

On the Cultivation of Learners' Competence of Critical Thinking in College English Teaching

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Abstract

The Cultivation of learners' critical thinking competence in college English teaching meets the needs of quality education for the high-quality talents for our society. The development of critical thinking skills is of great importance for learners to become more autonomous, independent, critical, and reflective individuals. This paper focuses on the significance and strategies of the cultivation of learners' critical thinking competence. It first analyzes the present situation of college English teaching, then it points out the delightful changes which have been made in the process of college English teaching reform and indicates that these changes bring about good opportunities to foster learners' critical thinking skills. Next, it elaborates on the significance of the integration of the cultivation of critical thinking ability into college English teaching and summarizes that the cultivation of critical thinking competence can promote learners' language proficiency, language learning efficiency and broaden their horizons. Finally, this paper provides several constructive suggestions on how to foster learners' critical thinking competence in practical teaching process.

Key words: Critical thinking competence; College English teaching; Cultivation; Autonomous learning; Learning efficiency

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INTRODUCTION

English, as one of the most extensively used languages in the world, is an important tool for international communications. Learning English well is not only beneficial for one's future development, but also helpful for strengthening our country's international competitiveness. College English which is a required basic course for all the undergraduates plays a crucial role in non-English majors' study since it is an integral and important part of higher education. For a long time in college English teaching, much attention is given to the training of learners' linguistic skills, while the fostering of learners' cognitive ability and critical thinking is generally ignored by both teachers and students. But as the society develops, the purpose for education is also changing. Teachers need to help students get high scores in all kinds of tests as well as help them become innovative talents who have the awareness of innovation. After all, in this new century, our society needs the talents with remarkable academic achievements as well as creativity, autonomous learning ability, critical thinking competence and other practical skills. One of the aims of college English teaching is to help the learners to foster the ability to use language in all-around way and learn independently, and eventually, to cultivate their lifelong autonomous learning ability. To cultivate learners' lifelong learning ability and innovative consciousness, changing their modes of thinking is a matter of primary importance. This paper researches on the cultivation of learners' critical thinking ability in college English teaching. It analyzes the present situation of college English teaching and the significance of the cultivation of critical thinking competence for learners. Besides it proposes suggestions on how to foster learners' critical thinking skills.

1. DEFINITIONS OF CRITICAL THINKING AND THE PRESENT SITUATION OF COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

1.1 Definitions of Critical Thinking

The researches on critical thinking began in 1930s by Dewey, an American educator. From then on, numerous educators have done lots of explorations on the values of critical thinking, especially in recent years, various researches on critical thinking have been carried out by many teachers, researchers and educators both abroad and at home (Ennis, 2006; He, Yin, Huang, & Liu, 1999; Li, 2010; Wen & Zhou 2006; Wen, Q. F. Wang, Wang, Zhao & Liu, 2010), and some of them have made great achievements on it. It is glad to see that more and more teachers and learners have realized the necessity and significance of cultivating learning ability learners' critical thinking ability for English learning.

As for the definition of critical thinking, different scholars have different understandings on it. Ennis (1985, p.45) gives critical thinking such a definition: "reasonably reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do." Halpern (1999) considers critical thinking as the utilization of cognitive skills or strategies that help to increase the probability of a welcome outcome. According to Mulnix (2010), critical thinking includes a commitment to using reason in the formulation of our beliefs. Paul & Elder (2006) define it as "the disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfection of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thinking." To conclude, critical thinking is a kind of clear, reasoned thinking, and it includes cognitive skills and affective dispositions.

1.2 The Present Situation of College English Teaching

In the past, most college English classrooms were dominated by teachers. Both teachers and students attached great importance to the mastery of basic linguistic skills. For quite a long time, learners' ability was measured chiefly by various examinations, which were their test scores. Besides, people usually decided whether a person was competent or not mainly or even only according to their marks. Hence, many students put much time and energy on study by rote learning, learning by heart everything the teacher told to them. In the learning process, they generally focused on "when", "where" and "what", ignoring the importance of "how" and "why". Indeed, students had the pressure to study hard to make great progress in their academic performance and this was caused by many reasons. Some students wanted to pass CET-4 (College English Test, Band 4) or CET-6, some hoped to find a better job more easily, etc. Therefore, many of them spared no efforts to bear in mind the new words and grammatical rules that were related to different examinations.

Since 2003, college English teaching reform has been carried out to fulfill these goals: a) The development of learners' ability to use language in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking; b) The widely employment of advanced information technology should be encouraged; c) Formative assessment should be combined with summative assessment; d) The development of learners' autonomous learning ability should be valued. It is clear to see the purpose of all these requirements for teaching reform is to enhance learners' comprehensive abilities. College English teaching reform has brought significant and meaningful changes to the traditional English teaching in the last decade. The National Foreign Languages Teaching Advisory Board under the Ministry of Education made a comprehensive survey on college English teaching situation in 530 Chinese universities from 2009 to 2010 (Wang, 2011). According to this survey, most educators and teachers in these universities think "the improvement of learners' own culture and their comprehensive ability of language use" is the most important teaching goal, and then comes the pass rate of CET-4 or CET-6. It is worth noting that the pass rate of CET is still important, but no longer being the foremost teaching or learning goal for many universities. It is a desirable and welcome change and provides more opportunities to cultivate learners' critical thinking ability as the teaching model shifts gradually from the pattern of the teacher-centered one to the student-centered one, and this shift gives students chances to develop their individualized learning methods.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTIVATING LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING FOR COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

As our society develops very quickly, the need for talents is also changing. It is vital for teachers to foster learners' competence of critical thinking and autonomous learning in and out of class. Today, students with the abilities of creative and critical thinking along with a solid language foundation can adapt to the changes arisen in our society more easily and generally these people can usually perform excellently at work.

2.1 Promoting Learners' Language Proficiency and the Efficiency of Language Learning

Language and thoughts are inseparably interconnected. Words embody what one thinks, and one's thoughts influence his words. According to the investigation on the relationship between critical thinking and language proficiency for 280 undergraduates, which was carried out by Rashid and Hashim (2008) with the help of Cornell Critical Thinking Test, there is a significant correlation between critical thinking competence and language performance. Students with a good command of linguistic

skills will often find it easier for them to express their thoughts out to others or to turn their thoughts into written languages if they have the ability to think clearly and critically, and conversely, a person who can think critically with a sharp mind will be able to learn and use English more flexibly and efficiently. Students with critical thinking ability will often have an open mind to consider one problem from various angles and this contributes to the broadening of their horizons. So there is no contradiction in the cultivation of critical thinking and the mastery of linguistic skills. On the contrary, critical thinking can promote students' efficiency of language learning, give them more confidence in their study and make learning process easier.

2.2 Stimulating Learners' Creativity and Initiatives

In traditional teaching context, most students are passive learners and usually they just receive everything from teachers without actively thinking about what they are learning. For English study, many students think the first priority should be given to language learning, so mastering grammatical rules and new words or expressions expression is of great importance to them. All they need to do they think is generally to memorize about what the teacher teaches to them, and by doing so, some of the "excellent" students can get high grades in various tests, hence, we can say, they take in most part of the knowledge the teacher imparts to them. However, many of these "excellent" students are short of creativity or manipulative ability, therefore, sometimes the fact is that many graduates have high scores but low ability, so they may get lost occasionally, especially when confronting some practical problems. There is an old Chinese saying from a sensible philosopher Lao Zi who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period: "It is better to teach a man how to fish than to give him a fish." The literal meaning of this sentence is that if a person is hungry and if you give him a fish, then he may fill his stomach for a short time, but if you teach him the skills about fishing, it may benefit him for a lifetime. That is to say, for teachers, to teach students how to find solutions to solve problems and finally to think out ways by themselves independently are much more important than to tell them the answers directly. The process of the cultivation of critical thinking just provides students such opportunities to think, to find out and to solve some practical problems in their study, work and daily lives. Critical thinking also helps learners with the ability to judge and cognize new things based on their cognition of their previous knowledge. Only thinking actively in the learning process, can learners really understand, internalize and assimilate what they have been taught.

2.3 Cultivating Learners' Autonomous and Lifelong Learning Ability

According to the college English curriculum requirements (2007, p.5), one of the objectives of college English

teaching reform is to develop and improve learners' autonomous learning ability. Autonomous learning means learners who are viewed as individuals should be responsible for their study. This kind of ability can develop learners' self-consciousness, vision and independent learning. Autonomous learning ability is crucial to the future development of students. According to Commission of European Communities (2001), lifelong learning means "all the learning activities undertook throughout one's life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective". To help students become independent learners and thinkers is one of the teacher's most important responsibilities. Critical thinking teaches students the necessary skills for independent learning and thinking so that it can promote their learning ability. Besides, critical thinking can help learners often reflect their study and be aware of the merits and disadvantages both in themselves and in their study.

3. THE STRATEGIES OF CULTIVATING LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING ABILITY IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

The importance of fostering learners' critical thinking ability is self-evident, but it is quite difficult for teachers to set aside time and find out appropriate ways to foster learners' critical thinking ability. Strategies about how to cultivate learners' critical thinking ability will be discussed in the following parts.

3.1 The Integration of the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability Into Teachers' Teaching Process

The importance of the cultivation of critical thinking ability has been widely recognized by educators and researchers worldwide. But the cultivation of critical thinking competence does not mean to teach learners how to foster critical thinking solely, that is the instruction of critical thinking skills should be integrated into the teaching process in more subtle and acceptable ways instead of abrupt ways, to be more specific, teachers need to combine the cultivation of critical thinking with the teaching materials, the classroom discussions, the homework, the rich and colorful extracurricular activities or even the examinations so that students can gain as many opportunities to cultivate their critical thinking ability as possible. It is very important for teachers to memorize that they need to integrate the cultivation of learners' critical thinking ability into their daily English teaching practice.

3.2 Designing More Activities Both in and Out of Class

Practice makes perfect. As the time in class is always limited, teachers need to design more classroom

activities as well as extracurricular activities such as holding speech contests, debate competitions, group discussions and so on, so as to provide more opportunities to students to practice their critical thinking skills. In these activities, students have to think and organize their ideas very quickly to defend their own viewpoints. In group discussions, students not only present their perspectives, but also learn from other group members while listening and thinking attentively to their ideas. Designing more activities which need critical thinking skills will undoubtedly create a more interesting learning environment, promote students' language learning as well as enhance their relationships and critical thinking competence.

3.3 The Employment of Reflective Teaching

Critical thinking always happens along with reflective thoughts. However, many college students seldom or never reflect about what they have achieved or how well they have learned and only fulfill what the teacher requires. Therefore, it is the teacher's duty to guide students to form the habit of regularly reflecting as well as assessing their study and modifying their learning methods accordingly. By reflections of their study, students know clearly about their strengths and weaknesses so that they can make the best use of their advantages and improve their deficiencies. Learning by constant reflections will definitely promote students' critical thinking skills. To help students to reflect more effectively, teachers can ask students to discuss their study in small cooperative groups about what they have fulfilled and what needs to be improved, besides, handing in a reflective report every week to the teacher is a must.

It is important to note that there are some changes in the teacher's roles in reflective teaching model. The teacher who aims at promoting learners' comprehensive abilities is no longer the only leader in the classroom. Instead, the teacher becomes the helper, instructor, participator and valuator rather than the dominator, controller or knowledge preacher.

3.4 The Improvement of Teaching Approaches and Philosophy

To change students' learning and thinking styles, the first thing for an English teacher to do is to change his/her teaching philosophy and methodology. Teachers need to leave more time to students rather than impart knowledge to them and let students be the center in the classroom. Teachers have to improve their own academic performance and equip themselves with advanced teaching notions. Only when a teacher has a sharp mind and the ability to think critically, can he/she become the model for students to learn from. To become a qualified teacher to instruct students about how to cultivate their critical thinking ability, an English teacher needs to read more books, learn the latest information technologies,

utilize computer-assisted teaching systems and carry out more Web-based courses to offer students more favorable learning atmosphere and facilities. Once the web-based courses are applied to English teaching, more learning materials will be provided to students and they can be free from the constraints of limited time in the classroom. Students will be able to choose when to learn and what to learn. Of course, as the attractiveness of the network and its rich resources, students are easy to get confused while numerous materials are presented to them, so teachers need to give students directions on how to assimilate the essence and discard the dross. It is also a good chance to train learners' critical thinking ability when they distinguish the useful learning materials from the useless ones. In all, the adjustments of teachers' teaching philosophy and model is advantageous for the cultivation of learners' autonomous learning and critical thinking ability.

CONCLUSION

The shift from the teacher-centered teaching pattern to the student-oriented one which takes place in the process of college English teaching reform provides the best opportunities for the cultivation of learners' critical thinking ability since much more attention is given to the development of learners' comprehensive ability, innovative spirit and ability. As the English teaching reform deepens, the cultivation of learners' critical thinking competence will become a more and more indispensable ingredient in college English teaching process. Teachers need to integrate the fostering of learners' critical thinking skills into their practical teaching process. Teaching students how to think critically is as important as teaching them how to learn effectively. The cultivation of critical thinking competence can promote learners' language learning efficiency and broaden their horizons. In the light of the importance and necessity of developing learners' critical thinking competence, teachers need to attach great importance to it. To our great delight, so far, more and more researchers and educators have realized the importance of fostering learners' critical thinking ability in college English teaching, and this will definitely bring more desirable outcomes to learners' language learning and the improvement of their comprehensive abilities as well as promote the quality of college English teaching.

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