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British Universities: International Students' Alleged Lack of Critical Thinking

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Abstract

This paper investigates British academics' perception of international students' alleged lack of critical thinking and poor writing performance. This research is relevant to those students and academics expected to demonstrate competences required for acceptance in the English speaking academic environment. The aim of this paper is to investigate in detail those factors that make British academics devalue academic material written in English as a second language. Using literature review and literature analysis as research methods, the authors present a detailed summary of problems associated with international students' performance in the UK universities and conclude with a set of practical recommendations for Russian speaking students and academics.

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1. Introduction

Problems associated with international students' performance in the UK universities are primarily linked to their apparent lack of critical thinking skills. According to Elder, "Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way" (Elder, 2002). People who think critically, she asserts, strive to act rationally, empathically and reasonably. They are aware of the imperfections of human reasoning and do their best to stop their own egocentric and sociocentric tendencies from affecting their

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judgments. They access, analyze, and improve their own thinking. They strive to achieve intellectual integrity, humility, civility, empathy, and sense of justice in reason. They accept their own intellectual limitations and understand that their own reasoning can still be impaired by prejudices, irrationality, biases and misrepresentations as well as by uncritically accepting social rules and social taboos, vested interest and self-interest. Their goal is to improve the world and work towards a more rational and civilized society. Nevertheless, critical thinkers recognize the difficulties involved in perusing intellectual perfection. They do not think simplistically about complicated matters and do their best to consider other people's needs and rights. They "recognize the complexities in developing as thinkers, and commit themselves to life-long practice toward self-improvement. They embody the Socratic principle: *The unexamined life is not worth living*, because they realize that many unexamined lives together result in an uncritical, unjust, dangerous world" (Critical thinking community).

There is a variety of approaches that define critical thinking by highlighting different aspects, with Dewey (1933) focusing on the capacity to weigh evidence and analyze ideas, (Glaser, 1941; Dewey, 1933) relating critical thinking to logical inquiry, whilst Scheffler (1973) and Glaser (1941) define critical thinking as the ability to evaluate. For Seigel (1990) (Scheffler, 1973), critical thinking is a process of goal-directed thinking to improve thoughts and actions and Lipman (1995) (Siegel, 1990) asserts that critical thinking is a way of developing the skill of sound judgment which is required for self-correctness. Shaheen (Shaheen, 2012) presents Mayfield's position on critical thinking as the ability to "recognize assumptions; separate facts from opinions and make evaluations; ask questions and question the validity of evidence; verify information and listen to observe; seek to understand several perspectives, and seek the truth before reporting it" (Shaheen & Nisbah, 2012; Halpern, 1998).

2. Critical thinking in British education

Overcoming the disparity of approaches to defining critical thinking, Facione's *Critical Thinking: a Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* states the following: "We understand critical thinking to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based (Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction, 1990). Critical thinking is taught in British schools as a skills-based rather than content-based subject. Seventeen and eighteen year-olds who choose this subject as an option for their A Levels, develop their ability to interpret, analyse and evaluate ideas and arguments (Elder, 2009).

In Higher Education, critical thinking is an essential component of students' set of competences necessary for successful completion of any degree program as "[c]ritical thinking forms the heart and soul of every subject because its concepts and principles are presupposed in, and give rise to, the logic of every subject" (Swatridge, 2014).

University students use books like *The Oxford Guide to Effective Argument and Critical Thinking* (Swatridge, 2014) in order to make sure that they know how to approach an essay or discussion question correctly, to review what claims others have made and offer counter-claims, to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of their own argument before putting together a persuasive conclusion.

3. International students allegedly lack critical thinking

British educators claim that international students who come to study in the UK lack critical thinking and hence underperform when it comes to producing essays, dissertations and theses. Teaching professionals note international students' lack of "higher order thinking skills", differentiating critical thinking from the lower-level intellectual abilities of understanding, remembering and applying (Halpern, 1998; Lipman, 1995; Tsui, 2006; Halpern, 1998). Universities in the UK host substantial numbers of international students. The Office for National Statistics estimates that in the year ending September 2014 there were 133,000 non-EU long-term study immigrants (Tsui,

2006), and questions about the extent of their adaptation to the British academic environment loom large. In particular, teaching professionals raise concerns about international students' lack of critical thinking in academic writing. " (Shaheen, 2012) notes that international students' approaches towards critical thinking are often derived from their own cultures where a collective style of learning prevails over an individual one, and where people respect the work of other scholars and avoid criticizing it. Shaheen finds that students' various conceptions of critical thinking which differ from that in British culture are the result of the cultural specificity of their socialization and the previous absence of relevant practice. She notes that the majority of international students choose surface learning strategies rather than deep learning strategies as specified by Jackie Lublin (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2003). Shaheen's study reveals that students from non-British traditions approach critical thinking tasks of formulating arguments and evaluating them, making sound judgments and analysing critically, in a different way than their British educators expect. Shaheen identified certain features of their home educational background as barriers in their development of critical thinking whilst in the UK. In particular, students who produce poor results were not previously encouraged to think creatively and analytically. Cross-cultural issues provide explanations for specific problems related to international students' poor performance in British universities, as critical thinking skills play an important role as assessment tools used in Britain.

International students consistently fail to answer analytically because they do not understand what it is to make their own point and are incapable of creating new meanings analytically. International students always receive much lower ratings, not only because they write in a foreign language, but also because they cannot think critically, presumably because they have not been trained to do so before they came to the UK (Davies, 2003).

Whilst marking non-British students' writing, teaching professionals note that their texts are "lacking arguments", have a "lack of clarity and criticality" and are "descriptive in nature" (Egege & Koteleh, 2004).

These comments relate to logic rather than language as in some cases students show a good level of English proficiency whilst presenting a poor argument in their paper (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004).

In addition to alleged cognitive deficiency, international students in British universities are renowned for dishonest behaviour such as plagiarism, improper textual borrowings, insufficient citation, excessive repetition and fraud (Howard, 2000).

4. Specific problems associated with international students' writing

Shaheen (2012) identified specific issues associated with international students' approach to writing which lead to poor writing performance as (1) passive learning experiences, (2) reproduction of ideas, (3) focus on the collection of information, (4) textbook-boundedness, (5) lack of purpose, (6) routine memorisation.

She has also listed critical thinking-related academic writing problems as (1) lack of clarity, (2) lack of critical analysis, (3) lack of critical evaluation, (4) lack of supporting evidence, (5) lack of precision and drawing conclusions.

Factors inhibiting international students' critical thinking performance include, as Shaheen found: (1) parents' educational background, (2) respect of elders, (3) fear of children's independency, (4) authoritative learning environment in previous life, (5) weak English language foundations, (6) fear of confrontation, (7) passive learning environment in childhood, (8) lack of critical thinking awareness, (9) lack of valuing critical thinking, (10) lack of understanding of the concept of critical thinking, (11) differences of academic requirements between native and non-native context, (12) insufficient English language abilities.

Shaheen (2012) lists factors that affect the promotion of critical thinking and relate to students' previous learning history. These are: (1) lack of critical thinking encouragement, (2) lack of the modelling of critical thinking, (3) poor methods of teaching writing, (4) unqualified teachers in English as a second language, (5) poor English language curriculum, (5) lack of questioning habits, (6) lack of debates and discussions.

5. Cultural background as a barrier to developing critical thinking

Shaheen (2012) draws on Hofstede's research that qualifies culture based learning approaches in terms of "power distance" (Hofstede, 1997). Hofstede defines power distance in terms of inequality in power, whereby less powerful people accept the authority of a powerful person as normal. According to Hofstede, the characteristics of the British culture include high individuality, low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2014) whilst, for example, East Asian societies are characterized by low individualism, large power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance (Durkin, 2008).

The large power distance manifests itself in educational settings creating a passive learning environment, with students accepting and respecting the teacher's authority. In such settings learning is based on teacher-centred events – lectures or lessons – in which the teacher's expertise is respected and never criticised and where students do not normally speak without being invited to do so. On the contrary, in a culture with low power distance, students can speak spontaneously, question and contradict the teacher – they are expected to be independent (Hofstede, 1986). According to Meyers (Meyers, 1986), education traditions based on lectures foster passive learning, whereby critical thinking is hardly taught at all (Meyers, 1986). Overall researchers criticise students' taking notes during lectures being passive listeners (Richmonds, 2007), memory-based learning (Hofstede, 1986) and emphasis on students passing exams rather than on them developing a critical and analytical approach to learning (Volet and Renshaw, 1996; Meyers, 1986).

In the context of British education, international students' classroom behaviour conditioned by their cultural background (avoidance of answering questions, not participating in group discussions, not having their own opinions and not challenging ideas) is taken negatively by their educators.

6. Russian students writing in English

None of the standards that regulate educational processes in Russia includes any mention of academic writing skills or courses in any language (Richmonds, 2007). Researchers identify the following problems resulting from this, and although these problems are noted in relation to legal profession, the same could be applied to other fields of research as well.

Most Russian legal writers (including prominent ones) need knowledge of clarity in academic writing and a system for presenting arguments, according to our Russian co-author who deals with Russian and English language submissions for a Russian law journal. The general problem is that legal writers in Russia tend to use (and reuse) language that is often dense and incomprehensible, with long sentences overloaded with subordinate clauses and stylistic errors. Russian law school postgraduates, moreover, have repeatedly complained about the lack of training in writing course papers and articles in Russian, while Russian law school professors complain about students poor writing qualities in terms of structure and argumentation. This dilemma may be supported by Russian law school administrators who leave no room in the curricula for legal writing, the emphasis being on substantive law rather than on legal learner skills for analyzing and communicating about the law. As in the U.S., quality is not a professorial or administrative issue but the personal responsibility of students assumed to "know how to write" before they get into law school (Somwung & Siridej, 2000).

This problem intensifies in the international education setting where Russian students, instead of a high-level, systematic academic instruction to produce quality research papers, dissertations and theses in their discipline, require support with basic skills and competences such as help with English grammar (Somwung & Siridej, 2000). The researchers continue: "[T]he lack of strong writing skills is especially obvious in such areas as writing dissertations and articles for professional journals. In 2013, Igor Fedyukin, a former Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation and a holder of a Ph.D. from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, complained about the low quality of academic articles and dissertations in terms of the language usage and structure.

He also pointed out that “specialized academic writing centers” should be established at higher educational institutions in order to teach “academic writing in the internationally recognized format” (Interview of Igor Fedyukin, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the RF, 2013).

Unfortunately, Fedyukin has since resigned, so there may be less support in the Russian Ministry of Education at this time to the idea of introducing academic writing courses (Somwung & Siridej, 2000).

7. Concluding statement and practical advice for international students

The above discussion, where English-speaking academics criticise international students’ critical thinking and academic writing skills, seems to contain an implicit claim that international students are inferior to their British counterparts, since critical thinking and academic writing skills are the main indicators of an academic’s intellectual worth. One may contest this conclusion. Indeed, historically, English speaking environment has not been the sole source of academic excellence in the world, and the wisdom that human race has accumulated over thousands of years was formed in different cultures who fostered different reasoning styles. Those people who acquire knowledge and process information in a different way than British academics should not be devalued just because their academic behaviours differ from a particular style accepted in the English speaking academic world. The British academics’ attitudes towards alternative styles of academic work can be compared with Berlioz’s dismissal of oriental music in his *Letters* as “a grotesque noise, analogous to that which children make when at play” (Partch, 1974). Indeed, the 19th century composer lacking specific training could not relate to the non-European, nuanced music due to the variations in intervals.

However, there is a practical need to adapt to the particular ways in which English-speaking academics operate. The skills and competences that are required in academia are educable and there is no reason why an intelligent student from any cultural background would not be able to acquire them. Acquiring new skills and adopting new behavioural patterns enriches one’s life and complicates one’s identity “combining various self-images” (Lukianova & Fell, 2015). It is worth taking into account that research indicates that in the U.S., Germany (and certainly in the UK – (Lukianova & Fell) “[W]omen are increasingly being ascribed more masculine features, such as competence and dominance.” (Interview of Igor Fedyukin, 2013). Thus in a British academic environment modest and reserved behaviour of a female student would not go in her favour.

It is important to acknowledge that new skills cannot be learnt instantly, or quickly. Bergson, analysing the nature of time, states that “[r]eal processes take some real, concrete time to happen, and these periods of time can only be regarded as absolute because they cannot be contracted or stretched” (Fell, 2012).

Mastery of critical thinking and academic writing skills by British students occurs over many years, as their training begins in early childhood. It is not realistic to expect that the same proficiency can be achieved in some short period of time.

The acquisition of the required skills is achievable but may take a number of years, assuming one is already fluent in English. However, steps can be taken to accelerate this process. Below are recommendations that could help.

Reading academic literature in one’s own area of expertise is essential. By doing this, you will familiarise yourself with the specific terminology that your English speaking colleagues use. Their papers will demonstrate ways in which it is customary to access and discuss your subject.

In order to grasp the framework within which British professionals operate, it is advisable to practice psychometric tests that can be accessed here: <http://www.practiceaptitudetests.com/verbal-reasoning-tests/>.

Nowadays taking psychometric tests is an essential procedure for British graduates as these measure their ability to reason adequately in a working environment. First, you can attempt to pass a verbal reasoning test, which will assess your understanding and comprehension skills. When you start you will be presented with a short passage of text and will need to select a True, False or Cannot Say response to each statement. Then you can try a Numerical Reasoning test and a Diagrammatic Reasoning test. If you pass these tests then you can be satisfied that your

reasoning skills are in line with the way of thinking expected from a professional educated to the standards of critical reasoning set by the British education system.

Also, acquainting oneself with the concept of lateral thinking is essential for understanding what is expected from an English speaking academic. The most prestigious universities in Britain specifically test candidates for their competence in lateral thinking before accepting them for general University entry (Edward de Bono, 2009).

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