

An Empirical Study on Cultivation of English Majors' Critical Thinking in Private Colleges

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ABSTRACT

In context of alarming absence of critical thinking and national call for “Golden Courses”, *Advanced English* course carries out a series of teaching reform to enhance English majors’ critical thinking. This paper aims to investigate students’ opinion of CT-oriented teaching reform and the role of each teaching activity in cultivating critical thinking by adopting a blended research method of both questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Based on data analysis, most respondents express their satisfaction with the cultivation of critical thinking in this course but show their uncertainty regarding the significance of upper-level activities like evaluation and role play. Also, they demonstrate their cluelessness about the effect of various group work and writing tasks in cultivating critical thinking. Recommendations are proposed accordingly for subsequent teaching practice.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, teaching reform, evaluation, survey*

1. INTRODUCTION

Absence of critical thinking among English majors in China was first put forward as an issue in 1998. Huang Yuanshen [1-2] called for a thorough reform in teaching focus, curriculum setting, TEM-4/TEM-8 and the like, so as to eradicate the long-standing absence of critical thinking. Li Liwen [3] also pointed out that it is completely possible for English majors to consolidate and enhance basic skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, and at the same time achieve the goal of improving critical thinking by reducing the class time spent on skill training and updating teaching content and teaching methods. Sun Youzhong [4] discussed feasible measures to enhance critical thinking from the perspectives of training objectives, curriculum setting, teaching methods, curriculum tests, textbook compilation and teacher development. Wen Qiufang [5] believed that critical thinking is an important part of foreign language proficiency, and considered the cultivation of critical thinking in terms of national competitiveness and soft power. Although the importance of cultivating critical thinking of English majors is generally acknowledged in domestic field of foreign language studies, there is relatively little literature on how to cultivate this competence, especially on how to foster critical thinking in private colleges. Therefore, based on the comprehensive analysis of domestic and foreign research, this paper attempts to explore how to build critical thinking-oriented teaching mode tailored for English majors in private colleges, and investigate students’ feedback on corresponding teaching reform through hybrid research methods.

2. CULTIVATION OF ENGLISH MAJORS’ CRITICAL THINKING

Based on the theoretical framework proposed by scholars and given the status quo of private colleges and students, the author adopts the following teaching reform measures to address current problems in English intensive reading course:

2.1. Teaching Design

The main theoretical basis of teaching design for *Advanced English* is the six-level cognitive ability model proposed by Anderson based on the educational taxonomy by famous American educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom, namely, memory, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation and creation respectively, which defines the major competence involved in thinking, and also matches the teaching objectives of intensive reading course for English majors. The pre-class assignments mainly include memory of words and grammatical points, understanding of textual structure and author’s writing purpose, which aim to boost students’ autonomous learning; during class, students are encouraged to focus on text, explore the theme, analyze writing strategies and appreciate rhetoric devices; after-class activities mainly center around high-level activities such as translation, writing, case study and cultural comparison. The three-phase teaching process not only enhances students’ cognitive ability, but also cultivates their emotional qualities, thus enabling students to learn autonomously

before class, collaboratively in class, and profoundly after class.

2.2. Teaching Methods

Under the guidance of humanism, *Advanced English* employs a variety of teaching methods, including heuristic teaching, project-based teaching, blended teaching, topic teaching and genre teaching, so as to stimulate students' interest in learning, cultivate students' critical thinking and humanistic quality.

Heuristic teaching is realized mainly through Socratic questioning. The teacher designs a series of thought-provoking and cognition-appropriate questions to facilitate students' comprehension of text and author's point of view. Students are gradually inspired to read between the lines, dig deep into the theme and challenge the already taken-for-granted concepts instead of blindly following what is said in texts.

Project-based teaching aims to equip students with fundamental methods of scientific research, including selection of respondents, data collection and analysis by means of research such as group projects or presentation. Different group projects and class presentations enable students to master the basic principles of quantitative and qualitative research and acquire how to diversify samples in research, how to avoid ambiguity in questionnaire design, how to ask a good question in a semi-structured interview and how to conduct data analysis, which lays a foundation for their further academic research.

Topic teaching aims to provide students with different perspectives by supplementing reading materials related to the theme of text and encourage them to interpret the text from multiple perspectives. Based on these topics, the teacher designs various teaching activities such as comparative analysis, mini-debate, poster design, class presentation, punchline translation and individualized vocabulary bank, so as to ignite students' motivation and expand their humanistic vision.

Hybrid teaching refers to the organic combination of online and classroom teaching by establishing an online learning platform, thus creating an environment for independent learning. In hybrid teaching, modern educational technology is optimized to improve classroom efficiency and motivate students' learning enthusiasm.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' FEEDBACK ON TEACHING REFORM

3.1. Research Method

The purpose of this study aims to investigate students' evaluation of critical-thinking-oriented teaching reform practiced in *Advanced English* and the effectiveness of each teaching activity in cultivating their critical thinking. A research of combining both quantitative and qualitative

methods is employed, in form of questionnaire as well as face-to-face interview. SPSS17 is used for data analysis, including descriptive statistics, independent sample T test, variance analysis and linear regression. Regarding the qualitative method, semi-structured interview is adopted, in which respondents are asked further questions spontaneously based on their previous answers in order to gain an accurate and deep perception of the questions.

3.2. Survey

The respondents of the survey are 65 English juniors in Tianhua College, Shanghai Normal University. The research questions are as follows: 1. Is the cultivation of critical thinking the priority of *Advanced English* teaching? 2. Is *Advanced English* teaching satisfactory in developing students' critical thinking? 3. How does each teaching activity in *Advanced English* effect students' critical thinking?

The main theoretical basis of the questionnaire is the six-level model of cognitive ability. Accordingly, the questionnaire is divided into five categories, namely, vocabulary & grammar, text comprehension & theme discussion, analysis of writing strategies, appreciation of rhetoric devices and translation & writing, with a total of 40 questions.

Meanwhile, based on the Dynamic Classroom Teaching Mode 2.0 drafted by Tianhua College, the questions in the questionnaire are ordered according to their corresponding teaching links, namely, before-class preview assignments (questions 1-9), classroom teaching activities (questions 10-33) and after-class evaluation and extension (questions 34-40). As is shown in SPSS17 data analysis, the overall reliability of the questionnaire is 0.952 and the coefficient value is higher than 0.8, indicating that the reliability is very high and can be used for further analysis. The questionnaire employs a five-level Linkert scale, with options 1-5 meaning "totally disagree", "disagree", "not sure", "agree" and "strongly agree" respectively.

3.3. Data Analysis

In response to the first question, "Is the cultivation of critical thinking the priority of *Advanced English* teaching?", among the 65 students who participated in the survey, 44 replied "agree" or "strongly agree" (67.69%), 21 chose "not sure" (21.54%), and 7 chose "strongly disagree" or "disagree" (10.77%).

It can be seen that nearly 70% of the students agree that *Advanced English* gives top priority to the cultivation of critical thinking. The second question "Is *Advanced English* teaching satisfactory in developing students' critical thinking? ", a total of 56 students responded "agree" or "strongly agree" (86.16%), 8 chose "not sure" (12.31%) while only one chose "disagree" (1.54%), indicating overwhelming satisfaction with the course regarding its cultivation of students' critical thinking.

Responses to the third question reveal the following: the top three teaching activities considered as most contributing to critical thinking are questions 23. The detailed explanation of key words and sentences in text ($M = 4.477$, $SD = 0.615$), 8. The grammatical analysis and translation of long complex sentences ($M = 4.338$, $SD = 0.594$), and 19. The clarification of logic between sentences and paragraphs ($M = 4.308$, $SD = 0.584$) respectively, which shows that students' interpretation of critical thinking still remains at the lower level cognitive ability, such as memorizing words, understanding and translating sentences and analyzing grammatical points, which can be attributed to students' limited language proficiency. Therefore, great importance is attached to such teaching activities as vocabulary, grammar and translation.

In addition, students expressed approval for interactive teaching activities, such as questions 21. In-depth exploration of theme in text ($M = 4.308$, $SD = 0.528$), 22. The teacher's heuristic questions ($M = 4.308$, $SD = 0.66$) and 10. Lead-in of topic ($M = 4.231$, $SD = 0.553$). Student Z in class 1 replied in the interview, "The lead-in is often in form of the current affairs, very up-to-date, which is interesting and engaging. In class, the teacher guides us to think through heuristic questions, and leads us into the world of texts by means of increasingly challenging questions. And case study enables us to relate to our lives and dig deeper the underlying causes, which is totally different from the previous superficial learning and gives us a sense of achievement." Question 34. Watching teacher's mini-lectures after class ($M=4.262$, $SD=0.691$) also ranked high, indicating students' affirmation of mini lectures in cultivating critical thinking. Student W in Class 2 commented, "The mini-lectures recorded by the teacher is usually short and concise, only a few minutes. Each mini-lecture focuses consistently on one point at a time and you can watch it again and again. It is very effective." In terms of teaching link, among the top ten teaching activities, up to seven fell into the category of in-class activities (Questions 19, 21, 22, 23, 10, 18, 11), activities of before-class and after-class accounted for only two (Q8, 9) and one (Q34) respectively, indicating students' preference of teacher-dominated in-class activities. Their favor of mini-lectures recorded by the teacher after class is another indicator. Students' overdependence on teacher means that there is much room for improvement in their autonomous and independent learning.

In contrast, among the ten teaching activities considered least effective in cultivating critical thinking, five are related to group work (30. peer review of group work, 31. group project, 29. in-class presentation of group work, 32. design and editing of PowerPoint, 24. group discussion & brainstorming); the other five involve writing tasks (27. playscript writing & role play, 38. writing academic essay, 28. adapted writing, 37. book report, 26. application of writing strategy to practice). It can be seen that teaching activities of high-level cognitive abilities such as evaluation and creation ranked the lowest, including 30. peer review of group work ($M = 3.215$, $SD = 0.944$), 27. playscript writing & role play ($M = 3.231$, $SD = 1.012$),

and 38. writing academic essay ($M = 3.446$, $SD = 0.884$), which suggests students' uncertainty about and negative attitude towards the role of such activities. In the interview, student L in Class 1 explained, "When reviewing other groups' work, we either didn't know what to say or just gave invariable praises to avoid embarrassment. As to role-play, some classmates are either shy or perfunctory. They just muddle through the performance, which is a waste of time for the audience." Student S in Class 2 added, "Language level varies from member to member in a single group, hence different contributions to the final work. Undeniably, some are sloppy and irresponsible, while others are overburdened, due to issues in task distribution and communication." Regarding various writing tasks, from in-class writing practice to book reports, from writing follow-ups to academic essays, the more challenging the writing task is, the more reluctant students will feel to do, and the less effective the activity will be rendered. Other comments include "Writing is my Achilles' heel", "The challenge of the task makes me totally at a loss", which illustrates a prevailing frustration among students. One possible cause is that the writing course is already completed as a prerequisite in the first two years, hence no special writing course tailored for junior English majors. Due to lack of relevant writing practice and limited knowledge in creative and academic writing, students find it a thorny issue to write.

3.4. Results and Analysis

Based on the above data analysis, the following can be drawn:

- 1) A majority of students agree that *Advanced English* course prioritizes cultivation of critical thinking, and express their satisfaction with this course;
- 2) Activities considered most contributing to critical thinking mainly focus on the first three levels of close reading, namely, paraphrase, explicating, and analyzing [6], such as paraphrasing key words and difficult sentences, explication of theme and viewpoint and analysis of writing purpose and author's tone, in contrast with their cluelessness of the significance of upper-level activities like evaluating and role play;
- 3) Students express their approval of teacher-led in-class activities and teacher-recorded mini lectures, while they are not sure about the role of preview assignments and after-class evaluation in cultivating critical thinking;
- 4) Students show their uncertainty about the effect of various group work and writing tasks on cultivation of critical thinking.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results, the author thinks that *Advanced English* should be improved from the following aspects:

- 1) Assignments should be student-tailored and developmentally appropriate, and the difficulty should be

raised step by step. Too much challenge will frustrate students and spoil their motivation for learning. At the same time, students should be endowed with freedom to choose within a particular range according to their academic interests.

2) In-class teaching should be student-centered while teachers function as the guides and facilitators of students' learning. Students should be encouraged to play a bigger role in class.

3) Teaching materials that are up-to-date and closely related to students' life experience should be fully exploited and incorporated into teaching activities so as to sparkle their interest, trigger their learning motivation, and encourage their in-depth learning in accordance with individualized academic interest.

4) Mini-lectures that boast thorough and systematic explanation on one focus at a time can effectively harness students' autonomous learning after class. Corresponding exercises that match the lectures should be designed to encourage students' discussion, thus cultivating their independent learning.

5) Writing tasks should be quality-oriented, and assigned to students gradually from in-class writing to book reports, from adapted writing to creative writing and finally to academic essay. It is advisable that teachers provide adequate, original and idiomatic supplementary materials beforehand to equip students with abundant language input. In class, the teacher focuses on analyzing the logic and language features, and students are encouraged to collect useful materials and establish their own reservoir of expression, extract plausible strategies that can be used in future writing. Besides, after students submit their writing assignments, teachers need to provide immediate and effective feedbacks, and offer a sample if possible.

6) As to students' headache - group work, the teacher should communicate with each group before class, check their presentation in advance, and provide guidance and support if necessary. In class, explicit evaluation standards or scoring rubrics should be offered for effective peer review.

7) According to Paul & Elder [7], "Role-playing an author is the ultimate test of understanding... To role play an author, you need to enter the author's mind and speak as if you were the author. You will discuss any questions by adopting the voice of the author and think within the author's logic." Therefore, role-playing is the highest level of critical reading and should be given more emphasis in cultivating students' critical thinking. Students can choose their own partners to form a pair, in which one reads through the text and raises important questions regarding the text while the other needs to imply about the author's logic and viewpoint and respond to these questions. Peer review among pairs is encouraged and teacher's timely feedback is also necessary. Role-playing should be anything but muddling through the work. It should aim at exploring author's logic and speculating on author's viewpoint, and make it explicit in the form of Q&A or interview.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper aims to investigate students' evaluation of critical-thinking-oriented teaching reform and the role of each teaching activity in cultivating critical thinking by a combination of questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Based on data analysis, a majority of students express their satisfaction with the cultivation of critical thinking in *Advanced English*; simultaneously, they reveal their uncertainty regarding the significance of upper-level activities such as evaluation and role play and the effect of various group work and writing tasks in cultivating critical thinking. A series of recommendations are put forward accordingly for subsequent teaching practice.

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