

On the Cultivation of College Students' Critical Thinking Based on English Course Model

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Abstract

It is well recognized that students' critical thinking skills should be promoted. However, researchers in China mainly focus their attention to exploring the way to cultivate students' critical thinking skills among English majors. Researches on cultivating college English students' critical thinking skills are a little scanty. There is no consensus on the effective ways to cultivate college students' critical thinking skills. This paper aims to explore some basic ways to cultivate students' critical thinking skills based on English course content. The exploration is implemented through three perspectives, question-based learning, more reflective thinking activities, and writing through reading activities. In the process, flexible and active classroom atmosphere is highlighted. Students actively participate in classroom activities and do more reflective thinking and imitation writing through reading. Gradually, they become autonomous learners, learn to monitor and regulate their learning orientation, and finally develop their critical thinking skills.

Key words: Critical thinking; Reflective activities; English course

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INTRODUCTION

In modern education, the objective is to improve students' comprehensive ability, which imposes higher requirement

for both teachers and students in universities. Students should learn to analyze problems, think independently, and propose possible and feasible solutions in the process of learning knowledge rather than receive what teachers endow to them without any analysis and judgment. As for college English teaching, teachers usually position themselves as linguistic knowledge transmitter, and their attention is usually paid to analyzing new words and phrases, difficult sentence patterns, language translation. Students passively receive knowledge, which renders a majority of students fruitless after so many years' English study. What they have acquired is some intangible words and sentence patterns, all of which are not organized in a clear and systematic way. The process of learning hinders students from developing their own critical thinking skills. They usually keep silent in English class or sometimes speak a few isolated words and phrases. When they are required to answer questions, what they say is echoing the view of others or usually too vague to mean anything. Richard Levin, president of Yale University once pointed out the talent training mode in China is that students keep in mind of what teachers instruct to them, then they restore when taking part in exams, and the missing parts in Chinese higher education lie in the neglect of cultivating students' critical thinking and interdisciplinary studies. Therefore, English teachers' teaching philosophy should be changed to design more classroom activities for students to study more actively, purposefully and critically so as to activate their studying initiative and ability to criticize and think independently and finally to solve problems.

The development of students' critical thinking has aroused many researchers' concern both in the West and in China. Some researches on promoting students' critical thinking in some courses have been sort of successful in Singapore. As English teachers, it is high time we should realize the vital role of critical thinking in differentiating authenticity among confusing information, identify

problems and, analyze and finally solve them. In English teaching, it means enhancing students' ability to appreciate different style of articles, analyze problems, evaluate what author intends to convey, whether his article is clearly elaborated and organized, and learn to understand and enjoy different culture and kaleidoscope, finally recreate based on one's own cognition and understanding of passage. Finally, students can learn to think independently and develop their autonomous learning ability. This paper is intended to implement the way of cultivating students' critical thinking into English class so as to cultivate students' critical thinking at the same improve students' English proficiency.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Definition of Critical Thinking

The concept of critical thinking originated from American practical philosopher, John Dewey's reflective thinking. He defined it as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" (Dewey, 1909). The way that students receive knowledge passively and arrive at conclusions without careful consideration and analysis is criticized. Robert Ennis (1985), the pioneer of critical thinking researches, defined critical thinking as reasonable reflective thinking. It involves abilities to make reasonable decisions to do what one believes to be true and right. It includes creative thinking. Making decisions is a vital part of critical thinking in his definition.

In China, the well-recognized definition on critical thinking is a cognitive and thinking process in which we think actively to evaluate the authenticity, credibility, process, theory, background, argument of what we have learnt, then make decisions on what to believe and to do (Lu, 1988). It involves a process in which one analyzes, evaluate, infer, and makes self-regulation. How they analyze and reflection is based on the previous knowledge they have mastered to identify problems and make the right choices. According to Li (2013), the key ingredients in critical thinking include the following aspect: first, it involves a process to think actively. Second, the key of critical thinking is evaluation. People question others' view and gradually form their own ideas. Third, critical thinking can be nurtured and cultivated through reading and education.

1.2 Critical thinking in Education and in English

1.2.1 Critical Thinking in Education

Traditionally, Chinese students learn knowledge mainly through transmission and analysis from teachers. Students usually play in a passive role and have little chance to apply knowledge to solve practical problems. The knowledge they have learned is at a lower level, and

they seldom think in a critical way about the knowledge learned. Critical thinking in education means enabling students to construct their own knowledge and associate what they have learned with problems-solving in the real world. In the process of different learning experiences, students should be encouraged to be less dependent upon teachers and course books but more exposed to the cases of problem-solving and frequently asked to explore, analyze, infer, regulate, differentiate, evaluate, construct and reconstruct problems and knowledge.

Richardson (2003) indicated that students' capacity to take command of and apply knowledge and information to the real world rather than simply possess them has been highlighted in education. Pithers and Soden (2000) pointed out that the existing education philosophy pay attention not only to the command of content knowledge but also cultivating the abilities to think critically. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the importance of critical thinking in education. What matters in education is not what knowledge to teach, but how it is taught. Students should be actively involved in courses, rendering them active and flexible in activities, skeptical of receiving information, critical in thinking, reflective in the process of learning, effective in communication, and rational in decision-making. Such critical abilities can be developed through systematic education and practice in the long run. As English teachers, it is imperative to change the role of knowledge transmitters through adopting proper teaching methodologies. Furthermore, students' critical thinking is promoted through the acquisition of some basic skills. For example, English reading comprehension ability plays a crucial part in one's understanding of some materials. Through reading, readers construct and reconstruct the text actively and purposefully, then gradually progress towards the nurture of critical thinking abilities. Only when they understand it can they analyze it, being reflective, critical, integrative, and summative.

1.2.2 Critical Thinking in English

If English teachers lack the sense of cultivation of students' critical thinking in English study, most of them also do not abandon the traditional role of transmitters of four basic skills; even they recognize the necessity of student-centered approach to teaching. More focus is accorded on instruction of some keywords, sentence translation, and analysis of some sentence structures, and little time is left for students to actively consider and reflect. Some English teachers do recognize the importance of critical thinking and design some activities such as skimming, scanning, inferring the meaning of some unknown words to promote students' reading ability. But the pace is totally at the control of teacher, students playing a passive role as audiences, and their critical thinking can not be developed. Moreover, even some questions are designed, they are usually asked to dig out

the surface meaning of texts, and answers can be easily found in a textbook. They are unable to expand their vision, not to mention posing some different questions to challenge the authorities. Besides, students' command of text structure is ignored. They are unable to analyze and reconstruct the deep meaning conveyed in passages. In the long run, student's sense of initiative and innovation is eliminated.

Using critical thinking in English reading means more than grasping the general idea of a reading material, and it involves many reading skills such as analysis, estimation, inference, comparison, and evaluation. Hafner (1974, p.40) regards CR as "such kind of reading in the process of which readers try to learn and use language more constructively, and to discuss and analyze language structures to clarify concepts with the skillful questioning". Halvorson (1992) proposes that "Critical reading as a goal includes the ability to evaluate ideas socially or politically. Critical reading skills are the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize what one reads." It means distinguishing the more important information from the less one, asking more questions about the intention and opinion of the author, making inference of the unknown information, going beyond messages conveyed in reading materials and addressing problems, estimating whether some arguments are consistent and relevant, deducting whether some conclusions are plausible or not, judging whether the reading material is valuable or believable or not. Generally it involves posing some questions and objection so as to make a conclusion.

Writing is a good manifestation of one's English output ability. Employing critical thinking in writing means enabling students to write independently, to discuss and analyze issues from different perspective, to make some in-depth consideration, to propose innovative suggestions, and to conceive some original conception. In the process of writing, students should be encouraged to pose some questions, and regard the process as a process of problem-solving. Some foreign researchers have done researches proving the effectiveness of promotion of students' critical thinking through writing process. Tuisil (1999) concluded there is a significant positive correlation between writing course and critical thinking. Writing in itself involves cognitive activities such as analyzing problems, making use of previous experience and knowledge, creating and recreating. Brown and Sorrell (1993) proposed that if students keep writing clinical journal, their critical thinking ability can be promoted. Clear directions and instruction about the assignment should be given, and timing feedback also should be provided for students to improve. The attention should be focused on conception, the significance of the paper, and unique conception.

In general, students can cultivate their critical thinking through practice, cooperation activities and discussion in their English learning process and their critical ability is gradually cultivated through the way of comprehension,

inference, comparison, generalization, and summary in their English learning process.

2. STRATEGIES TO IMPLEMENT ESSENCE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

2.1 Question-Based Learning

Students' quality of being flexible and innovative is highlighted in critical thinking. Therefore, when designing classroom activities, the "heuristic" and the "open" can activate students' thought. Teachers should grasp every opportunity to enlighten students to consider reasonably and learn to pose questions. As Jesse Kennedy mentioned "Good thinkers are good questioners. Whatever they see, hear, read, or experience, they are constantly analyzing it, puzzling over its significance, searching for explanations, and speculating about relations between that experience and what they already know." By taking the method of "brainstorming", teacher can design several questions related to each unit and inspire students to reflect and come up with innovative ideas from different perspectives and then ask other questions to doubt and make reflection. Questions posed by the teacher should be thought-provoking, and teachers are expected to set examples to analyze and evaluate problems. When discussing questions, teacher should guide students to adopt and sum up reasonable and innovative ideas, then supplement and consummate the discussion with their own unique ideas. For example, when doing with the unit "The American Dream", students are required to express their own understanding of American Dream freely. Most students relate American dream to success. Then, a student poses questions "How do you understand success? How can be a person defined as successful man". Then there is an argument about the true significance of success from the material and spiritual aspect. Through discussion, students' philosophy of life is evaluated and promoted, and they learn to speculate about the true significance of life. Then, teacher requires students to make comparison and contrast about similarities and differences of American dream and Chinese dream. They pose a question "Is there any differences between the way to achieve dream in America and in China" which arouse heated debate once again. When questions are discussed, the phenomenon that they memorize and repeat what others expressed is not allowed. When analyzing passages, teacher does not tell students directly about how to divide passages into several parts but require them to do and clarify their reasons. Then both teacher and students analyze together and propose the reason to do so. When new words and phrases are to be dealt with, students are well-noticed that it is their task to analyze and remember its usage rather than teachers. Teacher also poses some questions related to

understanding of texts for students to consider and come up with their independent ideas. Students are required to analyze the opinions of the author and what writing strategies the author adopts, to doubt whether arguments employed in the passage are relevant, effective, convincing, and coherent. Teacher constantly encourages students and provides them with positive feedbacks, which is beneficial to the reduction of their anxiety and establishment of confidence and self-efficiency. Students actively participate in classroom activities, reflecting, regulating, comparing, summarizing and questioning in the discussion process. Such divergent thinking activities can contribute to the establishment and improvement of students' higher and logical cognition.

2.2 Reflective Activities

If students can usually engage in reflective activities in English learning process, they can relate new information with what they previously have mastered, thinking logically and visibly, providing them insight into their learning process, and cultivating their consciousness and reasoning about what strategies to adopt in the following learning process so as to cultivate their metacognitive awareness. Dew (1933, pp.100-101) pointed out that "the function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious". Through conducting reflective activities, students' metacognitive awareness is reinforced and cultivated so that they gradually become autonomous learners. Reflection involves a special cognitive process which contributes to cultivation of students' reasonable and logical consideration towards learning. It also involves activities of self-evaluation and attribute analysis. Students are required to make a formative assessment as to their learning process and outcome, and then analyze reasons for contributing to the learning outcome. Students are strongly suggested to take down reflective journals to record the process of their English learning such as what problems they are faced with, and what strategies they adopt to overcome them, and what short-term and long-term learning plans to make, and what measures they take to fulfill. For example, some students take down in their journal that they have too much difficulty in understanding some passages, and why? What strategies to take to improve my reading ability? The first reason they reflect is they receive too less input in reading, so they cannot understand some difficult sentences at first sight. The second one is they are not familiar to way to figure out the chief elements in sentences. The third one is there are too many new words hindering their understanding of passages. Then they pose questions as to how to solve the above questions and make some detailed plans to implement. For another example, some students take down that when they are required to discuss

any issue, they feel so upset that they are usually trapped by inflexible thinking and come up with some ideas too vague to mean anything and reflect on its reasons. Some suggest that their use of single thinking for a long time contributes to their inflexible and directional thinking, and they cannot analyze problems from different perspectives. Finally they decide to read a variety of books to expand their vision and think actively. Moreover, they intend to communicate with more people especially those superior to them in insight, knowledge, and experience. By conducting reflective thinking activities such as taking down reflective journals, communication among teacher and students, collective reflection, self-report, students can come to monitor their learning process, regulate their learning strategies, reorient their learning direction, and finally become efficient autonomous learners, with critical thinking style formed in their head.

2.3 Implementing Writing Through Reading Activities

Reading and writing involve two interactive processes. It requires students to write an article through reading. Reading, as a kind of effective input for one to build one's cognition, help to improve one's writing, while writing, as a kind of output to reflect one's cognition, is sort of dependent on one's reading. The two are interdependent. Reading-to-write is an approach used to improve not only one's reading and writing competence such as receptive and productive skills but also one's cognition. Kroll (2001, pp.224-225) elucidated the advantages of implementation of reading in teaching writing: It presents students with discourse patterns of different foreign language articles, input English language style consciousness, help them develop text consciousness. In English language teaching, reading and writing correspond to input and output respectively. Kennedy (1985) stated that one's reading competence may influence effectiveness of notes-taking, the understanding and interpretation of the content of the notes. Through reading students will come to understand what matters in writing is not the use of certain language expressions and structure but the function of these language forms used to express the appropriate meaning, and the way about how to organize an article. Writing can enable students to apply the input they have received through reading and influence reading development. In all, reading-to-write involves a targeted, complicated, and cyclic cognitive process. Before writing, students are suggested to read targeted articles, figuring out the main idea, text organization, and relationship among different parts. Meanwhile, they are exposed to take command of idiomatic language forms in articles as well as foreign cultures. When students begin to write, they should be well-educated to abbreviate those passages they read before. Abbreviating passages after reading can help students learn some well-refined language forms learned in passages and apply them to accomplish basic writing;

Students can learn different key elements in different text style; Abbreviation-based reading-to-write approach can enable students to imitate the effective way to build their opinion. It is of help for them to make an improvement to their cognitive ability and way of thinking, for students can observe, think, analyze, imagine, and even create in the imitating process. In the process of imitation, gradually students can learn to write a comment and think actively and innovatively about the reading material sometimes they even argue against author when he has a different understanding, which is beneficial for them to develop their critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

Critical thinking matters a lot to students, even in our country. It exerts a long term impact on students' integrated development in the long run. However, different kinds of corrupt practices prevail in college English education. Teachers cannot activate students' learning motivation so they cannot learn autonomously, interact with each other, and think critically. In order to address the problem, an interactive, effective and rational English course content-based classroom model should be established in which active classroom atmosphere can be cultivated. Classroom activities should be designed elaborately by teachers, and students should be encouraged and provided with positive feedback constantly so as to alleviate students' anxiety and confusion and motivate them to participate in classroom activities spontaneously and actively. Moreover, student-centered notion in teaching is supposed to be implemented into teaching practice, and the traditional way of regarding students as recipients of knowledge without any information screening and judgment should be discarded. They are required to do more reflective thinking and reading-to-write activities. Because the ultimate goal to cultivate students' critical thinking is to enable them to address practical even troublesome problems through their own analysis and solution, and English is regarded as media used to convey one's thought, more tasks which are deeply close to real problems should be designed for students

to analyze, infer, integrate, compare and contrast, evaluate and finally come up with innovative ideas. Gradually they tend to think logically and reflectively and their metacognition ability can be improved a lot of time passing by. One apparent and notable limitation of the paper is that it lacks empirical study to testify the effectiveness of whether students' critical thinking can be developed through ways discussed in the passage. Additional empirical research is needed.

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