

# Exploration on Cultivation of Critical Thinking in College Intensive Reading Course

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## Abstract

Critical thinking has drawn great concern from researchers in America and western world since 1980s. Chinese researchers have come to realize the fundamental function of critical thinking for innovation. However, it does not take effect to cultivate students' critical thinking in English classroom. English classroom activities are generally designed for students to memorize, imitate, recite. The cultivation of students' critical thinking has been ignored. Chinese college students generally can speak out some sentences but lack in-depth ideas and practical ability to solve problems. They suffer from emotional literacy. This research aims to foster college students' critical thinking skills by designing some classroom activities regarding college intensive reading course in English classroom. But there are some deficiencies in this research such as lack of empirical studies to testify its positive effect.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, college English teaching, reading and writing, reflective ability

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the topmost priority of English language teaching in China has been accorded to the practice and improvement of students' four basic English language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, and great progress has been made in improving students' English proficiency. However, seldom attention is focused on the cultivation of students' ability to consider independently, especially to think critically. Concerning the problem, Wen and Zhou (2006) once commented that "English majors seldom assume complex and challenging thinking activities since admitted into college with their learning focus attached to memorization, imitation, recitation, rehearsal, so their thinking ability is in a state of suppression, cannot be developed and practiced to the full". The situation of English majors offers a glimpse into that of college English students. Worldwide higher education seminar held in 1998 issued a document Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century highlighting the importance of critical thinking and innovation. It proclaimed that "in order to foster students' critical thinking and ability to solve problems flexibly, curriculum needs to be reformed to transcend the simple and cognitive command of knowledge, and curriculum should be designed featuring the acquisition of critical thinking and innovative analytic skills." English, a kind of international language, plays indispensable significance in international communication. Huang (1998) proposed that college English teachers should avoid the mistake of attaching too much importance to inculcating linguistic knowledge while neglecting the cultivation of students' critical thinking, which results in "deficiency in critical thinking" characterized as "unable to organize logical words or make sense to argue sometimes even draw a blank when one is supposed to comment on something in English". Besides, though students-centered teaching method has been accepted by Chinese teachers, traditional teaching method has also been adopted by many English teachers in China, teachers taking up much time delivering a lecture in class. The whole process in English classroom is comparatively boring and suppressing. Chinese teachers tend to follow specific regulations when teaching in classroom. They usually abide by certain education doctrines which wears away students' interests in English study, let alone the development of innovation and critical thinking skills. Teacher interacts with students by posing some simple questions related to the text content, with little opportunities endowed for students to consider, let alone coming up with some logical and innovative ideas to solve problems. Only those students who spend time reading and studying after class can make progress in English study. Nowadays, as is known to all that faced with the explosion of too much knowledge and information in English, people with capacity to identify, select, distinguish and evaluate

information can adjust to the society better. The simple instruction of basic language skills can not meet the requirement of social development. Therefore, preference in English language teaching should be given to the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills and creative thinking ability rather than the simple practice of the basic skills and some linguistic knowledge.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of Critical Thinking

Researches in critical thinking have aroused concern first in the western countries. But there is no universally-accepted consensus on the definition of critical thinking among researchers in this field. It can be traced back to the research of Dewey (1909), American philosopher, educator who came up with the concept of "reflective thinking", a special process for learners to explore answer. Ever since, the research in critical thinking had profound influence in America especially in 1980s. Dewey (1933) went further proposing "a 5-phase critical thinking model (1) suggestion, (2) problem definition, (3) hypothesis generation, (4) reasoning and (5) hypothesis testing". With time moving on, a comparatively systematic theory of critical thinking was developed. Ennis (1989), a pioneer of critical thinking in America, proposed that critical thinking can be regarded as "reasonable reflective thinking that concentrates on the decision and behavior with underlying belief", and defined critical thinking as "to consider and think sensibly and reflectively based on what one believes and what one does." For Ennis, critical thinking involves a practical process in which a sequence of critical thinking skills will be implemented. In accordance, he developed many critical skills. Bartlett (1985) defined critical thinking as "the extension of belief, practice or evidence into new regions so as to make more widely available and fill up gaps in the belief or evidence". Lipman (1988) indicated that skillful and reflective thinking can make one wise in judgment for it highlights self-evaluation and regulation based on certain standards and understanding of context. Later Richard Paul (1990), an internationally-recognized authority in critical thinking, expanded the conception of critical thinking, and introduced the metacognition model into the critical research, and considered that critical thinking is a kind of individual thinking model in which thinkers stipulate the inner structure of thinking and apply knowledge to assess them so as to improve their thinking. Paul (1992) further explained that as people get accustomed to thinking critically, dispositions of mind will be formed such as "intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity, and confidence in reason".

Researchers in China also defined critical thinking. Luo (2001) proposed that critical thinking is a kind of individual quality of self-judgment and self-adjustment on the degree of rightness in process, theory, method, background, proof, and standard of evaluation when one makes output. Wen (2009) established a hierarchy theory model for critical thinking. The first hierarchy is meta-critical thinking skills which involve meta-plan, inspection, regulation, and assessing skills. The second hierarchy is critical thinking skills which involve cognitive and emotional skills, management and monitoring for meta-critical thinking skills, such as analyzing, inferring, evaluating, being curious, and open-minded, etc. Zhong (2002) proposed that individuals should be doubtful about certain fields of some subjects and be sensible and reasonable when making judgments based on of their own previous knowledge and accumulation.

In all, critical thinking should comprise the following aspects: (1) it involves an active logical process in which individual poses questions, reflects and regulates among different situations to solve problems. (2) it involves a set of skills and dispositions, and can be fostered through training and instruction. (3) The core of critical thinking is evaluation. Individuals make reasonable judgment by posing questions to doubt the credibility of statements. (4) Critical thinking does not mean being skeptical of something in a simple way and judging it to be wrong but a kind of attitude.

### 2.2 Researches on Critical Thinking Abroad and At Home

In western world, especially in America, the research on critical thinking has been in vogue. Since 1970s, the cultivation of critical thinking has been the focus of education reform in America. In 1980s, Americans regard the cultivation of critical thinking as one of the significant objectives in higher education. In general, researches on critical thinking mainly focus on three aspects.

#### (1) To define critical thinking

Many researchers such as Ennis (1989), Bartlett (1985), Lipman (1988), Richard (1990) have defined critical thinking and decoded its inner process. Some defined it from the perspective of logical and cognitive thinking process and advocated the employment of critical thinking skills to solve problems. Some defined it from philosophy, believing that truth and logical inference can be arrived at through a model of critical thinking.

#### (2) To design assessment instrument of critical thinking

More than 20 kinds of instrument have been designed to assess individuals' critical thinking. Richard (2008) proposed intellectual standards to assess the quality of critical thinking such as the skills used, and dispositions of the critical thinker from the perspective of the degree of being clear, accurate, precise, relevant, and logical.

In 1990s, some remarkable assessment instruments were designed including objective ones with multiple choices to assess students' critical thinking skill, California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI), which is renowned for its reliability and validity, and interpreted into different language version, such as French, Spanish, Japanese, and English. Cornell Critical Thinking Test and California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) focused on the evaluation of the core skills of critical thinking: analysis, explanation, self-regulation, reference, clarification, and evaluating skills (Facione, 1990).

(3) To cultivate critical ability skills by training

From 1970s to 1990s, the researches on critical thinking began to prosper, especially since American universities proposed a set of measures to promote students' critical thinking. The education objective of core subjects has been shifted to the development of students' critical ability and science exploration ability. Since the end of 1990s, the advocacy of critical thinking movement stepped out from campus to society on a large scale in America. Researches on cultivation of critical thinking skills, reflective thinking, and thinking disposition prevail.

In China, critical thinking has also aroused concern of Chinese scholars. Some researchers tried to decode the specific connotation of critical thinking. Wu (2011) interpreted critical thinking as one element to address problem system through semantic discrimination and concept curriculum design, and test for English majors band four and band eight should be reformed to cultivate students' critical thinking. Yang (2009) pointed out that critical thinking is the unity of the opposites of thinking ability, skills and emotional disposition. Some researchers also integrated the critical thinking training into the instruction of the four basic skills of English, listening, speaking, reading, writing (Wen & Zhou, 2006; Zhang, 2009; Han, 2009). The teaching efficiency is remarkable.

### **3. A Sample Lesson of Cultivating Critical Thinking in Intensive Reading Course**

Some researchers hold that too much attention paid to instructing linguistic knowledge would give rise to a problem that students speak fluently with good pronunciation but lack some profound and logical thoughts to infuse idea into their statement. But the neglect of the basic four skills, in others' view, may result in a situation that students feel enriched and full of innovative and critical ideas in inner heart but lack the ability to express correctly in English. Then they cannot meet the standards of some enterprises. Of course, they lose the potential chances. As is known to all that practice of the four basic skills is inevitable in foreign language teaching, but students should not be treated as passive message receivers who absorb what teachers inculcate to them without any consideration. Though it is not a must to promote students' critical thinking skills at the price of sacrifice students' solid English skill, teaching methodology should be reformed to reinforce students' English proficiency so as to cultivate students' critical thinking. The philosophy of critical thinking should be infused to every step of English teaching, listening, speaking, reading, writing. The acquisition and practice of English can go paralleling with the formation of critical thinking skills. In this sense, English is a kind of instrument and transition used to fulfill tasks. In English class, it is English teachers who should assume responsibility to design specific classroom activities which involve the practice of students' English skills and development of students' capacity to analyze, assess, and solve problems. Now, the author takes the New College English Course book as an example to illustrate how classroom activities are designed to practice students' English as the same time cultivate their' critical thinking.

#### *3.1 Before-class Section*

Before reading, the method of "brainstorming" is employed. Several open-minded questions are proposed by teacher for students within groups to discuss. For example, what do you think of a salesman? What are essential qualities of a successful salesman? What are the most frequent and effective marketing strategies employed by salesmen to promote their sales, and what are its correspondent function? How do salesmen conduct such marketing strategies. These questions are a little beyond students' scope of knowledge. They have to look for information available online or books in libraries. Such open-ended questions may not only promote students to learn a new profession, salesmen, but also ignite their passion to read more materials, think independently, identify among confusing ideas, interact with group members, induce the most supporting ideas they look for, and solve problems together.

After the open-ended questions, another challenge is posed to students. They are required to participate in a

role-play activity, some acting as salesmen to promote sales, others acting as potential customers. When preparing for the role-play activities, students have to make use of the effective strategies in sales promotion they have grasped in advance to convince others of the quality of their products. In the whole process, students relate new information learned recently to their previous accumulation. Students within group can analyze, argue, and make a conclusion about relevant materials so that they can have a general understanding of the concept and application of Marketing and Marketing strategies and use knowledge to address actual problems. Some group members even design advertisement and logo for their products. In the process of advertisement design, students' ability to analyze, and cooperate can be developed. If teachers consciously and continually design tasks related to real life for students to address such as open-ended group discussion, inquiry-oriented reflection, higher order thinking activities, chances are that students' critical thinking can be developed. In addition to group discussion and role play activities, students are also encouraged to preview the passage, which involves underlining good expression and sentence patterns, marking topics or issues worthy of discussion, distinguishing key points from non-key points. Such activities may enable students to have a full understanding of the passage before analysis in class.

### *3.2 In-class Section*

In this section, much importance in classroom activities should be paid more to developing students' skills to think independently and critically than to the content analysis. Thus, classroom atmosphere should be established to endow students with more opportunities to raise questions, probe into different situations, think critically, evaluate upon different choices and finally make rational decisions. Moreover, classroom activities should be designed to direct and enlighten students to analyze, integrate, criticize and argue among different situations. A case in point is that reflective questions and evaluation of critical thinking skills should be incorporated into analysis of the text organization. Students can learn to utilize some strategies to make a comparison and contrast about the background information, infer and summarize the main idea of the passage, and then retell the passage.

When dealing with Unit 7, *Life of a Salesman*, teacher incorporate introduction and evaluation of the background information, text illustration and group discussion into classroom activities to cultivate the core skills of critical thinking, reflection, questioning, evaluation and summarizing. First, students within groups are assigned with task to look for information about the author and characteristics of the 1980s, especially Welfare of the United States in 1990s and report to the class. After that, students evaluate that the introduction is a little hard to understand due to the improper arrangement of the organization, fast speed of the speakers, and some obscure words. Meanwhile, students also pose some questions about the report and the passage, and some even add some reporting omissions. For instance, why does the main character in the passage have to struggle to make a living, and even sell his house to cure himself in America with such sound development of welfare? What is the original intention of the author in writing the story? When discussing these questions, students are motivated to think creatively. Students can express freely, to decode the intrinsic value conveyed in the passage, experience the exotic culture, and to evaluate whether arguments used in this passage are correlated, sufficient to support the main idea, finally to make a comparison and contrast between Chinese and American Welfare System. What's more, By means of brainstorming, students are also encouraged to report in English within groups about some difficulties and obstacles they have been confronted with when finishing those tasks, and how do they address them. Some key phrases and sentence patterns are required to be applied when they express in English. But they are educated that English only serves as a media to fulfill tasks. Such open-minded questions and discussion are beneficial for them to develop sense of innovation to deal with problems, divergent thinking and ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, infer, self-regulate.

Then, teacher posed some questions about the key phrases, sentence pattern and content understanding of the passage which are already previewed by students. students summarize the passage structure and main idea, analyze correlation among different part.

### *3.3 After-class Section*

After analysis of the text, teacher should make use of some activities to cultivate and reinforce students' critical thinking. Writing can facilitate thought and thinking, allowing students to retrospect. It is also an application from the language input to the language output. When dealing with writing, teacher should highlight process-oriented writing rather than product-oriented writing. Students are encouraged to rewrite several drafts. In the process, students can use more supporting and powerful ideas to support their argument, which is of great help for them to reflect on their writing and explore the topic deeply. Students are noticed that passages sufficient in good sentence patterns and phrases but deficient in contents, new ideas, in-depth analysis and reasoning cannot grade high. Only when arguments, arguing techniques, structure and language style coordinate with each

other can a passage be judged as a good one.

When a writing task is assigned, students within groups are required to collect information for the topic, later share what they have collected, argue why these materials have been collected and why some materials finally be adopted, spot weakness in others' view. Group members are encouraged to defend themselves with supporting materials and proof. During the process, students' thought are broadened, deepen rather than echo the view of others. Such way of brainstorming can serve as effective guarantee for high-quality writing with logical and readable contents. Students should be explicitly informed of how to evaluate others' composition. By evaluating each other, students gradually develop the critical skills such as analysis and reflection instead of repeating teachers' remark mechanically. Assessing standards range from the use of syntax, lexical choices and mistakes to main organization, supporting, logical and innovative ideas in the passage, and the degree of cohesion and coherence of the passage.

#### **4. Implication and Conclusion**

##### *4.1 Implication*

Though college English curriculum in China has undergone a sequence of reforms, too much concern in English teaching has been paid to the enhancement of students' linguistic competence. The cultivation of students' emotional ability and cognitive ability have been ignored. Therefore, after so many years English study, they not only lack communicative ability to some degree, but also suffer from emotional illiteracy. Though it is not a must to cultivate students' critical thinking skills at the price of sacrificing the development of students' linguistic competence, it is necessary to reform the test format in China, for both English teachers and students are mainly test-oriented, with focus on linguistic knowledge acquisition, ignoring the cultivating of development of critical thinking skills. Taking writing for example, the writing can be open-ended ones with students expressing their ideas more freely and unstructuredly.

In the traditional classroom atmosphere, teachers are regarded as authority, students subject themselves to them with no time and space allocated for students to reflect on the degree of value and truth of knowledge they have learnt, which is obstructive to the development of students' critical thinking. Therefore, teachers are expected to make a change to their role, teachers acting as counselors and mediators to facilitate language learning and students' cognitive abilities. Namely, they should not simply regard themselves as knowledge transmitters in a narrow sense but as mediators to assist students thinking independently and autonomously. More interactive activities should be designed for students to interpret, explain, analyze, regulate, infer and evaluate. Students can discuss and negotiate with teacher equally. For instance, before class, duty reporter is required to introduce hot-debated news to the whole class. After that, some students can pose questions with regard to the topic, discuss together, analyze and comment on its background origin, reason why it happens, draw a plausible conclusion, predict its future development, give recommendation for further inquiry.

The way to assess also needs to be reformed. Chinese college English teachers mainly adopt the summative assessment. Formative assessment such as reflective journals and portfolios can be implemented in class for students themselves, peers and teacher to assess so as to enable students to regulate their learning process and the performance of their English study. Such assessing activities also contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills.

As critical thinking skills are not innately born with, but cultivated through training and practice. Developing them involves a process of cognitive and intellectual practice. English teachers should change teaching method, regarding language learning process as a process not only to promote students' language competence more to cultivate their thought. This paper deals with a practical model to cultivate students' critical thinking through classroom activities. Useful classroom activities such as role play, case study, discussion teaching, and debate are implemented in integrated reading course in which English teaching is regarded as a medium for students to be fully involved in English class, and come up with independent and innovative ideas. The cultivation of students' critical thinking is regarded as a long-term English teaching objective. Teaching contents, teaching procedures, classroom activities design and after-class activities are well-coordinated for students to positively participate in English class and practice so as to cultivate students' critical thinking in English class.

##### *4.2 Suggestions for Further Research*

The cultivation of students' critical thinking involves a sequence of intellectual activities. It seems that students' critical thinking can be cultivated and improved through explicit instructions and practice in integrated English reading course which highlights dynamic consideration and reflection of the students. Students learn to pose questions and challenge, come up with different, independent and innovative ideas. More teaching methodology

in English language teaching can also be researched about its contribution to the improvement of students' critical thinking.

Since cultivation of students' critical thinking requires a long period of time, longitudinal studies are strongly suggested to be conducted. More students in different grades can be required to be measured upon the beginning and end of the College English Course over the level of their critical thinking. Students can go through systematic training to check the degree of its feasibility of different English teaching methodology. In addition, case study can be conducted to help faculties explore effective way to improve students' critical thinking.

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