



# The Cultivation of Critical Thinking in English Teaching in Chinese College Education

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**Abstract.** Currently, with the acceleration of economic globalization process, talents armed with creative spirit and innovation capacity gradually become the focus of competence in the international community and the key point of cultivating these people relies on the promotion of critical thinking skill. Most educators agree that it is essential that students develop such skills while engaged in academic learning because that enable students to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. Chinese education in colleges stresses much on basic knowledge compared with that of western education. It has proved that there is a lack of critical thinking skills among Chinese college students. More and more scholars and teachers realize the importance of cultivating students' critical thinking ability in foreign language teaching and devote themselves to studying the causes of this situation. It is no doubt that to permeate the cultivation of critical thinking into colleges English teaching possesses practical significance and attracts widely attention. However, the pure traditional teaching pattern produces relatively little effect and the qualities of talent from colleges are difficult to meet the needs of unsettled economic and social development. This study summarizes and analyzes a series of practical teaching strategies in order to combine the critical thinking with college English teaching, covering the language teaching of grammar, listening, speaking, reading, writing from a pragmatic perspective, which has provided a feasible path and idea for college education of critical thinking.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking skill · second language acquisition · English language teaching · University teaching · pedagogy

## 1 Introduction

This thing we call “critical thinking” or “analysis” has strong cultural components. It is more than just a set of writing and thinking technique-it is a voice, a stance, a relationship with texts and family members, friends, teachers, the media, even the history of one's country [1, 2]. Critical thinking is the art of analyzing and evaluating thought processes with a view to improving them. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking [3]. According to Banning, critical thinking involves scrutinizing, differentiating and appraising information as well as reflecting on the information that will be used to make judgements and inform clinical decisions [4]. To advance one's critical thinking skill is the core of international education and the

key issue of higher education in 21st century [5]. Expert group from American universities came up with that it is our education objective to cultivate students with powerful ability of thinking and profound knowledge. Undergraduates ought to learn to think and then think energetically in such unpredictable world condition. Using critical thinking helps students evaluate the arguments of others and their own, resolve conflicts, and come to well-reasoned resolutions to complex problems [6]. A high-quality university student is more likely to analyze problem deeply and thinking in a creative way by using target language, raising doubts to an authority, being reflective and further making a decision with reason. In 1980s, western countries gradually began to study on critical thinking ability. Early in 1998, the UNESCO (united nations educational scientific and cultural organization) issued a declaration that it is one of the missions to cultivate a person's critical and independent attitude in higher education. Some western institutions and organizations had designed multiple ways and scales to measure learners' critical tendency and skills. Some schools put the cultivation of critical thinking ability in first place and offered related courses in order to foster students' such ability. For example, University of Cambridge encourages students to have a questioning spirit and adds this ability into the assessment of entrance examination. It is the requirement for English-major students from Yale University that they should gain deeper insight into human experience and try to become a stronger writer and more powerful analytical thinker after a completion of compulsory course [7]. It is no doubt that critical thinking is a mutual goal for first-class higher education and academic subject throughout the world. Cultivating undergraduates' high-level cognitive ability like critical thinking could conducive to their performance and operation in ongoing future [8].

Compared with a unanimous agreement about the importance of teaching critical thinking skills in western education, China's education tends to stress the superficial understand and command of fundamental knowledge and basic subjects due to the exam-oriented education circumstance where students are generally pushed to swallow knowledge without deep thinking. However, in recent years, in the course of education reformation, the nurture of critical thinking ability took up larger place, which was certainly a progress. As for higher education in China, TESOL is typical field of the implementation of critical thinking. It was in 1990s that critical thinking ability came into Chinese academic world and had raised heated discussions. In 1998, Huang Yuanshen initially raised a concept called the absence of critical thinking among English-major students who always kept silent with a blank mind or hesitated to express views smoothly when they asked to raise some deep questions or give some creative ideas after a seminar [9]. After class, low-frequency usage of target language and less input of foreign periodicals made a fact that their creativity and insight was limited without broad knowledge and active intellection. Similarly, he pointed that English teacher also struggled with original research subjects and had to repeatedly gulp obsolete views in previous works so as to complete scientific research task. This shows that the lack of critical thinking skills in TESOL of China's university is pervasive from top to bottom. Chinese education department published instructional document like National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development program (2010–2020) explicitly claims that students' critical thinking skills and creative spirit should be developed [10]. However, influenced

by traditional exam-oriented education circumstance, China's universities pay less attention to students' critical thinking skills. Currently, there is a notable lack of cultivation on critical thinking skills in China's EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education, which has already attracted widely attention in education world. Critical thinking skills mainly contain one's ability of analysis, explanation, inference, evaluation, reflection and disposal etc. Nevertheless, English-major students usually learn a second language through some rigid ways like imitating, memorizing and cramming rather than try to question about the learning materials in the process. In the meantime, teachers in Chinese universities pay more attention to enhance students' language skills and comprehension of target language instead of providing positive guidance on learners' critical thinking, which means that the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in university simply serves as a language class and loses sight of humanistic feature. Furthermore, deficient assessment system could not evaluate students' critical thinking skills in a scientific way. The question design in excessively standard and official English exams for undergraduate like CET4 and CET6 (the College English Test Band 4 and 6, as a officially national test, is to evaluate China's college students' English skill with unified paper each time [11] basically concern fundamental cognition and basic linguistic knowledge, which tends to be a learning result of mechanic memorization, weakening learners' exploratory and fancy desire for target language in the process of SLA (Second Language Acquisition).

At present, the development of internet and media technology regenerates learning content, learning style and tools in SLA and TESOL offers new ideas and requirement toward the cultivation of critical thinking skills on English-major students in China's universities. Correspondingly, language learners are swarmed with various and polybasic culture shock. In fact, the study of critical thinking skills in China started relatively late and Chinese scholars hardly combined internet media with this ability. Many scholars consider that the quality of critical thinking in SLA is a language practice on the basis of culture, history and social context and is gradually formed in the process of language input and output, which mainly contains three features: pursuing truth, rational judgment and Combination of learning and thinking. In general, the practical research on university students' critical thinking in China is very limited and the cultivation of this ability in TESOL need to be further explored. Therefore, this study reviews strategies in English teaching in Chinese colleges from the following perspectives: grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

## **2 Strategies to Cultivate Critical Thinking in English Teaching**

### **2.1 Grammar Teaching**

Inductive teaching method, in accordance with the principle from the concrete to the abstract, is a student-centered approach and makes students find the grammar rules by themselves under the guidance of teachers. In this way, students gain the language knowledge on their own initiative instead of passive acceptance in sequence through direct observation, comparison, analysis, elementary thinking, discussion and correction, further reflection and eventual summarization. It shows that students' critical thinking skill would be improved in an unconscious way. Take a very simple example, a teacher wants

to explain the usage of a common grammatical expression “so/such that” to students. For the first step, the teacher could offer the following sentence to students.

1)

She is so beautiful that many people like her.

She is such a beautiful girl that many people adore her.

2)

The man is so strong that he can lift the heavy box.

The man is such a strong guy that he can lift the heavy box.

3)

It is so difficult an examination that the majority of students have failed it.

It is such a difficult examination that the majority of students have failed it.

Then, the teacher should ask several relative questions as followed to let students’ think and discuss in groups.

What is the difference and similarity of each pair of the sentences.

Would you please make a piece of sentence yourself in two versions?

You can discuss with your group members and try to summarize a concrete grammar rule.

Finally, after discussion and reflection, students draw a conclusion and the teacher give further assessment and extensive explanation.

It turns out that those knowledge points found by learners themselves would be more impressive. It has been proved that using inductive method to teach English grammar knowledge is more likely to obtain a favorable result.

Mind map, acknowledged as spider diagram or brainstorm as well, is a collection of ideas that have been put into the radical format of a visual diagram [12]. It is a useful technique that supports learning, improves information recording, shows how different facts and ideas are related, and enhances creative problem solving. In the course of grammar teaching, it could be more effective to integrate and summarize the language knowledge points by using literal text, diagram and indicator pictures, making the key points and difficult points protruding, which could better stimulate learners’ memory and lead them to think logically. For example, students would learn different meaning and usage of a word in different learning stages. As the learning content increases, it is very necessary to make a periodical summary on this word, containing all its usages and meanings. To be more specific, the grammatical analysis diagram [13, 14] is shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

## 2.2 Listening Teaching

Interactive listening teaching method refers to a simulative way in which the teacher should lead the students interact and communicate with listening materials including recordings and output from real people, which could not only promote learners’ listening level but also beneficial to the expansion of their thought. It is worth noting that the material selection is very important for the cultivation of critical thinking. For example, the simple dialogue narrative passage is generally used for testing like one-choice question, which is beneficial to practice students’ language skills while educational and academic recordings are helpful students to foster the critical thinking ability. In the course of

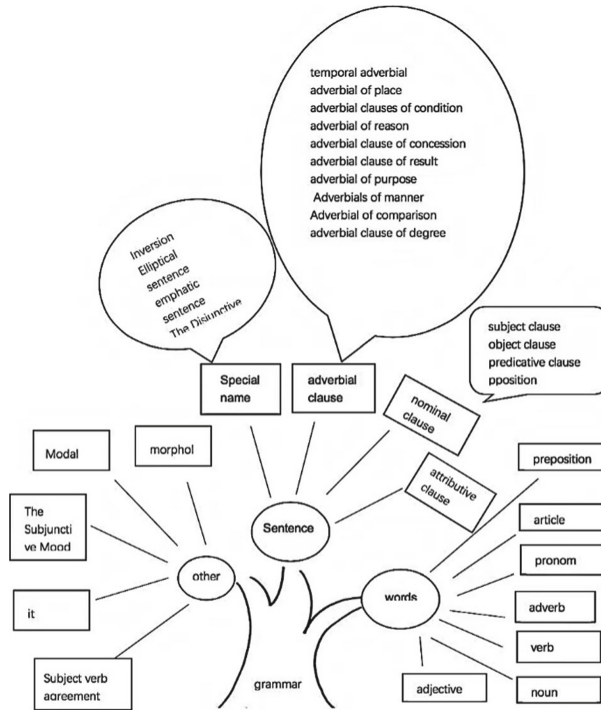


Fig. 1. Grammar tree map

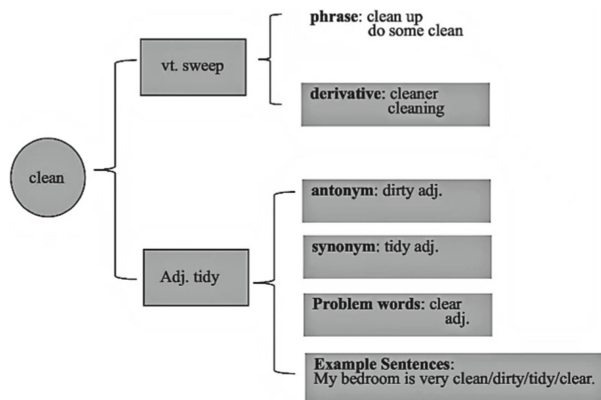


Fig. 2. Lexical map for the word: clean

listening, teachers are supposed to When it comes to recording materials, teachers could provide students with some cultural background and explain new vocabularies and then serve as the medium by leading students repeatedly to listen each segment of the recording until they really know the meaning. After listening, teachers are supposed to come up with some deep and reflective questions on the basis of the recording.

Predictive teaching method Prediction and deduction is two main layers of critical thinking cultivation. This method generally contains two aspects which separately refers that teachers should lead students to develop the ability to forecast upcoming words and infer the missing words according to the listening context and their previous knowledge store including the usage of vocabulary root, functional word and the majority of frequently-used phrases. For instance, if a listener hears the words like “an” or “some”, he shall reflexively estimate that the following word must be a noun. Similarly, if the topic of a listening material is bad weather, those expressions to describe the bad weather such as rainy day, humid atmosphere, sandstorm and air quality rating etc. could immediately arise and range in listeners’ mind. To do this, it is targeted for students to do the listening paragraphs with gap filling practice and after the exercise, teacher ought to specifically explain the language points like root and the method for prediction. Besides, it is much easier for students to memorize new vocabularies through associative memory approach when they organize them into groups like foods or animal classification, which is also conducive to learners’ critical thinking in second language acquisition.

### 2.3 Speaking Teaching

Collaborative learning method takes group with three to five members as the basic form of organization, urging group members to experience peer-assisted learning. In this way, under the teacher’s guidance, students learn how to formulate individual study plan, select reference, allocate study task in a group and control the learning progress, effectively functioning their creativity and initiative. In small collaborative learning group, students increasingly arouse a sense of responsibility over their learning production via communication and cooperation to make up personal insufficiency among members. Additionally, students are more likely to develop self-management ability in order to complete group tasks. Students would actively practice oral English after class, examine and update the old knowledge store and tend to overcome the adverse emotional factors toward learning in the process. Teachers ought to help students acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of different learning styles and develop individual multi-style learning pattern so as to meet different requirements of study tasks.

Situational teaching method allows learners to be exposed to authentic language situation in which the concrete and veritable learning environment could better elevate the learning effect, which is very necessary for second-language learners to practice oral English. Thus, teacher should create real language situation in the class as much as possible to concretize the teaching process.

Dubbing teaching, as a typical situational teaching method, could motivate students’ learning interest and enhance their confidence and sense of achievement. Specifically, teachers firstly play the video clips from classic movies or authentic videos in class and then explain the difficult speaking language points such as liaison, pause, speed and fluctuation for students to memorize and imitate. Then the teacher could divide students into small groups to practice dubbing skills and make a preparation. Finally, the teacher picks up students to dub before classmates with the mute-version of the video and ask others to make comments.

Role play teaching method is another representative situational teaching method and could be used as staged learning task to enhance study enjoyment and enrich recreational

activities. In the course of role performance, students accept no more mechanical and monotonous language practice but proceed oral communication according to abundant conversational situation. Students could freely form a group and choose roles on the basis of performance task. In this process, the main work for teacher is to guide and stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm instead of any interference in rehearsal and practice. After the formal performance, students could initially make a summary to express their feelings and experience and then teachers make comments to evaluate students' advantages and disadvantages and give suggestions.

Presentation and debating method is a kind of advanced language communication activity and high-class critical thinking, which could extensively foster one's various thinking abilities including logical deduction, comment, analysis and synthesis. Therefore, teachers ought to organize some related activities like speeches on given topics, debate competition and impromptu speech to expand students' brain, through which students are prompted to collect information and make further judgement, then formulate one's own viewpoint or interference and finally reach to a conclusion. Teachers, serving as a facilitator need to lead students to reasonably organize the structure and express clearly. Before the speech or debating, students need to make an argumentative preparation on hypothesis put up forward by the opponent group. Actually, the whole process including thinking, classification, inference, induction, deduction and conclusion, is the course of critical thinking. In addition, both students' oral communication and critical thinking would be developed in a long run because this method demands the participants to have high-level language fluency and accuracy, and rigorous logic with adequate proof.

## 2.4 Reading Teaching

Cultural teaching method: it is widely acknowledged that language and culture is inseparable with each other. College students' lack of critical thinking in reading is due to the deficiency of cultural background too much extent. The neglect and ignorance of objective culture penetration in second language learning tends to result in erroneous and biased comprehension toward target reading material. For instance, when a student read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* written by Hardy Thomas, he is unable to truly understand and think about the exploited feminism suffering under restrict lock of abnormal traditional morality if he remains unknown about the characteristics of the times in late 19th century [15]. Therefore, teachers ought to attach importance to cultural teaching, providing enough cultural background and combine the main topic with cultural factor so as to enhance students' comprehension toward reading text and foster the critical thinking. Apart from this, the English reading books except for classic English masterworks in Chinese colleges update relatively slow, making a fact that many students have lost interest in those materials. It is required that the department of teaching and research ought to consciously renew reading materials in colleges and teachers should often provide some moderately difficult readings for students to digest and urge students to read the latest interesting good articles or books under the assistance of new media technology. In the meantime, teachers are supposed to change the traditional reading teaching, through which teachers mainly focus on pure grammatical knowledge and sentence structure.

The advanced reading teaching asks teachers to break the screen of cultural difference and are able to expose learners to cultural phenomenon in target language.

## 2.5 Writing Teaching

Read-write union method: it is acknowledged that reading is language input while writing belongs to language output. In other words, reading could accumulate language materials for writing, telling students how to write and what to write. It appears that the absence of critical thinking in the process of students' writing is attributed to few reserves of reading. For example, there is a big difference between English and Chinese in expression logic that English-speaking people always come straight to the point at the very beginning while Chinese like to lay the groundwork before drawing a conclusion. Sometimes a passage without any grammar errors written by second-language student is unable to reveal the English thinking which means insufficient reading accumulation fails to support learners' writing output or demonstration of critical logic even if their basic language knowledge is standard. Thus, reading can be seen as a breaking hole to combine reading and writing together. To be specific, teachers could offer relative further reading materials for each lecture point and even put this task as obligatory homework to urge students' reading practice. Then, teachers ought to explain the cultural difference for students.

## 3 Conclusion

To sum up, critical thinking skill has already become the core objective of higher education in 21st century and all big industries in China continue to improve their requirements for English talents with high-level comprehensive skills, which prompt colleges and universities to conduct large-scale educational innovation. Critical thinking is seen as the typical characteristic of international and creative talents. From the perspective of a country, to nurture high-quality professionals with innovative consciousness and ability is the primary task of China's education sector, and also an important means to enhance China's international status and competitiveness, which could spread Chinese culture out to abroad as well. A fine critical education is helpful to promote students' transfer ability, bringing benefit for a lifetime. English course is an important platform for the communication of culture and thoughts between China and the West, which could definitely generate the spark of critical thinking through the comparison of two languages and cultures. This paper discusses the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China's college education separately from the perspective of knowledge teaching including grammar and specific language skill teaching covering listening, speaking, reading and writing, which is of distinctive characteristics of current times and offers practicable methods for actual class teaching.

In the long term, apart from the specific teaching methods and patterns, the absence of critical thinking skill in college English teaching can be ascribed to many other factors. For example, English teachers are also deemed to lack critical thinking, which could not foster students' such an ability from top to bottom. Up to now, there is no authoritative assessment system with high-level reliability and validity in China's academic world



to evaluate college students' critical thinking capacity. The speed to update textbooks in college English system is too slow to keep up with hot trends. The development of new media technology provides students' opportunity to study out of class, which means that to some extent the role of English teachers to impart academic knowledge has been replaced. Therefore, the teachers could turn to some new teaching patterns like blended learning and continue to enrich the content in class, enhancing students' invisible dialectic and creative ability. Meanwhile, teachers should do the research on how to better infuse the cultivation of critical thinking skill into teaching for there is no exclusively relative course to develop this capacity. Newman considers that the goal of university education is not an accumulation of knowledge but to learn how to think and proceed inference on the basis of knowledge learning [16]. One can easily be leading or even manipulated without any own independent mind if he merely reads but do not think. Only if a learner tries to think and analyze can he become the master of knowledge rather than to be affiliated. The teaching of skill and knowledge truly costs much time while to exert a subtle influence on one's character and mode of thinking is a lifelong work and we still have much to do.

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