Critical Thinking and Ethnocultural Diversity in Francophone Schools of a Canadian Province

Francis Bangou
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
145 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5
Canada

Carole Fleuret
Faculty of Education
University of Ottawa
145 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5
Canada

Abstract

The goal of this article is to explore the ways that Canadian teachers in a support program for newcomer students helped these learners to develop critical thinking. In this multiple case study, data were collected from September to December 2012 through focus groups and individual interviews of 43 teachers. The data reveal that enabling newcomer learners to connect with the classroom material and express an informed opinion is the preferred way that a majority of teachers ensured that newcomer students were able to develop critical thinking. As a result, they practiced a diversity of strategies mostly based around questioning, confidence- and autonomy-building, and enhancing the newcomers' capacity for reading and writing. These strategies were informed by the conventions of their discipline, the mandate of the PACS, and the resources that were available to them, as well as the teachers' knowledge regarding newcomer students and critical thinking.

Keywords: newcomer learners, critical thinking, linguistic minority

Introduction

Canada has a global reputation as being one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. In fact, it has been estimated that by 2031, one in three Canadians will be a visible minority (Friesen, 2010). Even today, the newcomer (immigrant) population forms a substantial part of Canada's structure and identity (Ascenuik, 2012). It is thus essential to ensure that every newcomer in Canada develops the necessary knowledge to be successful and to prosper socially, culturally, and economically as citizen of Canada and the world.

It is in this context that the Ministry of Education of one of the largest and most culturally diverse provinces in Canada initiated a support program for newcomer students in 2010. With French as a linguistic minority in this province, this program is intended to facilitate the academic, linguistic, social, and cultural adaptation of French-speaking newcomer learners into the province's French-speaking schools and communities. We will refer to this program as the *Programme d'adaptation communautaire et scolaire* (PACS). This program was designed mostly for students who have recently arrived in Canada from countries where French is the language of school and administration, and who have unconventional, few, or interrupted schooling experiences. More precisely, the mandate of this program is to help these students get acquainted with their new learning environment and develop the competences that are deemed necessary for their transition into the regular school program and for their development of the critical thinking that is essential for their academic and social success.

Considering that the PACS is a new program, it is important to explore how these objectives are being addressed in primary and secondary classrooms.

More precisely, the goal of this article is to explore the ways that teachers in a support program for newcomer students helped these learners to develop critical thinking. This article will first provide a succinct overview of the program, as well as a brief review of the recent literature on critical thinking. Then, after presenting the study and its findings, some recommendations will be formulated.

1. The Programme d'Adaptation Communautaire et Scolaire (PACS)

For both primary and secondary levels, it is recommended by the Ministry of Education that school boards and schools first assess the academic background of each newcomer learner through an entrance interview and a series of diagnostic tests in order to evaluate their level of literacy in Math, French, and Science. Subsequently, individualized programs can be designed based on their strengths, interests, needs, and culture, with the aim of assisting newcomer learners in developing the competencies necessary for full transition into the regular school program.

Although one participating school hosted one class that was attended exclusively by the newcomer students, in most schools, newcomer students in the program were placed in regular classrooms for the majority of the day and then were taken out periodically to work with support teachers who were assigned to the PACS program. These PACS teachers also worked with the regular-stream teachers to ensure that the students in the program were provided with the help they needed. Thus, both the PACS teachers and the regular-stream teachers were closely involved in the daily education of the newcomer students. For the primary levels, the PACS curricula took place within the French, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Sciences and Technology classes. For the secondary levels, the PACS curricula took place within an individualized selection of four varying courses chosen according to the needs and career aspirations of the participating students.

2. Critical Thinking

As one of the most frequently discussed topics in today's educational literature, critical thinking has been conceptualized in various ways (Atkinson, 1997; Nikoopour, Farsani, Nasiri, 2011). Such lack of clarity about the meaning of critical thinking is one of the reasons why Atkinson (1997) argues that critical thinking is more of a social practice than a variety of teachable behaviours. In her seminal work, she argues that we need to be critical about critical thinking, because while everybody seems to know what critical thinking generally means, no one is able to precisely define it—just like a social practice that is "*learned and practiced in an unconscious way*" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 73). She further argues that critical thinking is an exclusive and culturally based concept that tends to marginalize other types of thinking. Moreover, she is not convinced that critical thinking skills are necessarily transferrable from one learning system to another. In the same vein, Vandermensbrugghe (2004) argues that critical thinking can only be understood in context, which is why international students can potentially be disadvantaged, for they are sometimes not familiar with such concepts and do not necessarily possess the cultural background needed to understand context. She further argues that it is important for educators to develop intercultural competencies in order to continue to attract international students.

Recent literature on critical literacy has shown that there is a connection between language learning and the development of critical thinking (Mok, 2009). For instance, in a recent study, Grosser and Mirna (2013) demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between the academic language proficiency and the critical thinking competency of a group of preservice teachers. Indeed, many researchers have argued that good language ability is essential for the development of critical thinking, as language and thinking are intrinsically connected (Bauer, Holmes, and Warren, 2006; Paul, 2004; Mok; 2009). Others have argued that critical thinking is necessary to communicate effectively in the wired twenty-first century world. For instance, Geith (2007) claims that today's ease of communication actually motivates language learners to communicate with others, since they can easily share and express their own ideas. She further argues that integrating critical thinking into language teaching can contribute to a better future for learners, as they develop the ability to articulate their own vision of the future while they are learning the language.

To conclude, critical thinking is a concept that is not easily conceptualized. Despite the discrepancies that exist between definitions of critical thinking, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that the ability to think critically is both necessary in today's world and requires a range of sophisticated thinking abilities, including language ability. In that regard, language learning and the development of critical thinking are intrinsically connected.

While many educational guidelines and curricular reforms have already been installed to contribute to the development of critical thinking, some researchers have argued that there is a need to be more critical about critical thinking. This is particularly the case when working with newcomer students, as they may be coming to the classroom with other ways of thinking that also need to be valued.

3. The Study

This study uses a portion of the data collected from a three-year longitudinal multiple case study. The main goal of the larger study was to assess the implementation of the PACS; therefore, there was a need to understand what affected the experiences of the main actors implicated in that process (e.g., the school board representatives, principals, teachers, and parents involved in the PACS). This paper will focus on the teachers—both those assigned to the program as well as those teaching the regular classes. The results it presents will be associated with the data collected in the third year of the longitudinal study. The multiple case study approach allows for the exploration of multiple variables within complex social contexts, with the objective of providing an in-depth account of the experiences of the various participating actors (i.e., the teachers). All of the participants had their own understanding of their experience, and it is through their own words that their experiences were presented to us.

3.1. Participants

Due to the longitudinal nature of the larger study, the same school boards and schools that had participated in the study during the previous two years were again solicited for their participation in the third year. In the third year, a total of five school boards, representing five elementary schools and three secondary schools, accepted our invitation for continued participation. The principals, teachers, and parents of each participating school were then invited to take part in the study, as were the school board representatives in charge of the PACS dossiers. In the third year of the longitudinal study, 8 support teachers (5 primary, 3 secondary) who were assigned to the PACS program, along with 35 regular-stream teachers (28 primary, 7 secondary), accepted our invitation.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected from September to December 2012. For the regular-stream teachers, one focus group per school was conducted to explore their experiences with the subset of newcomer students in their classrooms. For the PACS support teachers, one round of individual semi-structured interviews per school was conducted to explore their more targeted experiences with the newcomer students they were assigned to assist. The focus groups and the interviews enabled participants to describe and share their experiences in their own words. The questioning for the focus groups and the interviews focused on: (1) the newcomer students' entrance and exit profiles; (2) the competencies acquired by the newcomer students; (3) the indicators of success for the newcomer students; and (4) participants' teaching and assessment practices. This article will present the participants' responses to the following question: How do you ensure that the newcomer students who are part of the program are able to develop critical thinking?

3.3. Data Analysis

Although multiple case studies are context-specific, their trustworthiness can be assured through the use of multiple and varied data, as well as by conducting of intra- and inter-case analyses in association with literature reviews (Yin, 2009). According to Davila and Dominguez (2010), the analysis of the data starts with the design of the project, when the researcher develops a theoretical framework and a set of research questions. For this article, the analysis is mainly based on the larger study's theoretical framework and research question. After collecting the data, the analysis was elaborated to ensure that the complexity and nuances of the participants' lived experiences were preserved (Davila and Dominguez, 2010). Data associated with each case were carefully analyzed to create a list of codes based on the questioning of the focus groups and interviews. Thus, the emerging themes for each participant could be highlighted through intra-case analyses, and common themes could be identified through a wider inter-case analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Primary Schools

4.1.1. Teachers assigned to the program

In terms of how PACS teachers ensured that primary-level newcomer students were able to develop critical thinking, one teacher expressed that she was supporting them by asking questions: "*C'est ça, poser des questions*" [That's it, ask questions]. She further explained, "*Et puis, comme les mathématiques, je veux dire résolution de problèmes; c'est de la pensée critique et c'est du français*" [An then, like Mathematics, I mean problem solving; it's critical thinking and it's French]. This teacher probably meant that solving problems in Mathematics provided learners with the opportunity to both think critically and practice the French language.

Another PACS teacher tried to develop newcomer learners' critical thinking by providing them with opportunities to express their opinions:

> *Vous savez, les élèves que nous avons ici, du programme. Ils sont là, c'est comme si, ils étaient devant un fait accompli. Donc, ils doivent accepter tout ce qu'ils ont parce qu'on vise ici l'intégration. Mais, à un certain moment, c'est d'aller les confronter à certaines situations où ils peuvent donner leur opinion.*
> [You know, students that we have here, from the program. They are here, it's like they were faced with a fait accompli. So they must accept everything they have, because what we for aim here, it's integration. But at a certain point, it's to confront them with situations where they can express an opinion.]

What's more, when newcomer students arrive in the province seeking a sense of belonging, they are often put in situations where they simply have to accept and absorb everything around them. Therefore, for this PACS teacher, it is important to provide them with the space to express their opinion.

Creating a connection with the reality of the students is something that another PACS teacher also highlighted. For this teacher, helping learners to produce written or oral texts that are connected to their lives provides a great opportunity for them to develop their critical thinking:

> *L'écrit, à l'oral. Juste pour savoir c'est quoi ses pensées et vraiment pousser ses pensées critiques. Et puis c'est de faire des liens avec le vécu, peut-être guider l'élève en lui donnant des pistes, des mots-clés, des questions clés pour pouvoir guider son histoire, son écrit, avec les éléments déclencheurs ou l'introduction.*
> [Writing, orally. Just to know what a student's thoughts are and really push his critical thinking. And then it's making the link with the experiences, maybe guiding the student by providing him with tips, keywords, key questions that are able to guide his story, his writing, with the triggers or the introduction.]

Clearly, the development of newcomer students' critical thinking is woven into teaching practices that are associated with the larger goal of the PACS program—to provide learners with the competence necessary to work autonomously within the regular school program. As one PACS teacher noted, this is because "*l'enfant va quand même retourner en salle de classe, puis il doit avoir les mêmes enseignements.*" [the kid will still go back to the classroom, so he has to have to same teaching.]. Indeed, these strategies to develop newcomer learners' critical thinking (e.g., formulating an opinion, writing a personalized text) have the ultimate goal of enabling them to function on their own: "*Puis ensuite, on va laisser l'enfant le faire seul*" [Then, we are going to let the kid do it alone].

As one PACS teacher expressed, the development of such critical thinking abilities is particularly important because many newcomer learners are fairly unfamiliar with the concept of critical thinking when they arrive from their home countries:

> *Ce que j'ai remarqué, c'est que les enfants qui arrivent d'ailleurs – je généralise – souvent, ils connaissent des choses par cœur. Par exemple, ils connaissent leur table de multiplications . . . Ils connaissent comment conjuguer des verbes. Mais . . . où il y a une lacune, c'est vraiment dans notre système d'éducation ici. Il y a par exemple l'occasion d'utiliser ou de viser la pensée critique. Donner une opinion, par exemple. C'est pas des choses que certains enfants . . . ça vient pas de leur culture.*

> [What I've noticed is that kids who are coming from elsewhere—I'm generalizing—often they know things by heart. For instance, they know their multiplication tables . . . They know how to conjugate verbs. But . . . where there is a gap, it's really in our educational system here. There is, for instance, an opportunity to use or to target critical thinking. Give an opinion, for instance. Those are not things that some kids . . . they don't come from their culture.]

However, while it is true that many newcomer students may not be familiar with critical thinking as it conceptualized in these schools, it is also important to note that some teachers are not as familiar with the concept as they should be, either. As one PACS teacher admitted, even some school employees did not know about critical thinking, as it was only recently included in the curriculum for the province's francophone schools. She further explained that training on critical thinking was not as easy for francophone schools to access as compared to Anglophone schools:

> *Carrément, il y a des adultes que je connais qui ne savent pas ça. Ça fait maintenant partie du programme. Il y a trois ans, on a eu au niveau de formation du côté anglais, et aussi par les syndicats. Moi, j'ai assisté à trois conférences au sujet de la pensée critique et de la technologie. Notre conseil n'est pas . . . on fait juste commencer à parler de certains sujets. Ça prend un peu plus de temps du côté francophone.*
> [Simply, there are adults I know who don't know that. It's now part of the program. Three years ago, we had a training session on the anglophone side, and through the union as well. As for me, I attended three conferences on the subject of critical thinking and technology. Our school board is not . . . we're just starting to talk about certain subjects. It takes a little bit more time on the francophone side.]

4.1.2. Regular-stream teachers

Although it is clear that PACS teachers face a particular challenge in terms of helping their newcomer students develop critical thinking in their primary years, regular-stream teachers recognized this challenge in terms of *all* students at this age. As one seventh-grade regular-stream teacher said, it was not easy to help primary learners from any background to develop critical thinking: "*En septième année, on n'est pas rendu là. Non . . . À cet âge-là, c'est assez compliqué*" [In seventh grade, we are not there yet . . . at this age, it's pretty complicated]. Another teacher added that critical thinking is a concept that is difficult to teach at any age: "*Oui, a pensée critique, c'est un concept qui est difficile à développer chez l'être humain en tant que tel*" [For sure, critical thinking is a concept that is difficult to develop in human beings as it is].

Despite this difficulty, the regular-stream teachers often referred to trying to provide newcomer learners with the opportunity to express their opinions by asking them questions or sparking informal discussions. As is the practice for one teacher, "*J'essaie toujours de poser les questions ouvertes pour qu'ils puissent s'exprimer. Pour qu'il y ait communication*" [I always try to ask questions so that they can express themselves, to have communication]. Indeed, asking questions was also a strategy that another teacher used, but this time through reciprocal teaching:

> *L'enseignement réciproque, c'est une stratégie qui se fait à l'oral, mais à partir de lectures. Puis on doit prédire ce qui va se passer. Ensuite de ça, on*
> *doit clarifier les mots qu'on n'a pas compris. On doit questionner les autres amis sur la lecture. Puis ça, oui. Ça, ça développe la pensée critique, parce qu'on doit vraiment aller plus loin, puis chercher au-delà, entre les lignes.*
> [Reciprocal teaching, it's a strategy that we do orally, but from readings. We have to predict what is going to happen. Afterward, we have to clarify the words we did not understand. We have to question others about the reading. Then, yes . . . it develops critical thinking because we really have to go further, then look beyond between the lines.]

Still, even though the regular-stream teachers used questioning, discussions, and reciprocal teaching as strategies for helping their primary students develop critical thinking, it was generally not a major focus with these young learners. As one teacher concluded,

> *Alors, il y a des élèves qu'on leur demande par des questionnements variés, ou par juste de la discussion informelle autour de la classe où ça permet à l'enfant de donner un petit peu son point de vue. Mais la pensée critique, on développe pas ça ici avec les jeunes.*

[So, we ask students various questions, or just engage them in an informal discussion with the class, which enables the child to provide a little bit of his point of view. But critical thinking, we don't develop that here with the young people.]

While the regular-stream teachers were open about the difficulties they came up against when teaching critical thinking to all primary students, they were also able to recognize the particular challenges that young newcomer learners face in terms of developing critical thinking. For instance, one teacher highlighted that the classroom resources used to develop critical thinking were perhaps more culturally relevant to the regular-stream students as compared to the newcomer learners:

> *Les ressources que nous avons ici, c'est fait au Canada. En fait, ça vient de la France. Alors le vécu de ces enfants qui n'ont jamais vécu l'hiver, qui ne connaissent même pas un ours, qui ne connaissent même pas les castors, qui connaissent rien. Alors, allez avoir une pensée critique dans* leur *raisonnement.*
>
> [The resources we have here are made in Canada. Well actually, they are made in France. So the experiences of these kids who have never experienced winter, who do not even know what a bear is, who do not even know what a beaver is, who do not know anything. So, try having critical thinking in their reasoning.]

Another teacher who agreed with her colleague further recommended that culturally relevant resources be provided to newcomer learners, as they know that such an approach would help them better develop their critical thinking: "*On pourrait s'assurer que ces jeunes-là ont des ressources adaptées à leur culture, à leur vécu, pour qu'on puisse exploiter (les ressources). Peut-être, ce côté-là qui est sous-exploité, on le sait*" [We could ensure that these young people have resources that are adapted to their culture, to their experience, so that we are able to take advantage (of the resources). Maybe this angle is under-exploited, we know that].

In terms of critical thinking, the cultural divide seems to be an obstacle faced by regular-stream primary students as well, for they cannot always think beyond their own Canadian reality. As one teacher argued, it would be beneficial for even the regular-stream students to have a broader range of culturally relevant teaching resources:

> *Les ressources représentent la réalité du Canada ou de l'Europe. Et c'est normal que les élèves d'ici discutent de cela, donnent leur opinion. Mais nos élèves qui discutent de cela, ne sont pas nécessairement aussi préparés à débattre sur des faits qui sont propres aux autres groupes*
>
> [The resources represent the reality of Canada or Europe. And it's normal that students from here talk about that, give their opinion. But our students who talk about that are not necessarily prepared to debate using facts that are distinctive of the other groups.]

As described by the regular-stream group of primary teachers, developing critical thinking in students at this age is not a major priority. For these teachers, supporting any young learner in developing critical thinking is not an easy task, regardless of their cultural background. However, they see this task as being especially difficult with newcomer students, in part because classroom resources are generally not culturally relevant for these learners.

To summarize, for primary-level PACS teachers and regular-stream teachers alike, helping young newcomer learners to develop critical thinking was mainly approached by enabling critical discussions and the expression of opinions. Both groups of teachers also cited the importance of focusing on topics that were culturally and academically relevant to newcomer students. However, some teachers expressed that this was not an easy task, either because they didn't feel sufficiently trained or because they had concerns that their classroom resources were not culturally relevant.

4.2. Secondary Schools

4.2.1. Teachers Assigned to the PACS program

The concern that newcomer students were not necessarily familiar with the concept of critical thinking when they arrived in Canada, expressed above by one primary PACS teacher, was also expressed by a PACS teacher at the secondary level. In this teacher's experience, it was not always easy to work with newcomers on higher-level thinking abilities like critical thinking, since these abilities were not necessarily addressed in their countries of origin:

> *On trouve que c'est une question qui est assez difficile, je crois . . . Peut-être dans le pays d'origine de la plupart de ces élèves, on n'adresse pas vraiment les habilités supérieures de la pensée.*

> [We think it's a pretty difficult question, I believe . . . Maybe in the country of origin of most of these students, the higher abilities of thought are not addressed.]

Moreover, this secondary-level PACS teacher believed it was difficult for newcomer learners to provide a rationale for their opinions. For this reason, she tried to ensure that these students felt comfortable expressing their opinions, to "*démontrer que chaque personne a droit à une opinion*" [show that each person is entitled to an opinion]. She also encouraged them to explain the reasoning behind their thinking as much as possible:

> *On commence facilement. D'habitude, c'est oui et non. Oui, j'aime. Non, je n'aime pas. C'est très difficile de dire pourquoi, donc, c'est beaucoup de modelage. Et dans les discussions, on encourage les élèves de dire pourquoi. On pose toujours la question : «Pourquoi, pourquoi, pourquoi?» Ou : «Si tu étais à cette . . . qu'est-ce que tu ferais?»*
> [We start easily. Usually, it's yes or no. Yes, I like. No, I don't like. It's very difficult to say why, so it's a lot of modeling. And in the discussions, we encourage students to say why. We always ask the question, "Why, why, why?" or "If you were at this . . . what would you do?"]

In addition to discussing their opinions, secondary PACS teachers focused on developing their newcomer students' critical thinking in terms of texts. One teacher explained that it was important to help learners analyze an author's perspective:

> *Alors, la pensée critique, c'est-à-dire justement qu'ils puissent analyser certains textes dans le sens où ils puissent justement se rendre compte que c'est juste une perspective particulière, vraiment comprendre qu'elle est la posture de l'auteur et voir qu'il y a d'autres postures aussi, et faire une analyse, je dirais, informer par rapport à cette posture.*
> [So, critical thinking, it's actually that they are able to analyze the meaning of certain texts in the sense that they are actually realizing that it's just one particular perspective, to really understand what the author's position is and see that there are other positions too, and make an analysis, I would say, informed in relation to this position.]

This PACS teacher also acknowledged that developing critical thinking about texts with newcomer learners was not an easy task, however, as many of these students had difficulties with basic reading and felt easily discouraged because of it:

> *Ils ne vont pas lire le texte, parce qu'ils sont d'avance découragés, et c'est très difficile d'aborder une phrase, deux phases. Il y a ce déficit d'attention qui est là. Alors résultat, c'est qu'ils sont pas capables d'analyser et de répondre aux questions. Donc, à ce moment-là, la pensée critique, ça pose un problème justement à ce niveau.*
> [They are not going to read the text because they are already discouraged, and it's very difficult for them to address one sentence, two sentences. There is an attention deficit there. So, as a result, it's that they are not capable of analyzing and answering the questions. So actually, at this moment, critical thinking is a problem at this level.]

Indeed, one secondary PACS teacher made the connection between this lack of higher-level reading comprehension and the newcomer learners' inability to develop critical thinking. For this teacher, it was important for newcomer students to read at a sufficient level in order to be able to develop critical thinking, because understanding basic sentences was the foundation for any thought:

> *Je lis avec eux des fois. Des fois je ne lis pas avec eux . . . ou on fait du travail de conjugaison de grammaire. Je leur demande toujours de me faire des phrases, des phrases complètes . . . C'est la base. C'est la base de notre pensée écrite . . . mais même les réguliers les élèves de n'importe où, ils ne savent pas écrire. Puis c'est important qu'à travers ce qu'ils écrivent ils structurent leur pensée également*
> [I read with them sometimes. Sometimes I don't read with them and we do work on conjugation, grammar. I always ask them to make sentences, complete sentences . . . It's the foundation. It's the foundation of our written thought . . . But even the regulars, students from anywhere, they do not know how to write. Then it's important, because through what they write, they structure their thoughts.]

As shown by this teacher, it is not just the newcomer students who attend the PACS program who experience challenges with critical thinking about texts. These secondary PACS teachers, however, do tailor their teaching practices to the particular challenges associated with newcomer learners' development of critical thinking—namely, ensuring that they feel comfortable exploring the reasoning behind their thoughts and generally enhancing their reading comprehension. Indeed, it seems that for a majority of these teachers, encouraging their newcomer students to think critically means helping them to formulate higher-level thoughts in writing and better articulate their opinions orally.

4.2.2. Regular-stream teachers

In terms of the development of critical thinking, the teaching practices of the regular-stream secondary teachers seemed to be deeply connected to the disciplines that are taught. For instance, for one Science teacher, asking newcomer students to justify their answers contributed to their development of critical thinking:

> *Quand on dit quelque chose, surtout en sciences, on doit l'appuyer par une théorie ou des outils scientifiques qu'on n'a pas à portée de mains . . . par exemple, des tableaux, etc. Donc, leur apprendre à justifier tout ce qu'ils disent. On raconte pas n'importe quoi . . . C'est des sciences exactes. Tout ce qu'on dit être justifié dans le cadre d'une théorie, dans le cadre d'une méthode, dans le cadre d'une démarche.*
>
> [When we say something, particularly in the Sciences, one needs to support it with a theory or with scientific tools within reach . . . for instance tables, etc. So to teach them to justify everything they say. We do not say whatever . . . These are exact sciences. Everything we say must be justified within the framework of a theory, within the framework of a method, within the framework of an approach.]

For a regular-stream English as a Second Language teacher, developing critical thinking was done mostly through questioning. Notably, like her PACS colleagues, this regular-stream secondary teacher believed that newcomer students had particular difficulty communicating in writing, and also that they lacked the confidence to express their opinions:

> *Pour moi, sur le plan de l'anglais, langue seconde, c'est surtout par le questionnement qu'elles essaient de développer la pensée critique, parce qu'ils n'ont pas les habiletés pour bien communiquer à l'écrit.*
>
> [As for me, in English as a Second Language, it's mostly through questioning that they try to develop critical thinking, because they do not have the abilities to communicate in writing.]

Asking questions was also a strategy used by another regular-stream secondary teacher, but this time it was used in the context of asking the newcomer learners to analyze a text. In fact, in this classroom, the newcomer students did "*beaucoup d'analyse de textes. Ils lisent souvent. On est toujours en train de lire des textes et ils doivent répondre à des questions*" [a lot of text analyses. They often read. We are always reading some texts. Then, eventually, it's their turn to take the text, then to answer a question]. What's more, just like for the teachers who were assigned to the PACS program, it seemed important for the regular-stream teachers to enable the newcomer learners to express opinions and make connections with the learners' lives. As this teacher explained, "*Mais on veut toujours aussi qu'ils fassent le lien entre ce qu'on a lu, puis leur vie personnelle. Puis c'est là où la pensée critique, ça commence à se developer*" [But we always want them to make the connection between what we read and their personal lives. Then this is when critical thinking starts to develop].

For another regular-stream secondary teacher, giving the newcomer learners some autonomy in their education also helped them to develop critical thinking. Specifically, she gave the newcomer learners some choice in terms of the activities they completed:

> *Donc, c'est à eux de décider du sujet pour leur projet. Et même à ça, on voit que la créativité se développe et ils trouvent différents moyens de présenter leur sujet sans qu'on ait à leur dire étape par étape qu'est-ce qu'ils doivent faire. C'est moins une recherche, et c'est plus un développement de l'habileté de la recherche, d'habileté de la pensée et de la créativité.*
>
> [So, it's their turn to decide on the subject for their project. And even for that, we can see that creativity develops, and they find different ways to present their subject without us telling them step by step what they have to do. It's less a research project, and more the development of the ability to research, the ability to think and be creative.]

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It seems apparent that these regular-stream secondary teachers' practices were affected by the conventions of their disciplines. Like their PACS colleagues, these regular-stream teachers strived to connect the classroom content with the newcomers' realities. What's more, they also seemed to consider the newcomer learners' profiles, their interests, and their need for autonomy in terms of enabling them to develop critical thinking.

5. Discussion

It is widely accepted in Western educational institutions that critical thinking is fundamental to the development, participation, and freedom of citizens in today's democratic society. The aim of this article was to explore the ways that teachers in a support program for newcomer students helped these learners to develop critical thinking. The data reveal that enabling newcomer learners to connect with the classroom material and express an informed opinion is the preferred way that a majority of teachers ensured that newcomer students were able to develop critical thinking. However, a majority of teachers also believed that this was not an easy process. As a result, they practiced a diversity of strategies mostly based around questioning, confidence- and autonomy-building, and enhancing the newcomers' capacity for reading and writing. These strategies were informed by the conventions of their discipline, the mandate of the PACS, and the resources that were available to them, as well as the teachers' knowledge regarding newcomer students and critical thinking.

Considering that the ultimate goal of the PACS was to facilitate the integration of newcomer learners into mainstream classrooms, most of the practices associated with the development of critical thinking were woven into activities that familiarized learners not just with the conventions of communication, but also with the conventions of a discipline or of a school. For instance, one Science teacher argued that learning to justify an answer in Science class contributed to the development of critical thinking, while another teacher believed that giving students a degree of autonomy encouraged creativity and higher-level thought. Such findings enable us to understand how critical thinking is discipline-specific and can also transcend disciplinary boundaries, as teachers of any discipline can potentially contribute to its development.

The data also showed that the classroom resources available to teachers could potentially affect their capacity to help newcomer learners develop critical thinking. For instance, it was revealed that some classrooms did not always have access the culturally relevant resources necessary to connect with newcomer learners and trigger their desire to express their opinions. Indeed, French-language teaching materials that are culturally relevant to a range of learners can be difficult to find, especially in contexts where French speakers are a minority. Similarly, some teachers emphasized that training was often more difficult to access in francophone schools as opposed to anglophone schools, mainly because there were fewer francophone teachers and they tended to be geographically dispersed.

It appears that most participating teachers formed a working knowledge of the development of newcomers' critical thinking based on their experiences with newcomer learners. This knowledge, combined with their understanding of critical thinking in general, guided the decisions they made in their classrooms. For instance, a number of primary teachers felt that critical thinking was not really a priority for younger learners, which suggested that they believed that critical thinking was relevant only to older learners. Other teachers felt that it was generally more difficult for newcomer learners to engage in critical thinking, as this way of thinking was not promoted in their countries of origin. Within an intercultural working environment such as this one it is crucial for teachers to break away from stereotypical representations of learners (Bangou and Bourdet, 2010). Some teachers admitted that they did not necessarily feel trained to help learners develop critical thinking. However, sufficient teacher training is necessary to facilitate the successful development of critical thinking in newcomer learners. While part of this training could advance teachers' knowledge about the needs of newcomer learners in general, the emphasis could also be placed on the best strategies to teach within an intercultural environment. For instance, such training could be an opportunity for teachers to become aware of their cultural biases and convictions associated with teaching critical thinking to newcomer learners. In this way, such preconceived ideas and convictions could be deconstructed and teachers' teaching practices associated with the development of learners' critical thinking could also be enhanced.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we were able to draw a portrait of the teaching practices associated with the development of critical thinking in newcomer students within a specific program. We were also able to highlight the factors that affected these practices through the words of the teachers themselves. Some of the findings echoed what has been presented in the literature on critical thinking while simultaneously opening the door for further research.

For instance, it would be beneficial to conduct further research on the training of both novice and seasoned teachers regarding critical thinking and newcomer learners. Moreover, more research is needed regarding the experiences of teachers and learners with critical thinking in contexts where the language of schooling is a minority language.

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