

Critical Thinking: What a Character

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Introduction

This learner-centered task chain is designed to exercise all four language-skills and encourage both critical thinking and self-reflection. Learners brainstorm for language related to personality traits and characteristics, watch a short video segment that involves some type of dilemma and includes characters with various personalities, discuss the dilemma and attractive/unattractive characters, write a short essay about a character they like/dislike, and read and respond to each other's essays. This activity was designed for first-year non-English majors enrolled in a required university EFL course, but could be used in other learning contexts.

Materials

VCR and short video excerpt of movie, television drama, cartoon, etc. (should include a dilemma or controversial topic and interaction among several characters, all having various personalities or characteristics), English or bilingual dictionaries.

Procedure

- Students brainstorm for as many personality traits or characteristics as possible. English or bilingual dictionaries are allowed only after students have listed up all known vocabulary.
- In pairs or small groups, this extended list is classified into positive, negative or neutral traits or characteristics and students think of examples from among their family members, friends and TV or film personalities.
- The instructor writes up the names of characters who appear in the video clip.
- Students watch the video clip and note traits or characteristics for each of the characters.
- Small groups summarize the actions or events in the video clip and compare notes on traits and characteristics. Discussion can then move to personal preferences that should be backed up with examples and clear reasoning.
- Individually, students choose one character who they admire, respect and/or would like to emulate. They then write a short essay explaining what is attractive about that character and which characteristics they would like to develop or acquire and why. Alternatively, they can choose a character they feel has negative traits or characteristics and write about why they wouldn't like to emulate them.
- Following peer review, writing conferences and revision, these essays will be posted around the room for public viewing and collectively bound into a class resource.

Outcomes or Productions

The main outcome will be student prepared essays describing characteristics or personality traits they hope to emulate or avoid. Again, these will be posted around the room for public viewing and eventually bound together as a class resource. At the same time, the discussions should also help students see multiple perspectives and force them to explain their ideas and opinions more fully. This task chain should provide opportunities to practice each of the four language skills and begin thinking more deeply about their own personalities and characteristics as well as those that they would like to emulate. I also hope students will listen carefully to their partners and begin developing public speaking skills such as organization and persuasion.

Evaluation

Evaluation of students will be based mainly on observation notes and the finished essay together with all drafts. Ideally, the instructor can use this activity to build on earlier lessons and follow it up periodically to take advantage of feeding functions.

Caveat

The success of this task chain depends largely on the video clip and how well learners connect with the characters. Instructors should experiment with different clips, some with issues and characters that are familiar to the learners and some that are new or distant. Stronger reactions will most likely encourage deeper reflection, so instructors may want to focus on negative characteristics or require learners to write two essays. Finally, for classrooms that don't have access to a VCR, teachers can collect short stories or Aesop's fables as a springboard for discussions and writing.

Conclusion

This task chain should provide learners with the opportunity to develop not only language skills but also critical thinking and reasoning skills they will need in their other studies and after graduation. The following concepts and strategies were taken into consideration.

Major Concepts

- **Critical Reading and Thinking:** Students will be encouraged to think critically in the group discussions as they give examples and explain their choices and reasoning. The public viewing of essays will also be an opportunity for critical reading and exploring other perspectives.
- **Dialogical Reasoning:** The group discussions and essays will also provide learners with the opportunity to hear and read other ideas and opinions related to personality traits and characteristics.
- **Argument & Persuasion:** Students will need to explain their reasoning both verbally and in writing. The IPSO framework can also be used to help learners think their arguments through.
- **Inquiry and Integration:** Students are encouraged to formulate their own questions about the characters and make connections to people they know (family, friends, TV or film personalities, etc.)

Main Teaching Strategies

- **Mediative Teaching:** Questions and dilemmas raised by the instructor as learners begin their essays are based on a meditative teaching approach. Video clips can also be selected which tease students' curiosity and stimulate inquiry, i.e. controversial story lines or themes and intriguing characters.
- **Collaborative Teaching:** Collaborative groups work both on consolidating ideas gleaned from the video and to stimulate ideas for the writing task. These verbal interactions will also involve both communication and social skills that should help these learners. Peer review of the essays is another example of collaborative teaching.
- **Scaffolding:** The group discussions should also help learners write at a level they would not be able to achieve alone. Scaffolding in this area should influence not only vocabulary and expressions but also ideas, examples of reasoning, etc.
- **Collaborative Apprenticeship Learning:** The previous two examples apply here as well. Peer writing conferences should benefit struggling learners in that their more able peers can point them in the right direction, while more advanced students should benefit from explaining their advice and suggestions in a way that their partners can understand.
- **Inquiry-based teaching:** Again, students will be responsible for forming their own questions and exploring possible answers.
- **Guided Student Generated Questioning:** This strategy is incorporated into the lesson plan through both the group discussions and peer review stages. Students should have some previous training in these questioning techniques but they can also work with a list of questions stems.

