〔Research Notes〕

The need for critical thinking skills
among business-related students in Japanese universities

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Abstract

The call for critical thinking skills has often been discussed in higher education in many countries (e.g., Zhou and Lin, 2019). In business-related schools and courses, in particular, the need is acute and urgent (e.g., Braun, 2004; Bunch, 2020). Business managers and workers must review a growing amount of information daily for decision-making and problem-solving. However, educators in Japanese universities seem not to have adequately considered the need. This paper discusses the present situation of students' critical thinking skills, the importance of the skill in the business world, and the need for cultivating the skill among business-related students in Japan.

Keywords: college/university, business, education, Japan, critical thinking

日本の大学教育と多角的思考能力の必要性
──ビジネス教育における重要性──

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1. Introduction

The call for critical thinking skills has often been discussed in higher education in many countries (e.g., Zhou and Lin, 2019). In business-related schools and courses, in particular, the need is acute and urgent (e.g., Braun, 2004; Bunch, 2020). Business managers and workers must review a growing amount of information daily for decision-making and problem-solving. However, educators in Japanese universities seem not to have adequately considered the need.

This paper discusses the importance of critical thinking skills among Japanese university students in business-related courses and is organised as follows. The first section presents the definition of critical thinking skills in this paper. The second section examines the present situation of students' critical thinking skills in Japanese universities. The third section looks at the importance of the skill in the business world and the need for cultivating the skill among business-related students in Japan. The concluding section considers the need for related studies, such as teaching methods or strategies to suit the actual classroom environment/conditions in Japan and students' cultural backgrounds.

2. Definitions of critical thinking skills

This section discusses the definition of critical thinking skills used in this paper. Critical thinking is a Western or English term. In Japanese, the word *critical* tends to have a negative connotation. Major English-Japanese dictionaries give the term *hihan-teki-na* (critical), which means judgmental or censorious, at the head of the list of its translation (Minamide, 2014; Nomura, Hanamoto and Hayashi, 2016; Inoue and Akano, 2019). As a Japanese, I also recognise *critical,* at first sight, as a negative term. In other words, the image of the word *critical* seems unfavourable to Japanese people in general.

On the other hand, the word *critical* has other meanings besides negative ones. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby et al., 2015), it means, for example, 'important', 'making fair, careful judgements about the good and bad qualities of sb/sth'. In addition, although many scholars proposed definitions regarding critical thinking, no consistent explicit interpretation exists (Wan, 2019; Hitchcock, 2021). Wan (2019) points out that one of the reasons for this inconsistency is the vagueness of the word *critical* and the deepness and complexity of the term *critical thinking*.

Therefore, this paper needs to define the term critical thinking to ensure clarity. The present paper utilises a definition by Robert Ennis (1993: 180): "Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do."

It should be noted here that this paper focuses on business-related students in Japanese universities. Therefore, a more practical definition of business would be helpful. Thus, in this paper,

the following definition by Perry Pascarella (1997: 38) is used for *critical thinking skills*:

1. Finding critical issues in complex situations.

2. Problem solving—finding the cause for what's gone wrong.

3. Making the best choice in appropriate time.

4. Identifying and responding to potential threats and opportunities.

Although the definitions by Ennis and Pascarella are basically the same, the latter is utilised for business-related content in this paper.

3. The present situation of students' critical thinking skills in Japanese universities.

This section talks about the situation of students' critical thinking skills in Japanese universities. There is considerable attention to cultivating critical thinking skills in higher education worldwide (Saulius and Malinauskas, 2021; Zhou and Lin, 2019). In Japan, some educators seem to recognise the need seriously and try to improve the students' skills at the university level. However, most university students in Japan appear to lack the skills. Using two reading materials, Tsuzuki and Shingaki (2012) conducted two studies about college students' critical thinking skills. The participants were asked to write a concluding paragraph after reading the materials. They found that 90% of the participants (n＝90) could not use the skill in their first study. Their second study showed that *non-critical thinkers* wrote concluding paragraphs without examining and/or exploring any information.

These results above are not surprising because students' education is typically connected with the cultural principles in society. McKinley (2013) points out some cultural obstacles Japanese students face in learning critical arguments in their academic writing programs. Such obstacles come from the educational system and parental upbringing. Japanese students have been educated towards *group living* and/or *teamwork* due to the cultural principles in society. In other words, criticising others, particularly within the same group or institution, is typically discouraged because it disturbs harmony or conformity with others. Many researchers share this view (e.g., Rohlen, 1998; Rohlen and LeTendre, 1998; Lewis, 1998). Lecturers/professors in Japanese universities usually do not require activities to improve critical thinking skills. For example, formal essays and term papers which need the skill are not assigned in most undergraduate classes in Japan. Therefore, most college students in Japan do not know the importance of the skill. The cultural principles may change in younger generations, but they still seem deeply rooted in society.

In summary, most university students in Japan lack critical thinking skills due to their education and cultural background. Students in business-related faculties are also in a similar situation.

4. The importance of cultivating critical thinking skills among business-related students in Japan

In the previous section, we looked at the absence of college students' critical thinking skills in Japan. Now, in this section, the focus is limited to business-related students in Japan. Namely, the importance of cultivating the skill among students is examined. To understand the importance, it is helpful to see how essential the skill is in business.

The need for personnel with critical thinking skills can be urgent and robust in the business world. International consulting company Kepner-Tregoe conducted a survey study about the thinking skill of 1,414 managers and hourly workers (Allnoch, 1997). All informants belonged to corporations with more than 100 employees. The majority of the informants believed their companies utilised less than half of the brainpower available to them. Also, 40% of the managers believed that hourly workers did not receive training for thinking skills. In addition, even 45% of the managers claimed it was difficult to get enough information to make plans/decisions and solve problems. To make matters worse, two-thirds of workers agreed that when a problem happened, they were forced to deal with it immediately. It means they can make big mistakes due to the scarcity of thinking skills, time pressure, and unavailability of needed information.

The absence of critical thinking skills in the workplace is not limited to small and medium-scale firms. For instance, a massive company like Enron, a Texas-based energy trading corporation, appeared to have collapsed due to their absence. Zellner et al. (2001) point out that one of the leading causes of Enron's destruction was rooted in many bad investments, which led the firm to a fragile financial state long before the collapse. In other words, wrong decision-making regarding investments due to a lack of critical thinking led the giant company to a breakdown. Ex-insiders and informants close to Enron confirmed the financial situation (ibid.).

According to Kepner-Tregoe (1997), world-renowned companies such as Corning, Hewlett-Packard, Johnson & Johnson and Harley-Davidson have coped with improving their employees' critical thinking skills. The action of such leading companies shows the importance of thinking skills. In addition, a deficiency in the skill impedes career progress (Berrett, 2012), particularly in companies like the ones above. To put it another way, being competent in the skill can be an advantage in career progress.

Regarding efficiency under time pressure, Quinn Spitzer, the former CEO of Kepner-Tregoe, has an interesting perspective on critical thinking skills. He claims that in the fast-changing world, time pressure and the amount of information in business are overwhelming; however, if a company is proficient in critical thinking skills, they can distinguish the needed from unnecessary information, and this process shortens the deliberation period (Pascarella, 1997). In a nutshell, critical thinking skills work well in the face of time pressure.

The advantage of the thinking ability in business shown earlier in this section impacts business schools and higher education in general. The US Department of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (1991 cited in Braun, 2004) initially issued instructions to make critical thinking skills an essential subject in education for competing in the world economy. This led US higher education to focus on the skill with support from the government, and it similarly influenced education in other countries (Braun, 2004). The influence still affects business courses in higher education (e.g., Bunch, 2020).

As discussed in this section, critical thinking skills are essential in business places, particularly in decision-making, problem-solving, and career progress. Time pressure and a growing amount of information are enormous factors in decision-making and problem-solving. In other words, the need for the skill is profound. Considering the lack of thinking skills among Japanese college students, which was examined in the previous section, educators in business schools in Japan should take the situation more seriously.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed the need for critical thinking skills among university students in Japan, particularly in business-related courses. Most students lack the skill, and the demand for the skill in the business world is urgent and robust. Considering these circumstances, business-related schools/ courses in Japan should take action to improve the skill more seriously.

Regarding related studies, they are very limited in the field of education in Japan, particularly in business-related pedagogy. Therefore, they are needed. Effective teaching strategies/methods are essential to improve students' critical thinking skills, and related research about methods is required.

There are strategies/methods which are found to be effective for teaching critical thinking skills, such as using debate as a teaching tool (e.g., Vo and Morris, 2006) and cooperative/collaborative learning (e.g., Gokhale, 1995; Ramdani et al., 2022). However, teaching Japanese students involves cultural considerations. The method's effectiveness was examined in other countries, and we need to accumulate pedagogical data on Japanese college students. In summary, research about teaching methods is required, particularly considering students' cultural backgrounds and the actual classroom environment.

Another primary issue related to enhancing students' critical thinking skills is how to combine skill training with business curricula. This can take considerable effort and time, and the training can generate student displeasure (Tsui, 2001 cited in Bunch, 2020). Therefore, studies about curriculum involvement are also needed.

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