise man is a man of few words." Accordingly, one might conclude that rhetoric and the critical thinking skills associated with rhetoric are not nearly as useful to Korean or Japanese students as they are to western students.

However, that would be a rash conclusion. For regardless of the role that critical thinking may or may not play in Japanese or Korean patterns of communication, we must remember that the learning of English and other foreign languages is of enormous interest and importance to Japanese and Korean students. In Korea, in particular, mastery of the English language is increasingly seen as a key to success in life, and parents spend enormous amounts of money to have their children learn it. But if critical thinking really is

essential to patterns of communication in English?conducting debates, presenting arguments, and persuading people?then Korean learners of English have a very good reason for receiving training in critical thinking.

Interestingly, Atkinson (1997) draws the opposite conclusion. Atkinson argues that because critical thinking is a culturally specific social practice, one that many eastern cultures do not endorse, TESOL educators ought to be cautious about using it in the classroom (p.72).

However, Atkinson's concern seems to be misplaced. If critical thinking really is a culturally based concept, as Atkinson insists it is, then the ESL/EFL classroom would seem to be one of the most appropriate places for critical thinking instruction. For learning a language is not merely a matter of learning a vocabulary plus a set of grammatical rules. Learning a language is very much a matter of learning a culture, in the sense of learning the ways in which members of the culture think, reason, and act. Indeed, the most common mistake that learners of a second language make is in translating into the target language, word-for-word, the things that they tend to say in their native language. This sort of process leads to error and communication failure far more often than it leads to communication success. In order to communicate with speakers of a foreign language, the L2 learner must absorb the linguistic habits of the target culture and speak they way members of that culture speak. In order to do so, the learner must also internalize the way members of the target culture think.

Thus, if critical thinking is closely associated with the modes of self-expression that prevail in English-speaking cultures then, contrary to what Atkinson argues, non-western students learning English ought to be taught critical thinking skills while they are learning English. Of course, it may not be feasible to introduce critical thinking instruction at the early stages of the language learning process. However, exactly when, in that process, critical thinking instruction ought to be introduced is another question entirely. The point I am concerned with here is merely that critical thinking ought to be used *at some point* with those students attempting to master the English language. Therefore, there is at least this much reason for critical thinking instruction in Korea.

#### 4.2 Critical thinking and democracy

In addition to the differences already mentioned, another way in which countries like Japan and South Korea differ from many western countries relates to the quite different experiences with democracy that these two groups of countries have had. The history of democracy in the west traces back to the American and French Revolutions that occurred in the eighteenth century. However, in Japan, as Singer has observed, the feudal system that developed in the thirteenth century continued unabated until Commodore Perry arrived, uninvited, in the Bay of Edo in 1853" (1995, p.109). In Korea, the history of democracy is even shorter. Indeed, the history of Korea in the twentieth century is very much the history of oppression, war, and military coups, and it was not until 1987 that Korea experienced its first peaceful, democratic transfer of power. However, while the superficial form of democracy is now well established in Korea, the substance of democracy has yet to arrive. Elections are generally run along lines of regionalism, political corruption is widespread, and the executive branch of government still strongly controls the legislature and judiciary branch, which often results in human rights abuses. Thus, Breen has notes that, from the 1980s to the present time, "thousands of students

have been arrested, for exercising rights which were recognized in the constitution, because the executive ordered a crackdown” (1998, p.224). What is needed in Korea, many people believe, is not just the superficial form of democracy, but the democratization of the culture.

The status of women in Korea provides a case in point. Korean women enjoy most legal rights that Korean men do, yet it is clear that women are victimized by gender discrimination within Korean society. To take but one example, the widespread preference for boys over girls is evident in the growing gender imbalance in Korean society and has been associated with the alarmingly high rate of abortion. This preference, moreover, is not arbitrary, but is fixed by customs and traditions that ensure a better life for males (and the parents of males) than for females (or their parents).

What, if anything, could disrupt the Korean patriarchy and promote social equality between the sexes? Here, the government, the courts, the media, and the education system all must play a role. However, for any of these institutions to have any effect at all, then the rhetoric of rights and social equality must first gain purchase within the public consciousness. For this to happen, public debate and rational argumentation must become effective forces in disrupting customs and traditions and promoting social change. This, then, is a second way in which Korea could benefit from the implementation of critical thinking pedagogy in the education system.

#### 4.3 Critical thinking and individual autonomy

The third of the aforementioned justifications for critical thinking is more controversial than the first two. As we have already seen, critical thinking does indeed promote individual autonomy. It does so by making the individual more aware of the reasons behind his or her actions or beliefs, less likely to be deceived or misled by oneself or by others, and more able to defend his or her own views. In all of these ways, critical thinking empowers the individual and promotes individual autonomy. What is controversial is not whether critical thinking can do these things, but whether these things are inherently desirable. From the point of view of the individual, autonomy is inevitably seen as a good thing, but from a social point of view, the value of individual autonomy is not so clear.

Singer (1995) argues that the western world in general, and American society in particular, is in the grip of an ethical crisis that is threatening to destroy society as we know it. The crisis he describes is a crisis of unrestrained individualism, the crisis of a society in which the majority of citizens have little or no concern for anything other than themselves and their own narrowly defined self-interests. Singer notes that, according to one estimate, “seventy percent of the world’s population live in societies in which loyalty to the family or tribe overrides personal goals” (1995, p.31). This is true, in particular, of Koreans, who place greater value on duties towards one’s family than on individual rights and freedoms. However, it is certainly not true of Americans in general. Indeed, Singer points out that “social scientists have developed scales for placing societies on a continuum from individualism to collectivism and that by these tests the U.S. comes out as the most individualistic society of all” (1995, p.32).

Given the shocking levels of crime, violence, and homelessness in the U.S. and the enormous disparities in wealth between the rich and poor, it is difficult to argue

against Singer's claim that the ethos of individualism in the U.S. has a crisis point. However, we have also just agreed that critical thinking promotes individualism by nurturing intellectual independence and individual autonomy. Putting these two things together, it is tempting to draw a connection between the critical thinking that permeates the American education system and the ethical crisis that is now threatening to destroy American society. If so, then in embracing western pedagogy based on critical thinking, there is cause for concern as to whether Korea will also eventually be damaged or destroyed by an ethos of individualism similar to that which is now threatening American society.

However, before we leap to this alarming conclusion, we need to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy forms of individualism. Healthy individualism is intellectual independence, which does not mean that one does not need others, but rather that one is able to think for oneself and less likely to be manipulated or deceived by others. Unhealthy individualism is pure selfishness, the tendency to think and act for oneself, in the sense of being unconcerned for others. There is, in fact, no reason why critical thinking should promote the unhealthy species of individualism: students of critical thinking certainly are not taught to be unconcerned for others. However, in practice, the distinction between thinking for oneself (in the sense of intellectual independence) and thinking for oneself (in the sense of acting selfishly) is often blurred or ignored. And there is the real danger that nurturing the first will inadvertently enhance the second.

But how shall we react to this possibility? Shall we recoil from critical thinking pedagogy and attempt to stifle individual autonomy? Such a response would be not only unwise, but also probably impossible to achieve, given the direction of social change in Korean society. A better and more practical response, I believe, is to provide critical thinking instruction, but to supplement it with ethical education. By "ethical education" I do not mean to refer to anything like the National Ethics classes that were once mandatory in Korean schools, classes that were mainly an excuse for promoting anti-communism. I am thinking rather of the applied ethics courses that are now common in most universities in the West, courses such as environmental ethics, bioethics, and business ethics. These courses help to ensure that the healthy version of individualism does not degenerate into mere selfishness. For the purpose of ethical education is, or should be, to teach students why they should be concerned for things other than themselves. Ideally it should also lead them to actually be concerned for things other than themselves. There is no reason to think that this sort of education is inconsistent, or incompatible, with critical thinking pedagogy. Indeed, applied ethics is really just the application of critical thinking to specific ethical issues.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary question with which this paper is concerned is whether critical thinking is a suitable educational philosophy for Korea. This question is important because, as we have seen, it is very likely that critical thinking pedagogy will become a more conspicuous part of the educational system in Korea in the very near future. Indeed, given the nature of the reasons for believing that the system is moving in this direction, it is unlikely that one could prevent it if one wanted to. But even if this is so, we are nevertheless faced with the question of whether we ought to embrace critical thinking pedagogy and promote it or resist and suppress it. We are also faced with the question of how it ought to be implemented. The conclusion of this paper is that critical thinking

pedagogy is likely to benefit Korean students and Korean society in at least two respects: by helping Korean learners of English to master the English language, and by helping to undermine the customs and traditions that restrict social equality and the democratization of Korean culture. There is a legitimate concern as to whether critical thinking pedagogy might promote not only intellectual independence, but also unhealthy forms of individualism. However, in order to prevent that from happening, critical thinking instruction should be supplemented with courses in applied ethics.

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