

Towards Critical Thinking Skills in Higher Education

The Case of English Courses at Swedish Universities

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Abstract

The present thesis investigates higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and critical thinking in English courses at Swedish universities. The rationale for investigating this topic is based on policy documents which state that students' development of these skills is a goal in both Swedish and international higher education. Previous research indicates a connection between critical thinking and L2 proficiency, which points to a potential importance of HOTS and critical thinking in English courses. Hence, the present study seeks to explore students' opportunities to develop thinking skills in English intermediate courses in Swedish universities.

This topic was investigated through three studies. The first study was inspired by the theory of constructive alignment and analyzed assessment tasks and intended learning outcomes in English courses. The second study investigated English teachers' views on and experiences of critical thinking and HOTS through interviews and a questionnaire. The data from both the first and the second studies was analyzed with the distinction between linguistics and literature in English courses in mind. Finally, the third study explored students' development of both critical thinking and EFL proficiency in English intermediate courses. Critical thinking was measured through the California Critical Thinking Skills Test and EFL proficiency was measured through a vocabulary size test.

The results show that critical thinking and HOTS were present in both intended learning outcomes and assessment tasks in English intermediate courses. However, there was a higher frequency of HOTS learning outcomes and assessment tasks in literature modules than in linguistics modules. While few differences between how teachers in linguistics and literature experienced and understood HOTS and critical thinking were detected, literature was often talked about as being more suitable for developing these skills. Although the teachers did not express a unified understanding of these concepts, they seemed to be aware of the importance of developing students' HOTS and critical thinking.

The study revealed that students did not develop critical thinking nor EFL proficiency, or that these were correlated. The results are discussed in relation to the short time frame of the study and students' already high levels of critical thinking and EFL proficiency.