

Study on College English Writing Teaching Led by the Cultivation of Students' Critical Thinking Ability

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Abstract. Critical thinking ability is the one of most important core qualities of college students nowadays, which not only assists with the cultivation of international competitive talents, but also facilitates the development of individual's innovation and creativity. Meantime, English writing is also considered as an effective way to develop individual's critical thinking ability. Therefore, some questionnaires, interviews, pre-test and post-test are conducted in this study to learn the present situation of students in English writing and critical thinking. However, there currently exist many serious problems in college English writing teaching class, which make a huge barrier to the development of students' critical thinking ability ultimately. Based on the analysis of the existing problems in college English writing teaching, this paper puts forward corresponding strategies as well as the concrete approaches as to improve college English writing teaching and further enhance students' writing skills and critical thinking ability in order to come up to the requirement of talents' cultivation.

Keywords: Critical thinking ability; College English writing teaching; Cultivation

1. Introduction

Critical thinking, from ancient time to present, has been a hot topic, whether it is the question-and-answer method from ancient Greek Socrates, the ancient Chinese "deliberate thinking, discerning.", or Dewey's "reflective thinking", who is the father of modern critical thinking school. All these show people's attention to critical thinking. In addition, today's educational circles also put more emphasis on the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability than ever before, the English curriculum standard for senior high schools (2017 edition) defines the quality of thinking as the ability of thinking in terms of logic, criticism and innovation, so it is believed that the quality of thinking is the mental characteristic of the core quality of English course, and its development will help to improve students' ability to analyze and solve problems from a multicultural perspectives, leading students to a correct value. The development goal of CET-4 requires students to be able to synthesize, compare and analyze from different sources, draw their own conclusions or form their own comprehension, and make others accept new ideas. On the one hand, the above two curriculum standards reflect the importance of thinking ability to students' personal and social sustainable development, on the other hand, they reflect the fact that English curriculum take the task of developing students' thinking ability.

Writing itself is a complex procedure of thinking, reasoning and analyzing. This is why some famous scholars believe that writing is one of the most effective way to develop critical thinking. Critical thinking ability is the precondition of writing, which in turn promotes the development of critical thinking ability of individuals. College English writing is the continuation of high school English writing, but at present, there are many problems in college English writing teaching, students' thinking ability and writing have even regressed, which should be given enough attention. On the basis of exploring the existing problems in college English, this paper mainly puts forward some solutions in the hope of improving the present worse situation of college English writing teaching and further promote students' writing skills and thinking ability.

2. The Present Situation on Critical Thinking Ability At Home and Abroad

Critical thinking is a comprehensive expression, which means to question, observe, analyze, and

assess, which refers to a mental activity that involves perception, interpretation, diagramming and so on. And critical thinking derives from the basis of dialectical thinking which emphasizes thinking with “width” and “depth”. In other words, dialectical thinking makes the individual break through the limited self-centeredness, change individual’s role in the world, and examine the social and cultural phenomenon from the view of “the other”, at the same time, through the appearance to the core, individuals can have a comprehensive understanding of things, and make a rational choice. Taken all into consideration, critical thinking ability can be defined as an individual’s ability to interpret, analyze, interpret, reason, and evaluate.

In recent decades, the research on the ability of critical thinking at home and abroad can be divided into the following parts: defining the ability of critical thinking, building thinking ability tools and exploring the ways and effectiveness of cultivating the ability of critical thinking in higher education. Some of the more influential models of critical thinking include The Delphi Project’s Critical Thinking Ability Model, Paul and Elder’s ternary structure model, Lin Chongde’s Mitsubishi structure, and Wen Qiufang’s critical thinking ability hierarchy model.

3. The Relationship between Critical Thinking and Language Acquisition

Some scholars, Richards and Rodger, believe that language should be used as a tool of developing higher thinking capability. As a result, a conclusion could be easily achieved that in language teaching, students are not learning language for language itself, but for the purpose of developing their thinking ability, and to use that ability in situations in or beyond the language class.” And Michael Halliday, the founder of systemic functional linguistics, also has the famous theory on language learning which involves three periods: learning language, learning through language, and learning about language and emphasizing that language learning is a complex procedure which needs to be closely related to the neurology of critical thinking supported by a large number of resources. From the above point of view, it can be said that the development of language learning and critical ability is the whole being, and the two subjects go along with and promote each other.

4. Problems in College English Writing Teaching Based on Questionnaires and Interviews from both Teachers and Students

In this research, China’s Standards of English Language Ability and California Critical Thinking Skill Test, questionnaires, interviews and two tests are employed during a semester to assess individual’s critical thinking ability and the language acquisition. And all together, there are almost 200 participants including 50 teachers and 148 students in two groups with two different teaching approaches in English writing class, male and female.

4.1 A Test-oriented View of Language Learning. Current exam-oriented environment at home makes students regard the exam as the most important criteria of English learning, which is not only contradictory to the orientation of the curriculum standards towards the instrumental and humanistic nature of English courses, but also ignores the fact that language learning is an effective way to develop students’ thinking ability. Under the exam-oriented condition, English classes inevitably become exam-oriented language learning. That means teachers’ pay more attention to the language problems, such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence patterns, which directly contributes to that the students’ writing narrows down to limited thinking, consequently, the absence of critical thinking makes the students have nothing to say while writing, and even making discourse structure illogical. And following table shows us the general situation of major interviewees in English classes.

Table 1. General condition of major interviewees

Interviewees	Gender	Purpose
Sample A	Female	CET-4
Sample B	Male	CET-6
Sample C	Female	IELTS
Sample D	Female	CET-4
Sample E	Male	CET-6
Sample F	Male	Neither
Sample G	Male	CET-4

4.2 The Class Time is Insufficient, the Teaching form is too Simple. Compared with English professional courses, college English courses account for a smaller proportion of in-class hours, but it takes a heavy task. In this case, teachers usually economize the time to apply an integrated model of listening, speaking, reading and writing rather than taking out one of them for separate training, especially in the teaching process of writing, the training of writing skills is simplified to the regular submission of essays on English writing platforms such as Correcting network, which, although convenient, can automatically analyze and give feedback on students' compositions based on standard corpus, but we also need to notice that the feedback of Correction network is still targeted at limited language categories. The reason why a lot of English writing platform can not effectively improve the teaching of writing is that the problem of thinking has stayed unsolved. Another reason for the poor performance of current English writing teaching is the simple teaching form. To prepare for the final exam or writing task in CET4 or CET 6, a teacher may spend a couple of classes committed to instructing writing, but the teaching form often goes like: the teacher arranges the topic, the students write, the teacher gives comment on the individual's composition; or teacher leads the students to appreciate the sample writing to maximize the teaching benefit. However, all these steps go in vain as for the cultivation of critical thinking or the effectiveness of teaching model.

4.3 The Subject of Writing is Too Old and Single. The teaching of college English writing is an effective way to develop students' critical thinking, which enable students to catch information quickly in new situations, and understand, analyze and make rational choices from different perspectives. The reason why we reclaim the significance of thinking ability is to highlight the transfer-ability of thinking as a way of thinking and a problem-solving strategy, as well as the diversity and immediacy of the objects of thinking. The transfer-ability diversity and immediacy of critical thinking make us realize that the themes of critical writing should be diversified and keep pace with the times. Actually, there are currently two main sources of writing themes: textbooks and test papers. The common features of these two sources are obviously out of touch with real world. Compared with those of text books, the themes from test papers are much more novel, but there is still a big gap with reality. Firstly, the outdated themes are not conducive to stimulating students' writing interest, secondly, the themes can not promote the development of students' critical thinking and are not challenging enough. In addition, the number of writing topics offered in textbooks and papers is far from sufficient to develop critical thinking ability.

5. Strategies for Improving College English Writing Teaching Based On the Pre-Test and Post-Test

The two tests are mainly targeted at the 148 students in two groups, one group is taught with the traditional method, another with the new teaching method according to the critical thinking skills test. Pairing the corresponding reform aimed at writing pre-test on English class with the result of post-test, this paper works out the following strategies and the teaching approach in English class.

5.1 To Change Teachers and Students' Ideas. In today's society, the situation that exam-oriented education dominates the world has been outdated. And the outline of the national medium-and long-term plan for human resources development (2010-2020) clearly states that

“Scientific spirit, creative thinking and innovative ability of students should be emphasized.” From above, the criterion for society to assess a talent is a comprehensive quality, namely, creativity instead of test results only. As the main output source of talents, colleges and universities should carry out this idea into learning and teaching process.

As it is well known, teachers are the implementers of teaching reform and the guarantee and support of realizing teaching goals. When it comes to the teaching of college English writing, teachers need change their ideas, abandon the idea of language learning with exam as the ultimate goal, and realize the importance of cultivating students’ thinking ability. First of all, teachers should change the traditional teaching mode of writing and take the training of students’ thinking ability as one of the main teaching goals. Secondly, if teachers are equipped with a higher sense of critical thinking, to better cultivate students’ critical thinking ability can be easier. Therefore, in the process of writing teaching, teachers need constantly strengthen their own thinking ability to meet the current English writing teaching requirements for the cultivation of students’ thinking ability. As the main body of language learning, students should change their language learning minds consciously or unconsciously and focus on the training of thinking while learning the form of language. First of all, encourage students to cultivate good reading habits. If students want to improve their writing, extensive reading is urgently needed. Reading can broaden students’ horizons, enrich their knowledge and help students analyze and think about problems from different stand views, then improve students’ ability to solve problems independently. Secondly, we should strengthen the students’ understanding of English language and culture and the cultivation of their thinking mode, give up the previous English writing mode only focusing on vocabulary and grammar, and put the three together so that they can really grab the essence of language.

In short, only when teachers and students do not confine themselves to the examination, can the English writing class truly realize the equal emphasis on language and critical thinking, and the present situation of college English writing teaching be effectively improved.

5.2 To Add Writing Course with Innovation Teaching Mode. Aiming at the insufficient support of college English writing, the university can add some selective writing courses as a supplement to meet the demands of students to improve their writing ability and train their critical thinking. On the basis of offering the selective course of critical writing, teachers are supposed to try to diversify the teaching modes and methods to trigger the vitality of the writing class and promote the development of students’ writing skills and critical thinking ability.

Especially in class period, heuristic and task-driven teaching methods are applied. Heuristic teaching method is to encourage and guide students to ask questions, to expand students’ ideas by means of refuting each other, and to guide students to discuss and even debate challenging questions. Before writing, guide the students to brainstorm, to think about the composition as a whole being, to collect relevant materials as many as possible, and to guide the students to use proper language in the process of writing, let students revise and reflect on their composition after writing. When using task-based teaching method, peer composition is corrected in the form of group cooperative discussion according to the evaluation criteria. In the process of accomplishing the task in group cooperation, students can strengthen their ability of team cooperation, expand their perspective of seeing problems, listen to others’ suggestions, build up the spirit of open-mindedness, and strengthen their empathy; these emotional traits are an important emotional component of critical thinking.

5.3 To Renew and Enrich the Theme of Writing. As for the problems of the writing theme being old and simple, the teacher can not be confined to the teaching materials and examinations only. When it comes to the combination of critical thinking and writing, teachers need to take students’ interests into account, taking these two parts as the guideline to well choose the hot social issues to discuss, also as a supplement to the writing theme provided in the teaching materials and examination. First, it can trigger students’ interest in learning, make them play the main role of learning process, actively participate in classroom activities, and become the real master of learning. Then, the social hot issues also meet the requirement of the diversity and immediacy of the objects of critical thinking. Therefore, good critical thinking enables students to independently think

complex information in the rapidly changing information age, and solve problems efficiently.

5.4 To Construct an Effective Evaluation Mechanism Combining Formative Evaluation with Summative Evaluation. Group discussions and debates, individual or group presentations are actively applied in writing classes. Learning materials, learning notes and other useful exercises and tests can stimulate students' innovation, then do help teachers precisely evaluate every single learning process of students. When assessing students' achievement on writing classes, we need pay more attention to the ability of language expression; attach more importance to the ability of logical thinking. While examining students, teachers need also guide students to carry out self-evaluation, which can both benefit the cultivation of students' critical thinking and the development of students' language by means of the comparison between the first draft and the final draft of the composition, students' personal reflection log, questionnaires and interviews set up by teachers.

In the concrete writing teaching procedure, the reform and the traditional teaching method we take in two different groups can be shown as the following table:

Table 2. The designs of two groups to in English writing class

Procedure	Group 1	Teaching approach in Group 1	Group 2	Teaching approach in Group 2
Before Class	1. Clarify the task and the writing demands 2. Self-study and try to have some output	Task-driven teaching method	Introduce topic and writing assignment	Exam-oriented teaching method
In Class	1. Discuss and debate on the first output in group 2. Assimilate and the second output	Collaborative Learning and critical thinking	Introduce the writing model and focus on grammar and spelling	Exam-oriented Teaching method
After Class	1. Feedback from teachers 2. Revise ang final output	Out-put oriented teaching approach	Score the writing according to the important points	Exam- oriented teaching method

6. Conclusions

After the reform of teaching approach applied in the group one, students' performance on English writing and critical thinking has been greatly improved. Just like saying from *The Book of Rites* once says: "to learn broadly, examine closely, reflect carefully, and discriminate earnestly" and Confucius, our great philosopher, once said, "to learn without thinking is to fail; to think without learning is to fail." It is true that critical thinking, to the least, is a person's basic capability to live on society; to the most, are a country and a nation's core driving force of innovation. Obviously, critical thinking has become a vital standard to evaluate a talent in today's society. Therefore, teachers and students should pay more attention to the problems in college English writing teaching for bettering the cultivation of students' critical thinking and teaching model in English classes. On the basis of exploring the present difficulties and hardships in the teaching of college English writing, this paper puts forward some methods, hoping to effectively improve the teaching of college English writing, giving full play to its role in developing students' critical ability and improving their writing ability, and truly realizing "Promoting critical thinking with writing, promoting writing with critical thinking", so as to make students' writing and thinking ability go higher and make them fully prepared for stepping into the society and being internationally competitive.

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