The Cultivation of Critical Thinking in the Teaching Process of College English

Feifei Li

Department of Humanities, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, China

Abstract

As one of the compulsory basic general education courses in China's higher education institutions, College English focuses on cultivating moral integrity and nurturing talents, and promotes overall improvement in foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence. For College English teaching under the traditional curriculum framework, it is challenging to enhance the critical thinking ability of college students in terms of teaching content, teaching mode, educational goal and resource construction. In light of theories related to critical thinking and its connection with College English teaching, together with current research issues of critical thinking development, the paper suggests five cultivation ways. According to the "Guidelines for the Integration of Ideological and Political Education into Higher Education Curricula", an education mechanism with comprehensive objectives to practice is formulated, which aims at fostering high-quality talents able to distinguish the cultural differences between China and other countries, objectively analyze the information, communicate Chinese culture, national condition and regional achievements in English, and have critical thinking ability.

Keywords

Critical thinking ability, College English teaching, innovation ability, information literacy, cultural confidence, teaching strategy, curriculum construction.

1. Domestic and Foreign Research Status and Problems

1.1. Foreign Situation: Based on the Idea of "Reflective Thinking" Advocated by John Dewey, the Western Developed Countries, Especially America, have Built up a Complete Framework to Train Students' Critical Thinking Ability.

It is clear that the cultivation of critical thinking ability in academia possesses a complete theoretical foundation due to the research findings and educational practices worldwide. The idea mainly refers to that advanced by John Dewey, i.e. "reflective thinking" [1]. Through many years of theoretical research and educational experiences, a systematic and standard education system has been formulated in Western developed countries, including goals of education, course setting, teaching mode, and evaluation system, etc., which integrates critical thinking into the standards of education at various academic stages, designs special training modules according to different disciplines, especially general education and language education. Consequently, there exist a lot of theoretical achievements and practical experiences worth learning for the world.

1.2. Domestic Situation: The Studies Started Relatively Late in China.

In contrast to the advanced theoretical researches and educational models abroad, the study and practice concerning the cultivation of critical thinking ability among Chinese college students fall behind [2]. Before the quality education reform of China after 2010, there were

only concerns about improving language ability and vocational skills without paying enough attention to cultivating students' cognitive ability. After the quality education reform was introduced, researchers gradually realized the crucial significance of critical thinking ability in cultivating talents.

1.3. Research Gap

Two problems still need to be addressed in the research and practice of critical thinking ability cultivation in China, namely the lack of specific study on teaching models for non-English major students and neglecting the training of teachers' critical thinking abilities.

Traditional approaches ignored the specific learning characters of non-English major students. With limited class time in non-English major College English course, it concentrates more on the language knowledge and lacks systematic critical thinking training. Meanwhile, the level of English proficiency varies greatly among them, thus making it hard to adopt the pedagogic system designed specifically for English majors. So far, there has not been a systematic pedagogic model suitable for them, which leads to insufficient practice of systematic critical thinking training in English classrooms for general university students.

Moreover, universities paid too little attention to enhancing teachers' critical thinking ability and offering corresponding training programs. Very few universities could formulate sustainable education mechanism for cultivating teachers' critical thinking ability. There have been no special teaching programs guiding teachers to develop pedagogy and critical thinking training courses for teachers either. Teachers are lacking in critical thinking and tend to use the same conventional method of rote-learning. It becomes rather difficult for them to spot critical thinking content from textbooks and conduct inquiry activities. As a result, the lack of ability among teachers has greatly restricted the effectiveness of critical thinking education.

2. Theoretical Foundation for Critical Thinking Ability Cultivation

2.1. Definition and Concept

The most widely recognized definition and concept of critical thinking ability was provided by Peter A. Facione, who made great contributions to the establishment of an all-round pedagogic system including cognition and emotion, which clarified its characteristics and importance. In terms of cognition, Facione pointed out that there are six important competences, namely interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, explanation and self-regulation, which successively make up a closed circle of critical thinking [3]. As for emotions, critical thinking ability goes beyond cognition. As a relatively stable characteristic of cognitive behavior, it includes openness, reasonable confidence, diligence in searching the truth and exploration of the unknown. Individuals with the ability of critical thinking hold an inclusive attitude toward different opinions, embrace various perspectives rationally without being influenced by authorities or stereotypes, and have reasonable confidence to challenge mainstream viewpoints and investigate issues thoroughly and critically.

2.2. Relationship with College English Teaching

Comparison and analysis in language learning are important opportunities to train critical thinking ability.

Regarding university English teaching, language learning does not merely refer to vocabulary, grammars and sentence patterns. The study of cultural comparison and textual analysis plays an important role as an opportunity for developing critical thinking ability.

From the angle of cultural comparison, the college English courses include a lot of distinctive cultural elements which cover various aspects such as values, social etiquette, modes of thinking, folk culture and social cognition. When making cultural comparisons between China

and other countries and analyzing their cultural cores, the students could be released from restrictions from the limitations of monoculture and fixed thinking. The students no longer accept the presented cultural information passively but could understand and analyze different cultural phenomena and make an objective evaluation of the advantages and features of different cultures as well as give up one-sided cultural identification and prejudice. They could improve their abilities of interpretation, evaluation and self-regulation in accordance with Facione's critical thinking cognitive skills and acquire a rational, truth-seeking thinking attitude with the help of cross-cultural cognition.

From the perspective of text analysis, some core teaching contents (English reading, text analysis and discourse appreciation) become a regular stage where the students could develop their critical thinking abilities. For instance, when studying texts deeply, the students should construct the structure of the text, analyze author's thoughts in a text, distinguish between objectivism and subjectivism and examine the credibility of evidence and its subjective tendency, making use of the cognitive skills of analysis, reasoning, evaluation and interpretation. Text analysis helps to inspire the students to seek knowledge proactively, think and reason rationally, raise bold questions, argue bravely and express their opinions clearly. Thus, all the cognitive skills mentioned above necessary for critical thinking could be fully developed.

3. The Present Situation and Problems Related to Critical Thinking Development in College English Education

3.1. The Analysis of the Present Situation

3.1.1. Course Design: The Traditional Mode of Instruction Emphasizes Language Training Too Much without Paying Enough Attention to Cognitive Development.

Noticeably, there is a serious imbalance in the course design and teaching approach used in the English teaching for non-English majors in Chinese universities. While the former emphasizes English language training to prepare for English tests and obtain necessary communication skills, the latter emphasizes cognitive skills development to train students' critical thinking skills. There is no doubt that the deficiency in the development of the cognitive skills will negatively influence the development of analytical skills [4]. In particular, the existing curriculum for non-English major students consists mainly of the training of language skills such as vocabulary enlargement, grammatical analysis, memorizing sentence structures and basic language skills training (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Therefore, students' tasks are to develop necessary linguistic foundation, pass English tests and obtain cross-language communication skills. Importantly, such crucial components of critical literacy as cognitive training, cultural analysis and logical analysis are not included into the standard program. There is also no specific course where students would learn to think critically. All students are limited by traditional learning methods implying mechanical imitation and memorization, lacking any chance to analyze or reflect text structure and content. As a result, neither basic cognitive skills necessary according to Facione's theory nor necessary qualities of critical thinking such as rationality and openness are developed.

3.1.2. Students' Work: The Widespread Phenomenon of "Absence of Critical Thinking" Which Implies Excessive Mechanical Memorization and Lack of Spirit of Questioning.

Under the long-lasting influence of the traditional model of English education, non-English major students usually display their typical feature of "absence of critical thinking" in the process of learning English, developing the stereotyped passive learning methods based on mechanical repetition and memorization and lack of independent critical thinking. During

everyday English learning activities, the students almost never make analyses and critical reflections on the structure of discourse, author's point of view, cultural differences and credibility of arguments.

Regarding critical thinking and reasoning, students face many difficulties caused by the lack of cognitive skills mentioned in Facione's critical thinking model. They cannot reveal the subjectivism and hidden points of view of the author of the text and cannot make objective comparison and evaluation of various cultural concepts and value systems.

Moreover, due to the absence of cognitive qualities characteristic for critical thinking such as quest for truth and critical reflection, students develop the habit of not asking any questions, avoiding arguments, being afraid to make independent discoveries, sticking to ready-made answers and standard thoughts. Thus, the mechanical learning method develops students' stereotypical thinking, poor independent judgment skills and inability to solve problems. Not only is the progress in improving linguistic skills restricted but also their ability to think critically and creatively suffers.

3.2. Problems

3.2.1. Lack of Tasks Related to Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Textbooks.

As regards the content of textbooks used for English courses at Chinese colleges and universities, it is obvious that they mostly concentrate on language training and lack systematic inquiry-based tasks for developing critical thinking skills among students. Most books emphasize consolidating linguistic fundamentals as their central goal, paying more attention to comprehensiveness, applicability and standardization and neglect the presence of controversial, critical and diverse texts.

With regard to the tasks of classroom practice, the textbook tasks focus on mechanical exercises which include vocabulary differentiation, grammatical analysis, sentence translation and reading comprehension questions with the answer either 'true' or 'false'. These tasks pay attention only to checking students' knowledge of language and skills of its memorization. What is more, there is practically no room in the entire book for developing inquiry-based tasks for students such as comparative analysis, opinion evaluation, raising critical questions, holding thematic debates and making text and literary criticism.

3.2.2. The System of Evaluating Teachers is Oversimplified.

The present teaching assessment system employed by colleges for English teachers is overly simplified and rigid and focuses largely on the use of conventional, result-based indicators rather than diverse evaluation methods for the assessment of critical thinking. Such a mechanism stifles the development and application of critical thinking education. Universities mostly focus on the assessment of students' quantitative results including the final exam marks, CET-4/6 success rate, and delivery skills as the major criteria. Additionally, existing teaching assessment systems focus mostly on the results of student's learning without taking into account the dynamism of the teaching process, the activities involved in cognitive processes and teaching–learning interactions that encourage critical thinking among students. Lastly, in assessing faculty members, there is a lack of factors like the capability of teachers in promoting critical thinking education, classroom research projects aimed at encouraging critical thinking, and cross-cultural mindsets.

4. Paths toward Developing Critical Thinking Skills

4.1. Optimizing Curriculum Design

In response to inherent weaknesses in conventional college English courses which value practical knowledge above all else, it is imperative that universities consider optimizing the curriculum design process to incorporate a course program specifically designed to help

develop critical thinking skills in students who do not specialize in English. This might involve implementing a "3+1" hierarchical teaching program which incorporates the use of fundamental classes in order to enhance students' linguistic capabilities as well as guaranteeing consistent improvements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills through more specialized classes aimed at developing cognitive skills [5]. Through the specialized classes, such as critical writing. English debate training, and in-depth text analysis should be introduced to focus on cultivating critical thinking skills that aim to guide students beyond rigid writing patterns and template-based expressions, and enable them to develop essential cognitive abilities.

4.2. Innovation in Teaching Methods

Traditional rote English teaching has obvious drawbacks. It rarely helps students build critical thinking abilities and lacks effective teacher-student interaction [6]. For this reason, teachers need to adjust their teaching focus to students' cognitive growth and redesign classroom teaching with flexible and student-centered strategies.

Problem-based learning is a practical way to change this situation. Teachers can wrap teaching activities around a complete learning cycle, covering pre-class reading, in-class exploration and after-class thinking. Instead of asking simple knowledge-based questions, teachers can design open and reflective questions for course texts. For example, teachers may invite students to judge the credibility of an author's opinions, find out logical loopholes in written arguments, or analyze how the same idea varies in different cultural backgrounds. This practice encourages students to read independently and think deeply about learning content.

Group cooperation and classroom debate are also great supplementary teaching methods. I believe teachers should organize such activities regularly. It is better to choose open and controversial topics for discussion, such as aesthetic views related to gender, cross-cultural value differences, Chinese and foreign social etiquette gaps, and popular international issues. These real and meaningful topics can naturally drive students to think critically in authentic classroom scenarios.

4.3. Development of Teaching Materials and Resources

Most existing college English textbooks have obvious limitations. They provide few tasks for critical thinking training and lack diverse learning materials, which cannot meet the needs of students' cognitive development. Optimizing textbook content and enriching teaching resources is therefore essential for delivering effective critical thinking education.

Traditional textbooks usually feature fixed structures, single content and standardized answers, which easily restrict students' divergent thinking. We can enrich classroom learning resources with various high-quality and up-to-date materials. Original English newspapers, official international commentaries, classic British and American film and television works, and cross-cultural prose readings are all suitable supplements [7]. These diverse materials can broaden students' learning horizons and bring more thinking space.

4.4. Transformation of Teachers' Roles

Teachers need to change their old teaching concepts to promote critical thinking training in English classes. They should no longer regard knowledge indoctrination as the core of classroom teaching. Instead, they need to focus on stimulating students' cognition, guiding their learning and helping them solve problems independently [8].

In actual classroom teaching, teachers should not only provide standard answers to questions. It is more important to build an open inquiry atmosphere for students. Teachers can put forward inspiring questions at proper teaching stages to guide students to conduct in-depth reflection. It is necessary to encourage students to question actively and accept different personal perspectives. Meanwhile, teachers need to control the rhythm of critical thinking

activities properly and correct students' cognitive deviations and wrong understandings in a targeted way.

Teacher self-improvement is also indispensable in this process. Teachers can record practical difficulties in daily critical thinking teaching and summarize students' common cognitive weaknesses. Regular teaching communication and experience sharing can help teachers continuously improve teaching design and optimize their teaching methods.

4.5. Reconstruction of the Evaluation System

Traditional college English evaluation systems have many defects. They usually focus only on final scores, ignore students' learning process, and pay little attention to the cultivation of critical thinking ability. It is necessary to build a new multi-dimensional evaluation system that focuses on the whole learning process and diversified development.

The new evaluation mechanism covers both online and offline learning performance. It values students' logical reasoning ability, innovative thinking, cross-cultural analysis depth and argumentation completeness. It also takes group cooperation performance, debate skills, critical writing quality and after-class inquiry results into comprehensive consideration.

We need to balance formative assessment and final assessment [9]. The weight of process evaluation indicators should be increased appropriately, including classroom critical interaction, project practice results, inquiry assignments and learning reflection records. The over-reliance on single test scores must be reduced. With the reasonable application of AIGC technology and official reliable data support, the whole evaluation system can become more diversified and scientific.

5. Conclusion and Prospects

Critical thinking cultivation cannot be regarded as a single teaching task. It needs to run through the whole process of curriculum design, classroom teaching and learning evaluation. Both students' independent learning ability and teachers' professional guiding function play vital roles in this process.

This study explores the practical difficulties and feasible optimization strategies of critical thinking training for non-English majors in college English teaching. The research results show that effective critical thinking cultivation depends on full-process educational reform, rather than partial adjustment of single classroom links.

Current college English teaching in China still has many shortcomings. Fixed curriculum settings, insufficient critical thinking training tasks, rigid teaching modes and single evaluation mechanisms all hinder students' cognitive development. A scientific critical thinking cultivation model must conform to the rules of English language teaching and adapt to students' cognitive development needs, balancing student autonomy and teacher guidance.

Curriculum design should break away from simple language skill training. It can set hierarchical learning contents that combine basic language knowledge with cognitive expansion. Diversified practical tasks such as project learning, classroom debates and critical writing can be added to teaching arrangements. Teaching methods should abandon rigid rote learning. Problem-oriented teaching, cooperative learning and multi-text comparative analysis can effectively cultivate students' independent inquiry ability and help them complete cognitive processes including analysis, evaluation, reasoning and self-supervision.

The evaluation system also needs iterative upgrading to get rid of score-oriented single assessment. A multi-dimensional evaluation standard that takes learning process and cognitive quality into account is more in line with teaching goals. In the whole teaching process, we must always highlight students' dominant position, leaving enough space for them to think independently, express diverse opinions and carry out critical inquiry. At the same time,

teachers need to give full play to their guiding role in cognitive training, classroom management and teaching efficiency improvement.

The transformation of teaching concepts and modes can realize accurate guidance for critical thinking teaching. It can finally promote the integrated development of college students' English proficiency and critical thinking ability.

References

[1] Wen, Q. F. (2008). On the cultivation of critical thinking skills in foreign language majors. Foreign Language Teaching and Research.

[2] Huang, Y. S. (2010). Absence of Critical Thinking in English Major Teaching. Foreign Language Studies.

[3] Facione, P. A. (1990). Critical thinking: A statement of expert consensus for purposes of educational assessment and instruction.

[4] Peng, L. (2023). On the cultivation of students' critical thinking in college English teaching. Foreign English Examination Teaching and Research.

[5] Du, Q. L. (2012). Application of the "3+1" teaching model in critical writing. Educational Research Papers.

[6] Guo, D. Y., & Zhan, S. X. (2023). A review of research on English critical thinking instruction in China based on CiteSpace. Educational Progress.

[7] (No author). (2024). English Teaching in Independent Colleges: Cultivating Critical Thinking Practice. Educational Research.

[8] Wu, H., et al. (2024). A review of research on the cultivation of critical thinking in English textbooks in China. Foreign Language Education Research.

[9] Chen, Y. P., et al. (2024). Exploration of fostering critical thinking tendencies in junior high school English teaching. Basic Education.