

Article

Discussion on the concept of ‘Criticality’

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Abstract

This study investigates the concept of ‘criticality’ from two perspectives: an empirical study conducted in beginners’ Japanese language courses at a British University and a theoretical study based on Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking. Skepticism was identified as a fundamental nature of criticality and it can be developed to some extent in the grammar based courses. It is implied that beginners’ language studies can be located under the roof of higher education aiming at criticality development.

Key words: beginners’ language studies, criticality, educational aims, higher education, skepticism

1. Introduction

The general tendency of higher education in the UK nowadays inclines towards practical skills leading to a value as a vocational qualification rather than academic studies. The past model of the single academic discipline cannot be sustained any longer. Universities nowadays offer a wide range of choices and combinations of subjects meeting the requirements of the students. On the other hand, the diversity also hinders a degree programme from having collective aims and there are warnings against the current tendency of focusing on demand-led skills leading to the lack of general aims of education. The one by Barnett (1997) claimed the importance of establishing educational aims in higher education, developing ‘criticality’ for fostering critical citizens with independent thought and action.

What kind of implication does it have for the language studies? The Criticality Project at the University of Southampton in the UK investigated the development

of criticality in a whole foreign language studies degree course, based on the claim by Barnett. They found that academic content subjects such as history and literature and the ‘content’ element of the intermediate and advanced level language courses can make a significant contribution to the development of criticality (Brumfit, Myles, Mitchell, Johnston, & Ford, 2005). Then, questions arise. ‘Is it also possible to develop criticality in the current beginners’ language studies?’ and ‘Where are beginners’ language studies located in higher education, which is aiming at criticality development?’ There is a need to investigate the concept of ‘criticality’ developed in the original theories and how the philosophies can work in the practice. Therefore, this study examines it from two perspectives: a literature review of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking and an empirical study conducted in beginners’ Japanese language courses of a British University. Then, the two approaches are compared in order to highlight the fundamental concept of ‘criticality’ and its potential in language studies.

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2. Criticality in theories

This literature review is based on Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking theories in order to draw the common fundamental concept of 'criticality' and their differences, as well. It mainly focuses on the basic features which are related to language teaching.

2.1. Critical Pedagogy compared with Critical Thinking

The distinct difference between Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking stems from the difference of the concepts of 'pedagogy' and 'skills'.

Critical Pedagogy entails the whole environment and living beyond the classroom, expanding to the outside community as 'We do not *do* critical pedagogy; we *live* it. Critical pedagogy is not a method; it is a way of life' (Jasso & Jasso, 1995 in Wink, 2000, p.119). In addition to this scale and reach, Critical Pedagogy requires continuing dialogue towards understanding, which needs long-term commitment rather than just a 'snap-shot' of teaching. Therefore, it is understood as 'process' and 'duration' which involve a certain length of time. McLaren (1995, p.34) regards pedagogy as 'the process by which teachers and students negotiate and produce meaning'. These characteristics are also emphasised by Freire who says 'education is permanent only in the sense of duration. In this case "permanent" does not mean the permanence of values, but the permanence of the *educational process*' (Freire, 1973, p.155).

On the other hand, Critical Thinking is regarded as a 'skill' as in McPeck, 'to the extent that critical thinking is a skill, it is teachable in much the same way that other skills are teachable, namely through drills, exercises or problem solving in an area' (McPeck, 1981, p.18). It aims to foster critical thinking skills for persuasion and justification of one's claim. It is smaller scale and limited in the learning within the institutions.

However, not all the differences between the two stem from the term 'pedagogy' and 'skills' themselves. First, their domains are different.

The domain of Critical Pedagogy is not only in the classroom but extends towards the outside world. It seeks for the connection between theory and practice and the final step of critical engagement with the outside

community of the classroom is 'action (practice) in the world'. Theory cannot become real theory without action (practice) and vice versa. Giroux argues that, 'knowledge becomes fertilized by practice and practice is guided by knowledge; theory and practice both change their nature once they cease to be separate' (Fromm, 1968, p.173 in Giroux, 1988, p.50). It is also made explicit in the discussion of reading, which is not just understanding literally what is in the texts: 'Reading the world always precedes reading the word' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.35). In Critical Pedagogy, the change is ultimately to be in the world (society). Its education is to foster critical citizens who can actively engage in transformative action for democratic societies. Therefore, it originally has a political mission. Its practice in the classroom leads towards this ultimate goal. It is a collective process based on institutions such as schools and universities and it extends to the outside world,

On the other hand, the domain of Critical Thinking is in an area of study in the classroom. It is usually built upon other existing thoughts and ideas. So, the background knowledge in the particular area is an important prerequisite for critical thinking to take place (Bailin, Case, Coombs & Daniels, 1999a, b). In Critical Thinking, the change is in the body of knowledge. It is more focused on the individual and their development as thinking beings. So it does not have an ultimate goal beyond the institutions.

The difference is found in the comprehensions of knowledge, as well.

Critical Pedagogy forms knowledge in the process of dialogue and inquiry and there is no concept of completed and established knowledge. Both teachers and learners cooperate and share the process of education and generate new knowledge together (Freire, 1998a, b). The one-sided transmission of the 'completed' knowledge from the teachers to the learners, which Freire (1972, 1998a) calls 'banking education', is strongly denied. In Giroux's words, 'Knowledge is not the end of thinking, as Freire claims, but rather the mediating link between students and teachers' (Giroux, 1988, p.63). This concept is embodied by 'dialogue'. It is a continuing process without an end being stimulated by learners' curiosities and involved at a social level.

In contrast, Critical Thinking builds on the completed knowledge and attempts to make use of existing knowledge in the process of reasoning. It aims to support assertion with reasoning skills, so assertion is a kind of end point. Siegel explains it:

When assessing claims, making judgements, evaluating procedures, or contemplating alternative actions, the critical thinker seeks reasons on which to base her assessments, judgements, and actions. (Siegel, 1988, p.33).

It is also stated in Foundation for Critical Thinking (2009) 'A well cultivated thinker (...) gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively, comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards ...' (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2009, p.2). Therefore, in order to establish a justification in one's claim, the person needs to make use of the knowledge in the relevant field (McPeck, 1981).

Basically the two have different formations: the starting point, how they developed and the ultimate goals. Burbles and Berk (1999) point out that the literatures of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking hardly discuss one another, and therefore, the two disciplines have been developed separately and in different directions. Besides these differences discussed in the above, what both Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking share is to be skeptical towards commonly accepted truisms (Burbles & Berk, 1999). 'Skepticism' is to stop and to raise inquiries on what is presented. Dewey defines it as suspended judgement:

The essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment; and the essence of this suspense is inquiry to determine the nature of the problem before proceeding to attempts at its solution. (Dewey, 1997, p.74)

The result of questioning 'does not necessarily entail disagreement with, rejection of or deviation from accepted norms' (McPeck, 1981, p.13). The following quote from Jarvis, Holford & Griffin (2003) also argues:

Non-reflective learning is just the process of accepting what is being presented and memorizing or repeating it, or accepting a situation within

which an experience occurs and learning from it.

In contrast, reflective learning is the process of being critical. This can mean thinking about the situation (and / or what is presented) and then deciding to accept or seek to change the situation.

It can also involve accepting or seeking to change the information which has been presented. (Jarvis *et al.*, 2003, p.70)

In Critical Pedagogy, 'curiosity of the learners' is an important driving force of inquiry. Continuing 'dialogue' is stimulated by inquiry. Teachers can also guide 'dialogue' by inquiry, being facilitators 'to stimulate questions and critical reflection about the questions, asking what is meant by this or that question.' (Freire, 1998a, p.80).

It can be inferred based on the above analysis of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking theories that skepticism is the common concern between the two and to be found as a fundamental concept of 'criticality'.

3. Empirical study

3.1 Beginners' level language studies in UK higher education

In addition to the general trend towards skills in higher education, the change in language teaching methods has also had a large impact on the nature of language studies. Until the late 1960s, when 'single honours degree' was the major style of degree programmes, the grammar translation method was the natural choice for higher education language studies which promoted 'academic' analysis based on original texts (Coleman, 2004). Since the 1970s, the development of communicative language teaching (CLT) quickly and widely attracted the language teaching profession because of existing needs for more practical use of the language at that time (Savignon, 2004).

These changes affected language courses in general, but the most striking feature of beginners' level language classes, distinguishing them from higher levels, is the steady introduction of new grammatical structures in a cumulative process sequenced according to the difficulty and complexity of the structures. In intermediate and advanced levels, the clear cumulative and progressive presentation of linguistic structures fades away and is replaced by the introduction of more

advanced linguistic expression and vocabulary based on topics (Klapper, 2006). With some simplification, the beginners' level focuses on 'usage of linguistic form' while the upper levels focus more on 'content'. Focus on content makes the nature of study closer to an academic discipline, while focus on usage makes it more like the acquisition of practical and instrumental skills. CLT has captured this point and further intensified this instrumental nature of beginners' level language studies.

Besides the necessity of teaching grammar, the limitation of dealing with abstract topics is another characteristic of beginners' language studies, which means that the teaching cannot be based on text, and has instead to emphasize practical skills in oral communicative activities. Intermediate and advanced levels language studies, meanwhile, using texts dealing with a wider range of abstract thought and content, are able to share a common discipline with the academic content subjects such as history and literature and thus retain their identity as 'academic studies'.

What was alerted with reference to all higher education, is particularly evident in beginners' language studies: over-emphasis on skills and the lack of 'content' leading to criticality, which are related to the lack of educational aims. Then, the question arises. 'Is it possible to find the indications of developing 'criticality' in the current beginners' language studies, which incline to instrumental purposes of practical skills?'

3.2 Empirical data

This empirical study was conducted prior to the examination of existing theoretical definitions in the literature on criticality, since the empirical study aimed to purely illustrate the possibility of criticality grounded in the empirical data first without any influence of existing criticality concepts in literature.

The research field of this study was the two stages of lower and upper beginners' levels courses in four-year Japanese degree programmes of a British university. In the courses, four 50 minutes-lessons were offered per week. There were 11 teaching weeks each for two semesters, therefore the total teaching hours for one academic year were 88. The course syllabus was based on textbooks (*Genki*: Japan Times.

Textbook 1: for lower beginners' level and textbook 2: for upper beginners' level), which are grammatical structure based, with the four skills integrated and with communicative activities. 49 research participants took part in the study.

Qualitative data collected from the students—group interviews and post-lesson questionnaires—are the sources for analysis to search for the indications of criticality.

3.2.1. Data 1: student group interview

The group interviews were conducted at the end of the academic year. Six groups ranging from two to five participants were formed, and the duration of interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were semi-structured, although the topics and issues to be covered were specified in advance, the sequence and wording of questions were decided by the interviewer (author) in the course of the interview, following the direction taken spontaneously by the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.271). So fixed probes and question patterns were not used but the interviewer directed the conversation intentionally towards the issues of language (grammatical structures and scripts), culture and what they particularly gained from the lessons, if they did not naturally appear in the discussion.

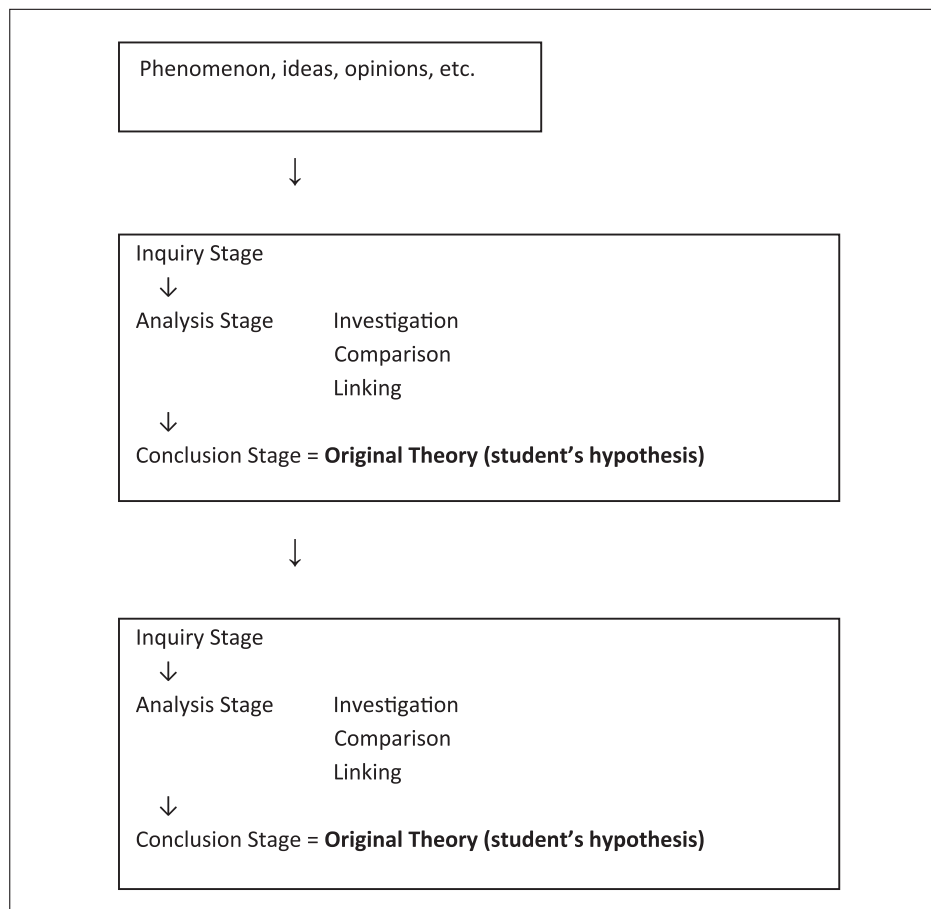
3.2.2. Data 2: post-lesson questionnaire

The written post-lesson questionnaire was conducted after randomly selected lessons. On each occasion, five volunteer participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire. A total of 65 were collected. The questions are open-ended to gain participants' spontaneous and expressive response (Oppenheim, 1992, p.114).

3.3 Data analysis and findings

The validity and reliability of the qualitative data were taken into consideration by ensuring a 'natural setting' (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994) by planning the research to fit into the existing teaching framework. The data were carefully examined following a qualitative data analysis method (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview transcripts were examined as closely as possible to describe the 'reality', following the definition of grounded theory: 'theory (...) derived from

Figure 1 Students' original theory building model from the empirical data



data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The patterns which were most noticeable in the data were focused on first as 'the first categories to emerge from the data generally are those that occur most frequently' (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p.242). What was most salient in the transcripts was the participants' thoughts and their theory building process related to Japanese language learning, and these were formulated and labelled as 'students' original theories (hypotheses)'.

The indications that students are developing their own original theories (students' hypotheses) related to Japanese language learning were found in the empirical data. As Figure 1 shows, a pattern of the students' own theory building model was established from the data analysis.

There are three stages in the process starting with inquiry and ending with conclusion and this sequence can be repeated cyclically. The original theories (students' hypotheses) that students first build up are not an absolute terminal point of the theory building process, as the theories can be challenged by

the encounter with different points of view and other opinions later. The 'theories (hypotheses)' meant in this study are differentiated from personal feelings expressed in terms such as 'interesting' and 'exciting' and from simplified inferences without a rationale. These kinds of feelings and simplified inferences do not demonstrate the process of thinking and how the participants reached their theories, *the analysis stage* (Figure 1). Therefore theories (hypotheses) which did not appear with the analysis stage were not considered in this study.

The two stages in the above Figure 1, *analysis stage* and *conclusion stage*, were found in group interview data. After that, *inquiry stage* was found in post-lesson questionnaire data. The followings are examples from group interview data¹. Original Theory (Students' Hypothesis) A, was drawn from the

¹ Period, comma and the capital at the beginning of the sentence were not used in the transcript because they are not always suitable for spoken discourse. Omissions are expressed by (...), special terms and Japanese words, ' ', and inaudible words, [].

Gothic part in the data below, which is the third stage, *the conclusion stage* of the students' theory building process. The italicized part is the second stage, *the analysis stage* of the theory building process. This part indicates that students try to justify and to explain their theories (hypotheses) in *the conclusion stage*.

Original Theory A: Japanese language has more obvious systematic code-switching in politeness than European languages.

Student 1: it's even just the levels of language – like plain form – 'masu-form' – honorific and polite forms and so on – *I mean obviously that exists in French and English – but it's not like whole new verb ending – it's a sort of like if I'm talking so important – I'll – I don't know – I'll speak in a certain way and [] talk with my friends – I'll be more casual – but it doesn't really change the language structure or anything – even the verbs or anything – wouldn't change those* – whereas in Japanese – it's such a clear difference – it's such a – like if we are using 'keigo' – then it's so clear that wanting to be very very polite – and speaking up to someone – in English or French – it's much more individual thing – how – how you'd be polite to someone is – (...)

Student 1: yeah – I think in English – it's even if – I thought I was speaking English [] to you – you might actually think – that wasn't very respectful – *it's much more er – er – open to interpretation* – (...) – whereas in Japanese if I use 'keigo' – it's clear to me and you that I've been polite and you can't accidentally think that I've not been polite if I'm using 'keigo' – whereas in English – I might think I've been polite and you might interpret in a different way because how vary everything can be – [I] think (Interview 5: 475-529, 485-518 & 522-524 omitted)

The comparative linguistic analysis by Student 1 seen above is about the difference between systems for expressing politeness. The datum shows that the contrastive difference between English and Japanese language in terms of politeness made students engage in this comparative analysis.

Original Theory B: The existing common image of Japanese as a difficult language is not correct.

Student 2: *I think there is a perception that as soon as you tell [] you are studying Japanese – they just think that it's impossible thing to do – but I think we are learning that it's not that hard and I think that speaking and listening parts are a lot easier than reading and writing* (Interview 4: 137-140)

In Original Theory B above, the participant reasoned that the general assumption that Japanese is a difficult language to learn is attributable to people who have never studied Japanese. The generally accepted assumption was questioned and tested against the student's own experience of learning Japanese.

The theories (hypotheses) developed by the students were grouped into three thematic categories: language (6 theories), culture (3) and learning process (7). In this article, the above Original Theory A represents 'language' category. And Original Theory B represents 'learning process' category. These three categories suggest therefore that criticality development appeared in this study is related to *language awareness, cultural awareness and learning process*.

Three different patterns were found in the second stage, *the analysis stage*, of the theory building process before reaching *the conclusion stage*:

- *analysis by investigating (observation, studying, reviewing)*
- *analysis by comparison (categorization, contrasting): Original Theory A*
- *analysis by linking (connecting, relating with other theories): Original Theory B*

The analysis by investigating is simply to observe and to investigate the details of the phenomenon, ideas and opinions, etc. they have spotted in search of the answer to the question which has occurred to them. This investigation is sometimes developed to further analysis of two types. One is *analysis by comparison, categorization and contrasting* between two or more languages or cultures and also reflecting on their own language and culture. *The analysis by comparison* is represented by Original Theory A above. The second one is *analysis by linking*, represented by Original Theory B, in which the students are developing their thoughts through making links with their knowledge from sources other than the learning in the Japanese

language course and with already existing ideas and opinions.

Secondly, another students' data, the post-lesson questionnaire answers, were studied in relation to the above group interview data analysis. The student group interview data revealed the two stages of theory building: *analysis and conclusion*, but how the analysis stage is initiated is not evident from these data. However, there were elements of post-lesson questionnaire answers which indicate that the students are in the middle of inquiry, with expressions such as 'I wonder...' and 'why'. These data show that the students have not yet moved into the analysis stage but are not ignorant of certain phenomena, either. They have spotted something and started inquiring.

The following cases are answers to open-ended questions in the post-lesson questionnaire. The two cases below are answers for Question 3 'Please tell me about your thoughts on Japan during the lesson.' The first one is from a lesson about grammatical structure describing direction and location, with the structure in Japanese being quite different from English. The second one, which shows another student beginning to wonder about the language itself:

I wondered why Japanese language developed in this way, if that was for any particular cultural reason. (Post-lesson Questionnaire: 11-25-Fri-13-1A-N-4/5-Q3)

Wondered why some modern words use katakana rather than hiragana and why they need to distinguish. (Post-lesson Questionnaire: 11-25-Fri-13-1A-N-5/5-Q3)

When the students are in the middle of *the inquiry stage*, they are not conscious of it. This is why *the inquiry stage* emerged without being evidently related to *the analysis or conclusion stages*. At the initial point when students encounter new phenomena and ideas and stop for inquiry, the process of 'being critical' has already started. Even if they decide to agree with the ideas in the end, it is a different action from simply accepting the presented ideas without thinking. The students' original theories (hypotheses) generated are the products of stopping to raise questions about the new knowledge encountered and seeking answers by three types of analysis stages. Therefore it is assumed

that any theory building process has the '*inquiry stage*' as a starting point, even if it is not visible in the data, and *the inquiry stage* is a crucial point for the flow of the theory building by students and can be visualized as the first stepping stone as Figure 1 above shows.

4. Discussion

4.1 Criticality in the empirical study compared with criticality in theories

The literature review on Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking revealed differences in the understanding of 'criticality' between the two. The ultimate goal of Critical Pedagogy is 'action in the world', and education is to foster critical citizens who can actively engage in transformative action for democratic societies. On the other hand, the goal of Critical Thinking is to foster criticality within what is dealt with in the teaching and learning. It aims to foster critical thinking skills for persuasion and justification of one's claims. It does not have an ultimate goal beyond the school or university. Thus, Critical Pedagogy is a collective process based on institutions such as schools and universities and it extends to the outside world, while Critical Thinking is more focused on the individual and their development as thinking begins. Besides these differences, what was inferred from the review is that *skepticism* is the fundamental concept of 'criticality'.

The significance of *the inquiry stage* from the empirical data can be related to the notion of *skepticism* from the literature of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking. What is found from these investigations from both the empirical study and the literature review is that the fundamental nature of 'criticality' is *inquiry and skepticism*.

4.2. Factors contributing to the inquiry towards criticality development

It is inferred from the three thematic categories indicated in the student theories that criticality development is related to *language awareness, cultural awareness and learning process*. The grammar-based lessons revealed the possibility of criticality development as far as these three dimensions are concerned.

Original Theory A in the empirical study shows the students' comparative linguistic analysis between the languages, and it was also evident in many other

data of this study that foreign languages learning as opposed to their mother tongue played an important role in the development of criticality. It is inferred that the encounter with 'otherness', which let them reflect and inquire of the taken-for-granted notions (Byram, 1997), stimulated the students to be engaged in the analysis especially by comparing and contrasting between their own and Japanese language and culture.

Theorizing about the *learning process* appeared in the student data related to the language learning process and strategies, as students engaged in critical reflection on their own language learning experience. For example, 'Original Theory B: The existing common image of Japanese as a difficult language is not correct.' was produced by the students from their own language learning experience.

The Criticality Project at the University of Southampton in the UK found that the 'content' element of the intermediate and advanced level language courses can make a significant contribution to the development of criticality (Brumfit *et al.*, 2005) but raised a question of 'the precise role of the language element itself (Brumfit *et al.*, 2005, p.160)'.

On the other hand, this empirical study shows that factors contributing to the development which are not related to the content element of the course were also important. It is inferred that the language learning at the beginners' level itself, even if it is in the grammar-based framework, has a possibility of developing criticality. Furthermore, two dimensions which are not based on 'content' i.e. reference to Japanese culture, in the course – theorizing about *language awareness* and the *learning process* – have a specific value to the criticality development. This can be an answer to the above question by the Criticality Project.

5. Conclusions

The literature review based on Critical Pedagogy and Critical Thinking theories identified the fundamental concept of criticality as '*skepticism*'. The empirical study found three stages of theory building process of the students: *inquiry, analysis (by investigation, by comparison, and by linking), and conclusion stages*. It also indicated the significance of '*inquiry stage*' as the students' original theories (hypotheses) generated

are the results of stopping to raise questions about the new knowledge encountered and seeking for answers by analysis. From these two perspectives, it can be concluded that the fundamental nature of criticality is defined as *inquiry and skepticism*.

Literary definition of 'critical' in dictionaries represents only a phase of the concepts of 'critical' in theories. Quoting again, '...accepting or seeking to change (Jarvis, *et al.*, 2003, p.70)', and 'does not necessarily entail disagreement with, rejection of or deviation from accepted norms' (McPeck, 1981, p.13), one may decide *to accept and to agree to what was presented*, not only criticizes and rejects it, as a result of being critical. And '*inquiry stage*' from the empirical study does not include the stage of making judgement, either, as it is a 'suspended judgement' (Dewey, 1997, p.74).

From the analysis of the empirical data, the thematic categories of students' theories (hypotheses) present three dimensions of criticality: *language awareness, cultural awareness and learning process*. The current grammar based beginners' level language courses have the potential to develop criticality, as far as these three dimensions are concerned. The study also presented some implications and future agenda: how to organize the curriculum instead of letting criticality develop randomly in the course, how both instrumental and educational aims can be compatible within the beginners' level language courses, and what the responsibilities of the teachers are, etc.

Lastly, the impetus of this study originated in the author's simple inquiries as a Japanese language teacher, such as, 'What is the ultimate goal of the learners other than proficiency?' and 'What is the significance of consolidating communicative simulation patterns at the shops in Japan in the UK?'. Returning to the present condition of the language studies in the UK, without clarifying the ultimate goal of higher education, language studies can easily lose their direction. Considering what the collective educational aims of education - the large roof - should precede the designing of an individual component (subject) under the roof. As Sato (2005) suggests, Japanese language education needs to be discussed in relation to a larger framework, 'education'.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to the students of beginners' Japanese language modules of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for their cooperation during the data collection.