Teaching Strategies in the "Greek Myths" Chapter based on the Hierarchical Model of Critical Thinking Ability

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to be an exploration of a series of effective teaching strategies of the "Greek Myths" chapter in an extended and optional course "Western Culture" in college English teaching applying the hierarchical model of critical thinking ability proposed by Wen Qiufang(2009). Through a comprehensive investigation and analysis of the model and its correlation with teaching strategies, it elaborately explores how multiple elements in a content-based course such as "content" and "language", "input" and "output", "tool feature" and "culture feature" can be dynamically and flexibly integrated into a highly-efficient mechanism according to whether both students' language competence, communication ability and cultural awareness can be enhanced.

Keywords: Teaching Strategies, Greek Myths, Hierarchical Model, Critical Thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

As a content-based extended course in college English, "Western Culture" aims at enhancing students' cultural awareness as well as the language and communication competence via the class activities concerning western philosophy, history, politics, economics, religion, customs, and national values. As the root of western literature and art, Greek mythology has generated a profound influence in literature, language, value, and philosophy in the modern English culture. So Greek Mythology needs to be encompassed as an indispensable topic when a course about western culture is launched.

In the modern education, critical thinking skills are reckoned to be one of the most important teaching objectives in all fields. The hierarchical model of critical thinking ability proposed by professor Wen Qiufang in 2009 integrated dynamically the features of previous theoretical frames and completely presents the muti-dimensional characteristic of "critical thinking", which can be flexibly and effectively applied in the teaching of western culture so as to inspire and enhance students' active thinking ability, critical judgement of cultural elements, and thus improve students' cultural awareness, communication awareness, as well as their cultural confidence [3].

2. APPROACHING THE HIERARCHICAL MODEL OF CRITICAL THINKNG

The hierarchical model proposed by professor Wen Qiufang has defined "critical thinking" from the perspectives of self-regulation ability, cognition, and emotion, featuring the hierarchical relationship between them [1]. This model integrates the critical thinking skills into three categories: analysis, reasoning, and evaluation, and meanwhile simplifies the cognitive criteria and emotional features into five categories separately. The following table illustrates the hierarchical model of critical thinking.

Table 1. The hierarchical model of critical thinking

Hierarchy one: **meta critical thinking**		
Hierarchy two: **critical thinking**		
Cognition		
Skills	**Criteria**	**Emotions**
Analysis Inference Evaluation	Clarity Relativity Logic Flexibility	Curiosity Openness Confidence Integrity, Grit

Enhancing the innovation in talents' cultivating modes oriented by the building of critical thinking ability, and creating advanced foreign language talents with comprehensive skills and international perspectives have been recognized commonly as the essential teaching objectives in college English teaching reform by most scholars. This detailed analysis and clarification of critical thinking ability as a hierarchical model manifests the complexity and richness of "critical thinking" and thus increases the attraction of research in this field yet facilitates the teaching activities in an extended course in which the hierarchical model can be largely referred to and applied.

3. APPLICATION OF THE HIERARCHICAL MODEL OF CRITICAL THINKING IN THE "GREEK MYTHS" CHAPTER

"Western Culture" is developed as an extended and optional course for the college non-English majors at a higher level in English language competence. With a consuming passion and rough knowledge of the western culture, students have superior anticipations for how the course is presented and thus the teaching objectives, including improving students' cultural awareness and enhancing their language competence, communication awareness, as well as critical thinking ability need to be achieved via a series of advanced, diverse, and dynamic teaching methods and tools than what are commonly adopted in a foundation course. Accordingly, the hierarchical model of critical thinking can be largely integrated into each specific topic of this course to build students' cognitive skills, cultural awareness, and communicative competence when the cultural messages and cultural interpretations and reflections are closely associated with a series of content-based and skill-based activities and strategies [4].

3.1. Building the Hierarchical Model of Critical Thinking Framework

The building of the framework of the hierarchical model of critical thinking and the application of it in the "Greek Myths" chapter is actually a combination of content-based activities and skill-based activities, and an integration between cultural interpretation and thinking-fostering strategies [3]. In the "skills" hierarchy, students are targeted to be able to analyze the features of

any myth or mythical figure with proper words, infer the possible meanings of new vocabulary in the reading and listening teaching materials and evaluate the cultural impacts of the myths and figures and thus enhance the awareness and competence in making comparisons between cultures. These are the basic and primary skills students need in a culture-targeted course and can equally improve the efficiency of vocabulary teaching.

The "emotion" hierarchy is an embodiment and demand of students' psychology and attitude in learning. To have a full knowledge of the cultural messages of the myths and, more prominently, improve the cross-cultural awareness and boost culture confidence and dignity, one is expected to be inspired in the curiosity about the hidden culture of the myths and pertinent culture differences in their origins and impacts. Thus students are supposed to effectively balance between endorsing culture exclusiveness and highly maintaining culture confidence of their home culture. Moreover, students need to recognize the fact that the learning of a culture-targeted course is a rather complex system, and one has to be confident and tolerant enough to persist in learning and exploring with diverse activities featuring listening, speaking, reading and vocabulary building to accumulate culture information and enhance basic language skills.

In terms of the "criteria" hierarchy, i.e., standards in evaluating one's critical thinking ability, the items listed apply equally to the evaluation of students' learning effects in such an integrated course. Firstly, students are expected to achieve accuracy, vividness, coherence and idiomaticness in retelling the mythical stories. Secondly, giving an objective judgment on myths and mythical figures as well as balancing culture respect and culture confidence require and meanwhile practice one's logic and flexibility in thinking. In addition, an uppermost purpose for students to learn ancient Greek myths is to seek their correlations with the reality in the modern world. Consequently, associating the myths and mythical figures with students' real life and study, employing them in recognizing, analyzing and commenting the current natural or social phenomena must be highlighted and largely practiced in teaching. The following figure is a trial to build the hierarchical model of critical thinking applied in the "Greek Myths" chapter [2].
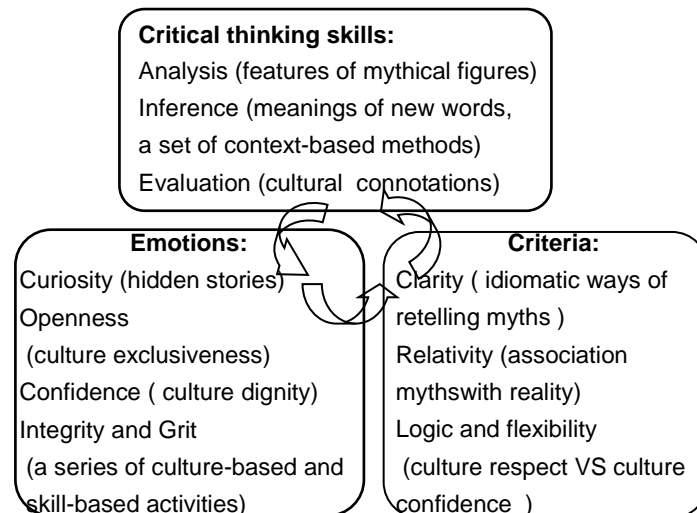
Critical thinking skills:

Analysis (features of mythical figures)

Inference (meanings of new words,

a set of context-based methods)

Evaluation (cultural connotations)

Emotions:

Curiosity (hidden stories)

Openness

(culture exclusiveness)

Confidence (culture dignity)

Integrity and Grit

(a series of culture-based and

skill-based activities)

Criteria:

Clarity (idiomatic ways of

retelling myths)

Relativity (association

mythswith reality)

Logic and flexibility

(culture respect VS culture

confidence)

Figure 1 Framework of the hierarchical model of critical thinking ability in the "Greek Myths" chapter

As is shown in the figure, the teaching of the "Greek Myths" chapter can be a flexible process where critical thinking skills, emotions and criteria can be largely applied.

3.2. Approaching the Comprehensive Teaching Methods and Tools

Based on the above analysis and exploration, a set of teaching tools and methods can be explored in the "Greek Myths" chapter in the extended course "Western Culture" for college English learners. The following is the trial and design of teaching applying the hierarchical model of critical thinking framework.

3.2.1. Mythical Stories through Movie Clips

In the "Western Culture" course, movie clips, including hit films, TV operas, or documentaries can offer as effective media for learning the culture of western countries as well as enhancing the language competence with authentic English of the speakers or characters [4]. The abundant video files about Greek mythical heroes and classical stories can be dynamically, flexibly, and selectively compiled in the course as the principal media for students to learn Greek mythology. Each movie clip can be edited into no more than 5 minutes, conveying a representative mythical figure or story with concise plots, culture elements, and idiomatic language. Compared with mere reading materials, the movie clips enable students to get acquainted with the key knowledge of Greek myths and their cultural connotations in a more intuitive way. Students would present a good fascination with the mysterious plots, exquisite motive pictures, concise language style, and authentic pronunciation. The following table illustrates the basic train of thought for the listening and speaking exercise design based on the 5 movie clips and the application of hierarchical model of critical thinking in the "Greek Myths" chapter.

Each movie clip functions as a listening material, an input item for students to comprehend the cultural information and think further the cultural connotations. Consequently, a series of listening and speaking exercises are designed based on each movie clip and thus the output and input are integrated dynamically to enhance the students' cultural awareness and language competence.

Through individual work and collaborative work, students are expected to accomplish the listening exercises in or after classes based on listening to the movie clips without subtitle several times until they have a thorough comprehension of the detailed cultural messages of them. These listening exercises are designed to practice students' listening ability in targeted cultural contexts with diverse language styles. Speaking exercises as the output part are chiefly aiming at inspiring students' critical and creative thinking and fostering students' expressiveness on certain cultural phenomena, ideas or behaviors, and above all, cultivating their awareness and capability in exploring the cultural values of the myths in varied cultural backgrounds.

3.2.2. Vocabulary Building

As an extended course in college English teaching, "Western Culture" largely embodies the integration between the "tool feature" and "culture feature" of English teaching. Apart from listening and speaking activities, specific vocabulary building would be involved in the teaching strategies. The content-based vocabulary teaching in a mythology-themed chapter are expected to instruct students to accumulate and enlarge their vocabulary in describing and evaluating Greek mythical figures and stories. Paraphrase and translation activities would be mainly designed for students. Through comparing students' translated and paraphrased sentences with the original sentences from

the teaching materials, students would be able to realize how awkward their own expressions are and thus

memorize effectively the appropriate and authentic expressions.

Table 2. Design for the Listening And Speaking Practice based on Movie Clips

Movie Clips	"Approaching Greek Myths", "Zeus", "The Minotaur", "Medusa", "Trojan Horse"
Listening Practice	content questions, spot dictation, true-or-false judgement, plot rearrangement, "mind-map" completion
Speaking Practice Topics	1) key features of Greek myths 2) Hera's solution to her marital problems 3) allusion and scenic spot originating from the myth 4) female injustice and the English idiom "looks that kill" stemming from the myth 5) allusions: "Trojan Horse", "Helen of Troy", "Greek gift"
Expected Teaching Effects	1) Skills: listening for the major plots and making sound judgments, allusion exploration with objective interpretations 2) Emotion: a contrast and comparison analysis on some core values, inspiration on culture confidence 3) Criteria: awareness and capability in associating the myths with reality(scenic spot, idioms, modern values)

The following table illustrates the major activities of vocabulary building and the expected teaching effects when "hierarchical thinking model" of critical thinking is incorporated.

Table 3. Design for vocabulary building activities

Vocabulary classification: mythical figures' appearance and personality; feelings and emotions; position, destiny, and experience; cultural evaluations	
Activities	**Expected effects**
1) context examining 2)"meaning-check" questioning	1) cultivating the awareness of constant questioning and doubting 2) practicing the ability of inference
1) translating 2) paraphrasing 3) polishing	1) enhancing clarity, accuracy, and coherence in expressing, 2) inspiring an insight into culture comparison and contrast,
1) associating with reality 2) proper use	highlighting the practical use of words in reading and speaking in other contexts

The words and expressions that students are expected to learn are classified systematically. With the context-based vocabulary learning, sentence translating and paraphrasing, and a comparison or contrast between the authentic expressions and their own, students' interests can be stimulated, and their awareness and abilities of inference can be practiced. With the

meanings of the targeted words or phrases gradually getting clarified, the relevant cultural information can be detected. Students thus would be able to talk about or write about the relevant topic in an idiomatic, accurate and fluent way. Moreover, they would be inspired in using these vocabulary dynamically in diverse contexts.

3.2.3. Collaborative Oral Presentation

A collaborative oral presentation refers to a presentation task undertaken by a team of students focusing on one general topic in which each student is responsible for a part of the whole. To fulfill such a task, students should be required to work out a rough but logical and streamlined outline of their presentation collaboratively and then each of them has to specialize and target on one aspect of it. Consequently, some transitional devices have to be presented in between each two parts or aspects and there would be an introduction and a closing part to make the presentation complete and coherent. How teamwork is embodied and how each student gives the speech expressively and impressively in prescribed time are largely evaluated. The extended course "Western Culture" covers 9 chapters and thus 9 teams are organized among students to be responsible separately for each of the specific topics. As for the "Greek Myths" chapter, the team that is responsible for the theme is asked to work on the characteristics of Greek mythology, relating an entire story, explaining the idioms stemming from the stories, associating the mythical stories with reality, etc.. With the aid of PPT in which the outline, mind map, key illustrations of the speech are presented, each member of the team is supposed to give a speech concerning one

of the above aspects in no more than 3 minutes. The other students are expected to listen and give certain reflections on their speeches based on these criteria: fluency, accuracy, vividness, convincingness, coherence, rhythm, and collaboration. The following chart illustrates the major criteria and their purposes in the presentations.

Table 4. Major criteria for students' collaborative oral presentations

Criteria	Purposes
Fluency	Enhancing students' sense of language; strengthening the the efficiency in language input
Accuracy	Encouraging students to accurate the language input ; streamlining the information conveyance
Vividness	Encouraging students to enlarge the vocabulary and impress upon them the aesthetic judgement of language
Convincingness	Guiding students to associate the cultural facts and evaluations with reality; instructing them to adding evidence to judgments
Coherence	Guiding students to convey information and express their ideas in a logical way
Rhythm	Encouraging students to sense and practice the nonverbal factors in speeches
Collaboration	Promoting students' mutual exchange; enhancing students' collaborative ability in study

The students are expected to give the speeches in a fluent, smooth way without checking the scripts. Apart from it, they need to achieve correctness and appropriateness in the use of words and grammar, employing more advanced words, diverse sentence patterns and certain rhetoric devices. In order to make the students' points of view convincing, they are encouraged to associate the evaluations with reality, adding evidence to the judgements. Meanwhile, effective transitional devices are largely suggested to enhance the coherence and logic of the speeches. Differing from indivisual writing assignments, the collaborative oral presentations require students to seek for a proper rhythm so as to establish a more desirable nonverbal and emotional communication with the audience [5]. Moreover, collaborations with teammakes both before and in the presentations are also evaluated to promote students' aollaborative awareness and ability in study.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching strategies in the "Greek Myths" chapter in the extended course "Western Culture" in which the classic mythical stories, allusions, cultural parallels, comparisons, and reflections are involved as the major contents, are expected to set an example for the other cultural categories in desirable teaching tasks. Associated with the hierarchical model of critical thinking, they deserve teachers' further exploration so as to achieve the teaching purpose in all dimensions: vocabulary accumulation, presentation skills, cultural awareness and confidence, and above all, logic and critical thinking abilities. The exploration of establishing a correlation between teaching strategies of such a course and hierarchical model of critical thinking is a trial to apply cognitive and thinking theories into language competence training and cultural inspirations. Facts proved that these teaching concepts and approaches are highly feasible and practicable. However, more teaching practice in real class has to be observed, evaluated and thus the strategies can be modified, polished and improved accordingly.

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