If you, as many teachers, think that critical thinking can only come after all the language-learning basics are mastered, then this interactive session will set that idea on its head.

Unlike babies learning their mother tongue, our learners have complex minds. Lists of definitions and rules fail to engage that complexity, and so most of them are forgotten. Critical thinking learning activities engage more of their brain’s interconnections. As a result, new words and grammatical patterns stick and become more available for productive language.

This webinar will show some ways to weave our grammar and vocabulary objectives into that interconnected web.
Before Richard ever went to university, he sought to educate himself. He traveled through South America and Africa where he learned how to learn languages and cultures from everyone from children to elders. These experiences informed his later teaching in a U.S. prison and three universities, and then in Central Asia, North Africa, and South America.

He was an U.S. Department of State English Language Fellow in Algeria and Morocco, and a Specialist in Bolivia. His workshop topics range from “energizing academic writing” to “harnessing the richness of large, multi-level class diversity.” Whatever the subject, he taps into the renewable resource that is available in all teachers and all students: the capacity for critical thinking.
What our web will reach today:

• Where Critical Thinking fits in English language teaching.
• Critical Thinking for vocabulary: some practical activities.
• Critical Thinking for grammar: some practical activities.
For teachers, hierarchies seem natural as mountains.
Our Very Logical Reasoning

Basic skills before higher level thinking
Question

What level of English skills do learners need **before** they are ready to use critical thinking?
It’s not a hierarchy...

It’s a cycle
Critical Thinking allows us to link the **familiar** with **new knowledge**.

It helps us to reflect and see more clearly **what we know** and **what we need to know**.
We may worry our students aren’t learning and remembering enough vocabulary.

How many words do they need to learn?
Question

*Give your best guess:*

How many words are in the English language?
The *Oxford English Dictionary* has 600,000!
Don’t panic!

No one can or needs to know that many.
5,000 word families is enough to understand 98% of ordinary texts and accurately guess most of the rest.

Nation (1990) and Laufer (1997)
By the way, if you want to estimate the size your own vocabulary, test it on this site:

http://testyourvocab.com

(no, not now)
Math for English Teachers:

5,000 divided by the number of weeks of school = words per week.

Multiply by 2 equals.....?
The question is not:

Can we use critical thinking to teach vocabulary?

The question is:

How can we teach enough vocabulary without it?
Critical Thinking for Vocabulary Learning
Ask yourself:
Which words belong together?

Make two lists of the words that fit together.

Which words are in one of your two lists?

Share them with us.
Same 8 words:

Now make two different lists.

Find a new way that the words fit together.

Which words are in one of your new word lists?
Choose one: Was your first or second try better?

For example:

If you put these words in one list, you had an idea of what brings them together.

The other cards, (giraffe, goat, sheep and cow) share a different idea.
We work with the learners to provide a name for their idea:
- sharp-toothed
- carnivore
- meat eater

Learners express their ideas through pointing, miming, or asking the question “What is the English word for...?”
A different group of learners made a pile of these words.

What brings these word cards together?
You just

✓ Analyzed
✓ Perceived patterns
✓ Engaged in problem solving
✓ Engaged in cooperation and negotiation
✓ Evaluated when asking which was better

Could your beginning students do this activity?
New words need to be used between 6 to 10 times and in different ways. If not, the words don’t go into the learner’s long-term memory.
Concept categories provide a way to order words:

Meat-eaters / Sharp-toothed / Carnivores
contrasted to
Flat-toothed / Grass-eaters / Herbivores / Ruminants

Tame / Domesticated / Farm Animals
contrasted to
Wild / Savage / Dangerous
With critical thinking vocabulary activities, new words are learned in the way our brains are wired.
Having **multiple** correct answers frees students from the fear of having the wrong answer.

Fear of mistakes leaves many students afraid to speak up and prevents them from using the language they are learning.
These activities are **best with small groups**

- Group interaction generates more new ideas and insight
  - Groups ensure discussion
- Group behavior cultivates individual learning strategies

Small groups work great in very large classes if you break activities into small steps with short, clear instructions.
Which word *does not* belong?

CHICKEN / DINOSAUR / BAT

Why?
Birds evolved from dinosaurs!
Which word **does not** belong?

WHALE / DINOSAUR / BAT

Why?
We have only grouped nouns by their definitions,

*but*

these activities can be used to help learners notice:

- Parts of speech
- Number of syllables
- Register (formal/informal/scientific)
- Any dimension of language
I never thought of that!
At first

group activities take a bit more time,
but they are actually very time efficient:

☑ Students soon organize quickly
☑ Less vocabulary is forgotten
☑ Concept categories and learning strategies
  help students become independent learners
Make this sorting and resorting of words a **regular activity**.

**Students will develop the habit**

of looking with their critical minds,

of weaving webs with each new word they encounter

both in your class and in other classes,

both in school or out, whenever they encounter new words

in texts or films or advertisements or songs.

**With activated minds, learners become collaborators**

in their and their peers’ learning.
Critical Thinking for Grammar Learning
Critical thinking uses the human brain’s natural genius for recognizing and creating patterns.
On one side:
The mind notices expected patterns.
Examples:
The **eye** only scans to read common words.
The **ear** only needs to hear a bit of common phrases

    How are you? automatically answers with *Fine, thank you.*

On the other side:
The mind notices anomalies.
Examples:
Unnatural word order
- *The white big dog*
- *She lunch ate.*
Question

What do you feel when your students make grammatical mistakes?
Grammar rules are descriptions of patterns.

When we hear our students break the pattern, we notice.

However, if instead of teaching rules, we teach our students to listen for the pattern, they will start to self-correct.
Question

Do you do dictation activities in your classes?
For what purpose?
Dictogloss

A kind of dictation that surprises learners into discovering new grammatical features.

A dictogloss helps learners realize that grammar is a meaning-making pattern.
Dictogloss for Learning the Simple Present

1. Arrange students in small groups.
2. Ask everyone to carefully listen.
3. Read a short paragraph that uses the simple future.
4. Read it clearly a second time.
5. Ask each group to choose a ‘scribe’.
6. Ask the groups to write the entire paragraph as exactly as they can.
I would slowly and clearly read the following twice:

“I will have a busy day today. First, I’ll eat breakfast at home. Then I’ll walk to school. At school, I will go to class all morning, and then I’ll eat lunch. After lunch, we will have some time outside.”
But, when you walk around the class, you will see this:

“I have a busy day today. First, I eat breakfast at home. Then I walk to school. At school, I go to class all morning, and then I eat lunch. After lunch, we have some time outside.”
There may not be single mistake!

Working together, they avoid most mistakes that they are aware of, but they miss every “will” and “-ll.”

The patterns they know are all they have heard!
The web of the human brain is also a net. It lets everything pass through that it doesn’t think is important.

Here, that net caught the big fish (“eat lunch,” “go to class”) but let little, quiet “will” and even quieter “‘ll” slip through like invisible water.

Our work is to reweave the net so it catches the grammar.
Now, here’s the *really, really* hard part:

We, the knowledgeable teachers, need to say

**NOTHING**

(yet)
I will have a busy day today. First, I’ll eat breakfast at home. Then I’ll walk to school. At school, I will go to class all morning and then I’ll eat lunch. After lunch, we will have some time outside.”
Ask each group to look at your text very carefully.

Compare it with their own work and find every difference between what they had written and what you had spoken.
Groups mark all the differences between what they had written

“I have a busy day today. First, I eat breakfast at home. Then I walk to school. At school, I go to class all morning, and then I eat lunch. After lunch, we have some time outside.”

and what you had spoken.

“I will have a busy day today. First, I’ll eat breakfast at home. Then I’ll walk to school. At school, I will go to class all morning and then I’ll eat lunch. After lunch, we will have some time outside.”
Ask each group to select a spokesperson (someone different from their scribe).

Ask each group to answer two questions:

1. What are the differences between what they wrote and what you spoke?

2. Why do those differences make a difference?

Prepare the spokesperson to present your answers to the class.
When trying to figure out the second question,

“Why do those differences make a difference?”

they might propose different reasons,
but someone will ask the question,
“*When* did these things happen?”

Asking “*when*” is the first understanding of verb tense
and leads to a theory of how tenses are formed.
The groups present their answers to the two questions. Let them hypothesize; let their peers challenge and perfect the hypotheses.
The groups present their answers to the two questions.

Let them hypothesize;

let their peers challenge and perfect the hypotheses.

The teacher will write their ideas on the board
gently helping them formulate a clear conclusion:

“This is how the simple future tense works.”
The groups present their answers to the two questions. Let them hypothesize; let their peers challenge and perfect the hypotheses. The teacher will write their ideas on the board gently helping them formulate a clear conclusion: “This is how the simple future tense works.”

Your learners must feel that this is their discovery.
A dictogloss opens a learner’s eyes.

They notice what they had not seen, wonder about why it is so, and begin to see a pattern in what had been ignored.

The invisible water is now visible and available to make meaning.
What’s the hardest thing about activating critical thinking skills?

**Trusting learners**
as thinkers trying to make sense of the world.

Making sense, making anything, is a creative process,
the peak of Bloom’s taxonomy.
We need to keep quiet while this creation of sense is happening. Letting students think, speak, and make their own mistakes does not mean that we are failing to do our job.
It means that we re-define our job.

Instead of pouring the concrete of knowledge into their heads...
we become architects of learning. Teachers design situations where deep learning can take place.
If we are architects of learning
we can’t spend out precious teaching time
making concrete harden in their heads.

We help them weave the flexible nets
that they can use to catch deeper understanding.
Critical Thinking makes everyone a better learner.

- It helps us notice what we had missed,
- to ask better questions,
- to make better guesses and check them
- to see how things fit together
- and perceive bigger patterns

in the vibrant and ever growing English language.
One Last Question: The Biggest One

Do you feel ready to use critical thinking activities in your class?
Thank you!

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