

## Critical Thinking Skills in an EFL Art Task at a Self-Access Learning Center

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to explore some ideas of implementing critical thinking skills in an EFL task using works of art as its content. First, the setting of where this task is currently used will be introduced. Then background information about critical thinking skills, thinking routines, and the importance of studying art will provide reasoning for the use of the task. Next, the method and detailed breakdown of the task itself will help build a deeper understanding. And finally, a small discussion section will focus on some additional thoughts and observations of using the art task in different classroom scenarios. It is my hope that this task can be beneficial in a variety of EFL learning in a variety of situations.*

*Keywords:* EFL, Language Centers, Critical Thinking, Art, Tasks, Thinking Routines

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Back Story**

In universities, and now even high schools, throughout Japan, there have been a growing number of self-access learning centers. These centers provide an additional learning space for students to come in on their own time and participate in a learning activity, be it an event, conversation with an exchange student, or a place to study alone. Each university has their own system, for further information the JASAL website <https://jasalorg.com/> provides a number of links to universities and their learning philosophies. However, for the purpose of this essay, I will focus on Konan University's Language Loft, also known as the "Loft."

The Loft is "an innovative self-access center that encourages interactive face-to-face communication and embraces student diversity. It serves to nurture first

curiosity and later a deeper interest in cultural differences, varied ways of thinking, and global perspectives for all students at the university.” (Yamamoto, 2017) The Loft also provides students with an additional learning atmosphere outside of the classroom, where students can come to the Loft and interact with professors, exchange students, and older university students with high language skills. As an incentive to come to the Loft, students taking classes in the Institute of Culture and Language are required to bring a stamp card. Each student’s completion of their card counts towards a small percentage of their spring and fall semester credits.

There are three main activities students can choose to do in the Loft. They are a Visit, Task, and Event. If a student chooses a Task activity, they have a variety of options as well. They can listen to a song, watch a movie, or read an article and write their thoughts on a handout. Starting in the summer of 2017, students were also able to choose to do an art task called Art in Loft. Art in Loft is a task where students look at a famous work of art and write their ideas on a handout. Once completed, students must reproduce their answers from 12 questions asked by a staff member, assistant, teacher or professor. In the next section there will be some background information that supports the importance and significance of a task like Art in Lot in improving critical thinking skills.

## ACADEMIC SUPPORT

### **Thinking and Learning**

Lessons in EFL classrooms can often be places of “tell and practice.” An instructor tells the students the target and meaning and then has them practice that vocabulary or grammar. However, in self-access learning centers like Loft, there is a desire to distance itself from this classroom mentality and act as a place of not just recalling the language from lessons, but actually “doing” in that language. This can be quite a leap for some students, so there needs to be a careful way to build a bridge to take students from the classroom setting into the real world. One way to do so is to shift the concept of learning language in these centers from “learning by recalling the meaning or structures” to “learning by building an understanding of how they are used correctly.”

To achieve this; there needs to be an awareness that building this understanding of how to do something is the result of multiple opportunities of different types

thinking over a period of time and by doing so the learning of new language concepts and usage continually evolves throughout this thinking process. Understanding new words or grammar isn't something that happens before observations, training, analyzing, reflecting, but is the outcome of all of these processes done over and over again. Nation (2001) proposes that "we should expect knowledge of a word to be gradually built up as a result of numerous spaced meetings with the word." To help develop this understanding of how to use a language, there is a need for authentic intellectual activity. That means using English to solve problems, make decisions, and perform other complex activities. These situations are what makes a task relevant to students' needs and increases their motivation to learn more by giving them a sense of time spent wisely (Dörnyei, 2001).

As EFL educators we need to recognize that not only we should we be extremely knowledgeable about the language and provide correct feedback when necessary, but we need to carefully create opportunities for students to use language in multiple ways so they can engage, struggle, question, and ultimately build a deeper understanding of the new language they are exploring. By choosing different ways of thinking throughout this process of understanding a new language, educators can create tasks that will better foster students' learning more efficiently. To describe different ways of thinking, there is the term "*thinking moves*" as used by Ritchhart, Church, and Morrison (2011) in the book *Making Thinking Visible*.

By using these thinking moves as a base we can construct tasks for our students to be creative, intelligent, and productive in their use of the new language they are learning. These researchers have identified these thinking moves.

1. Observing and Describing

- This thinking move helps us to be able to identify and go into detail about the features of things we perceive so we can analyze them better.

2. Building Explanations and Interpretations

- This move helps to take our observations and begin to form possible ideas of what we are encountering.

### 3. Reasoning with Evidence

- When building an explanation we rely on evidence or facts to support our position. By doing so our positions become stronger and more accurate.

### 4. Making Connections

- When we encounter anything new, we draw on our past experiences. We use this past knowledge to help make sense of what we are encountering.

### 5. Different Viewpoints and Perspectives

- We need to consider what the other sides or stories are of an event, concept, or situation. Awareness of different perspectives gives us a more robust understanding.

### 6. Capturing the Heart and Forming Conclusions

- We want to know what is at the core or center of what we are encountering. We want to make sure we haven't lost the big picture.

### 7. Wondering and Asking Questions

- Asking questions is an ongoing part in developing our understanding. When questions are asked, they are used to help solidify the one's understanding.

### 8. Uncovering Complexity

- We want students to identify the complexity in events, stories, or ideas. To do so we need to dig deeper and get more detail or input. By doing so, our understanding becomes richer and better.

This collection of thinking moves is a good place to start when creating materials and tasks. There are different and more complex ways to think about issues or problems, but those tend to be made up of multiple thinking moves. Later in this paper, in the description of questions used in the Art in Loft task, I'll refer to each of these thinking moves as support for choosing the questions used in the handout. The goal is to provide a basic avenue for students to express their ideas of images they encounter. These images can be from anywhere and anytime, but to start images of famous paintings were chosen. Studying art is more important now than ever and here are some reasons why.

## Why Art?

We live in a world that is changing quickly, where anything that can be automated will be. Employers will look for individuals that can be creative in solving difficult problems. One of the tools needed to become creative is to have creative knowledge. This skill set is “obtained by exposure to a wide variety of other creative humans” (Anderson, 2016). If one cannot find such human beings, the next best thing is to study the processes and results of creative people. There is a vast amount of information about art history we can use to build our creative knowledge.

We also live in a visual world. Whether it is professional or personal, commercial or political, people encounter images everyday on screens at home on TV or outside in their hands on a smartphone. Manmade visuals are everywhere. And with more and more people using social media applications, people are encountering images at a higher rate than ever. More so than ever in most professional and social circles, there is a need to be able to observe these images, analyze them, inquire their authenticity, and reach conclusion based on reason. People lacking in these skills can have powerful effects that can change one’s social or cultural perspectives. It is important to understand how to encounter and breakdown these images, and one way to achieve these skills is to study art history. Below is a table of goals one hopes to achieve while studying art in academic settings.

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**Table 1.0 Aims for Studying Art History**

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- to understand our visual environment
  - to interpret our own culture, as well as other cultures and the value systems of both the past and the present
  - to appreciate diverse art forms
  - to enhance cross-cultural communication
  - to develop global perspectives in the contemporary world
  - to reveal the processes of human creativity
  - to play an essential role in aesthetic education
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**Fine Arts Department. University of Hong Kong. (2011)**

When students have started building their knowledge of art, or creative knowledge, they can better prepared to implement other skills when encountering

images seen in their academic, professional, and social lives. These skills are necessary in the ever-changing visual world (Table 1.1). Students can use these skills to help reach correct conclusions on all types of media they observe in print, on screen, or and the world around them.

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**Table 1.1 Skills Gained from Studying Art History**

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- critical thinking and creative thinking
  - analytical writing
  - visual analysis and interpretation
  - cross-cultural communication
  - historical or archival research methods
  - self-directed learning
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Fine Arts Department. University of Hong Kong. (2011)

In an effort to create a new EFL task activity for the Loft self-access learning center, the “Art in Loft” task was designed. To help build this task, a number of steps were taken to ensure its success. In the next section there will be an explanation of the art that was chosen, the decisions made to construct the handout, and the method applied to get students to build a better understand of learning EFL.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD



### The Art

There are two types of materials used for the task, one is the art sheet and the

other is the handout with spaces to write observations and ideas. The art sheet is a laminated sheet with an image of the painting on the front. There are 25 art sheets to choose from that range from the early Renaissance to Contemporary Art of the 2000s. The paintings were chosen based on its significance to art movements throughout the centuries and accessibility to view the painting if one decides to travel abroad someday to see it “live.” Student language levels ranging from lower TOEIC scores to higher ones were considered, so graphic, sexual, and other complex themes weren’t selected to avoid confusing or embarrassing situations. In addition to the image on the front, there are details of the work of art, similar to a placard one would find in a museum, and a brief history of the artist and art itself. On the back of the laminated sheet are two example paintings with sentences to match each question from the handout.

### **The Handout**

The handout and its selection of questions is the most important part of the task. On it there is a brief explanation of the method and 12 questions with space for students to write their ideas. The questions are divided into four stages with a set of three questions for each stage. These sets of questions are known as thinking routines. Thinking routines are simple tools, used over and over again that support specific thinking moves mentioned earlier. They are structures through which students collectively as well as individually initiate, explore, discuss, document and manage their thinking. And they are patterns of behavior adopted to help use the mind to form thoughts, reason, or reflect on what students encounter while learning. From here there will be a further detailed explanation of each thinking routine, noting where the routine is in the task and the thinking move associated with each question.

The first thinking routine is Colors-Objects-Themes. The purpose of this stage is for students to begin to collect information and to start exploring their ideas about what the student is looking at. These questions are based on the 1. Observing and Describing thinking move for the first two questions and the 2. Building Explanations and Interpretations thinking move for the final question.

The second thinking routine is Focus-Think-Wonder. The purpose of this stage is to take a second look at the art and pick out something that catches the student’s attention. These questions are based on the 1. Observing and Describing thinking

move for the first question, the 3. Reasoning with Evidence thinking move for the second question, and 7. Wondering and Asking Questions thinking move for the final question.

The third thinking routine is Feelings-Make-Like. The purpose of this stage is to dig deeper into the art and discover what it may mean to the student. These questions are based on the 8. Uncovering Complexity thinking move for the first question, the 3. Reasoning with Evidence for the second question, and the 7. Different Viewpoints and Perspectives thinking move for the final question.

**Art in Loft**

Task No. \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Checked by: \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 1.** Look at the image. Take your time. **Step 2.** Write **ONE** sentence for each question.

**Step 3.** Practice saying your answers. **Step 4.** Do a Q&A. Don't look at your paper!

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**Colors-Objects-Themes** Use descriptive vocabulary. Colors: bright red, dark green...  
Objects: many kids, fast cars... Themes: love, history, death...

What colors do you see?

What objects do you see?

What themes do you see?

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**Focus-Think-Wonder** Choose one thing/aspect from the image. Describe it. Write an idea or reason for it. Write a new question about your thought.

What part did you focus on?

What do you think about that?

What do you wonder?

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**Feelings-Makes-Like** Write emotions you feel looking at this. Write a reason why you feel this way. Name a famous person that likes this. Because...

What feelings are being expressed?

What makes you say that?

What celebrity would like this? Why?

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**Overall-Remind-Same** Give your final opinion about the image. What else do you think about when you look at this image? They both are have/ide...

Overall, what do you think?

What does it remind you of?

How are they the same?

*By Craig Mertens. Konan University. 2018*

The fourth thinking routine is Overall-Remind-Same. The purpose of this stage is wrap up the task and reflect on the thinking about the art. These questions are based on the 6. Capturing the Heart and Forming Conclusions thinking move for the first question, the 4. Making Connections thinking move for the second question, the 3. Reasoning with Evidence thinking move for the final question.

Again, each question is designed to encourage different ways of thinking. Within each thinking routine and among the stages of the handout there are specific steps to help direct or scaffold a students thinking about the art. This makes it easier for students to express their ideas after writing their ideas. Also, each stage is given a three-word name to help students remember the questions when they return to do the task again with a different painting. Next to each thinking routine name, there is a small description of what the routine is asking for.

## Method

This task is made for university students of all English levels. Students are allowed to use dictionaries or other outside sources as long as their ideas for each



question are original and not copied from other students. There is no single correct answer for each question. There is no time limit for students to finish and they are allowed to ask for help if there is trouble understanding what to do. Students need to complete several steps to successfully finish the task. These steps are written in brief atop the handout for reminders to students and staff. Here is a more detailed explanation of each step.

Students must first tell the staff they plan on doing a task. Next, students will choose a painting that is new to them or one they have not done before for this task. Students are allowed to sit anywhere in the Loft and are given as much time as they like to finish the task. In fact, students are encouraged to take their time, look at the painting, and read the information before writing. Then once they feel comfortable, they should read each question and write one full sentence in the space provided. Students can look at the back of the art sheet for examples for each question. After they have written one sentence for each question, students must practice saying the question and answer to themselves several times. When students have enough confidence, they must bring the art sheet and handout to a professor, teacher, or a Loft staff member to do an oral Q and A. During the Q and A, students are allowed to look at the art sheet, but are not allowed to look at their written sentences.

It is up to the checker's discretion to assess the student's performance. If they feel that it is unsatisfactory, they can instruct the student to practice saying the questions and answers again and come back to try the Q and A later. However, if the checker feels satisfied, they should give appropriate feedback on any vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation errors that the student committed. Once that is completed, the checker will sign their name at the top of the handout, and the task is finished.

### **ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS**

By no means this is the only way to use thinking moves and thinking routines to look at art or to do other tasks. There are plenty of suggestions listed in *Making Thinking Visible*, and I suggest reading this book for more variations of thinking routines and how to implement them in different settings levels of learning. As for this task in particular, it can be adapted as well. For lower level students,

chose one thinking routine. For higher level students, ask for more details in their ideas for each question.

Much like deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2016), thinking routines are quite useful in breaking down bigger tasks into smaller achievable steps. Giving a student an image and ask, "What do you think?" can be a daunting task for a native speaker, let alone an EFL student. The thinking routines in this task gives students the steps to do so, and after several attempts of the tasks with different paintings, their thinking should become "routine." Students won't need to focus so much on the questions, but more so on expressing their ideas and opinions. It may seem boring that the same routines are repeated, but students feel that with each painting a new challenge is before them. One student remarked, "The questions seem easy, but when I think about it. It's hard." This is the challenge students should be doing with their thinking. Students must use different types of vocabulary and draw from different experiences in their past to complete the task. It also helps students build a better understanding of the words and grammar in the questions used, by learning the different types of answers they may produce.

For some students doing a task like this with thinking routines is a new experience for them. When asked for feedback on the task, one staff member said, "At first, students struggle to answer the questions." Perhaps in most of their EFL careers there is always one answer to each question, but for this task multiple answers can be accepted. This can cause some relief but also some stress. This is a good thing. The same staff member concurred "but when I check their answers I'm impressed with their unique ideas about art." Students need to feel a little bit out of their comfort zone to have a real impact in learning something new. And finally for the teachers and staff, it is easier to give feedback to students for this art task. The thinking routines and stages are always the same, so it cuts down on time and allows checkers to be more efficient giving feedback. Checkers can draw on their experiences checking other students' ideas and performances and decide the types of feedback that is necessary for this particular student.

Creating tasks for students in self-access learning centers can be exciting for teachers and staff. Asked about this particular task, another student said, "I feel more freely to think about pictures. For me, it's a new way to talk about art." I hope this task can be useful for other students interested in learning about art,

English, and a bit about themselves by thinking a bit deeper about the visuals they encounter in not only museums, but their everyday lives.

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