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Analysis of English Language Test Tasks for the Fifth and Sixth Graders in Serbia according to Bloom's Taxonomy

Extended summary

Critical thinking (CT) is an important academic and life skill. Its development begins early and it needs to be cultivated both during and after a person's formal education. In school, CT can be taught within the domain of different subjects or as a separate skill. Many educational systems, including Serbian, list CT as an educational priority. However, teachers seem to be neither well acquainted with the concept of CT, nor with the possible ways of teaching it.

Within the domain of the English language, CT presupposes free and creative use of the language, which is the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching and learning. The learning of a foreign language is organized in a stepwise fashion which coincides with the development of thinking skills. For instance, foreign language learning begins with memorizing isolated words, phrases, and rules (level of knowledge). Based on that knowledge, the student is able to comprehend a spoken, and then a written message (level of understanding). Subsequently, the learner becomes capable of independently using some language knowledge he/she has learned over time (level of application). With the gradual acquisition of knowledge, the student becomes aware of the differences among linguistic options and their functions in different contexts (level of analysis) and he/she gains competence in producing a self-created utterance (level of synthesis), as well as of evaluating the linguistic content against external or internal criteria (level of evaluation). Based on this trajectory, it is evident that the development of thinking skills coincides with the

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phases in the process of learning a foreign language, which indicates CT can be taught as a content-specific skill. In order to teach this skill successfully, it is necessary to assess students' progress from time to time.

This paper examines whether English language teachers in Serbia develop CT as a content-specific skill and whether they monitor its progress. More precisely, the paper aims to investigate whether primary school English language teachers in Serbia include tasks at different levels of cognitive complexity in their self-made progress tests in order to monitor the development of their students' thinking skills.

The authors gathered 28 English language progress tests (14 for the fifth and 14 for the sixth grade) constructed by 14 English language teachers. The authors analyzed the tasks contained in the tests (N = 308) and classified each one according to the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. When performing the task analysis, the authors followed the descriptions of the levels of the taxonomy, but they also took into consideration the age of the students for whom the tests had been designed, the context of the tasks, task instructions, and the prescribed learning objectives for the two analyzed grades.

The analysis reveals that the tasks for the sixth grade are somewhat more demanding than those for the fifth grade. However, most tasks for both grades do not operate at those levels that comprise CT, which implicates that students do not get an opportunity to use the foreign language freely and creatively despite the fact that, at the moment the research was carried out, they had already been learning it for several years (formally, from the first grade; informally, for even longer). Of 66 tasks for each of the two grades, there was found only one task for the fifth grade and five tasks for the sixth grade that require complex cognitive processing, i.e., free and creative language use (fifth grade: level of synthesis, sixth grade: level of analysis (3 tasks), level of synthesis (1 task), and level of evaluation (1 task)). Students are mostly required to recognize and reproduce acquired knowledge. The tasks for the fifth grade are predominantly at the lowest level of cognitive capacity (29 tasks), whereas the tasks for the subsequent grade are at the level of understanding (23 tasks) and application (21 tasks). Such results indicate that teachers do not assess students' communicative competence, which is required in cognitively complex tasks. Also, the results are not aligned with the Rulebook on the Syllabus for the Second Cycle of Primary School Education and Curriculum for the Fifth Grade of Primary School or the same rulebook for the subsequent grade, as the documents do not prescribe declarative knowledge, but rather the acquisition of both receptive and productive knowledge, as well as the ability to communicate orally and in written form.

The gathered findings necessitate that English language teachers in Serbia become more familiar with both the concept of CT and effective ways of teaching and assessing this skill, which would very likely result in students' improved cognitive thinking skills and language competence.

Keywords: critical thinking, Bloom's Taxonomy, fifth and sixth grade, testing, English language.

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