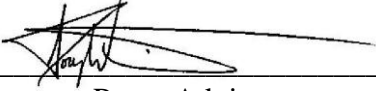


APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING TO COLLEGE EFL TEACHING

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Abstract

APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING TO COLLEGE EFL TEACHING

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Under the Supervision of Kory Wein, PhD

Because it is an important driving force for developing innovative spirit and ability, critical thinking is of critical importance in our modern educational system. In college EFL teaching, critical thinking has long been regarded as an advanced stage and skill of thinking. However, most Chinese EFL instructors stress language skills rather than critical thinking in class. This paper reviews the literature regarding critical thinking, from its development to its approaches in education. By classifying and summarizing the relevant studies on critical thinking, this paper mainly expounds on the relationship between critical thinking and language competence, and explores the strategies of applying critical thinking to college EFL teaching.

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Chapter I Introduction

The roots of critical thinking date back to the teaching practice of Socrates 2,500 years ago. Socrates emphasized and established the importance of asking questions that probe profoundly into thinking before we accept ideas (Paul, Elder & Bartell, 1997).

In the first half of the 20th century, great progress was made in the field of critical thinking from the perspective of education. Critical thinking was perceived as reflective thinking, more specifically, as consistent, careful, and active consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge (Dewey, 1933). As cultivating talent with innovative spirit and ability is becoming more and more important worldwide in education, EFL teachers and researchers are paying more interest and attention to fostering critical thinking.

In EFL teaching, critical thinking has long been regarded as an advanced stage and skill of thinking, and has continuously received wide academic attention both domestically and abroad. In China, College English is a compulsory course in most colleges, and it occupies a large amount of class time and involves almost all college students. However, most EFL instruction stresses language skills rather than critical thinking, which can impede deep learning and critical understanding of things.

Statement of the Problem

Stated as a problem, what is the relationship between critical thinking and language competence, and how can teachers in the EFL classroom apply critical thinking to increase student learning?

Definition of Terms

Critical thinking: thinking that explicitly aims at getting well-formed judgments and utilizes appropriate evaluative standards in the attempt to determine the true worth, merit, or value of something (Paul & Elder, 2006).

EFL: acronym for English as a Foreign Language. It refers to “the teaching of English to people whom it is not the first language” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary).

Language competence: an ability to recognize and understand words and sentences, including summarizing the language materials and inferring them to the language rules and regular sentences (Chomsky, 1965).

Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to examine the literature on the relationship between critical thinking and language competence and to explore the application of critical thinking in college EFL teaching.

Significance of the Study

The study of critical thinking is of great significance to college EFL teaching. It can enhance students’ language competence, such as comprehension, and also stimulate students’ interests and independence in study. However, the potential critical thinking offers Chinese universities and colleges has not yet been realized. Students in Chinese EFL classrooms tend to keep silent, and instructors do not ask probing questions that challenge students to think critically about the topic at hand. A large number of students do not have sharp critical thinking skills. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the application of critical thinking in college EFL teaching.

Methodology

A review of literature on critical thinking and its application in college EFL teaching were conducted. Searches of the literature were conducted in and through Karrmann Library, with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and JSTOR as the primary database sources. The Chinese database CNKI was also used because the study looks at college EFL teaching in China. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Since Socrates, critical thinking has been a very valuable thinking tool, but the true deep and extensive research of this issue began from “reflective thinking” proposed by American educator John Dewey in the early 20th century. In recent decades, many educators have paid close attention to the academic and non-academic aspects of critical thinking. By the 1980s, people began to explore the actual application of critical thinking to teaching. Entering the 21st century, critical thinking has become an important topic and research area around the world, especially in European countries and the United States. In China, more and more English educators and researchers are paying attention to critical thinking, especially in college EFL teaching.

This review is organized around five categories that can give us a deeper understanding of critical thinking and its application in college EFL teaching.

Defining Critical Thinking

From the early 20th century to the 1960s, research on critical thinking gradually became popular in western countries. The experts in this field have different definitions of critical thinking.

John Dewey (1933) defined critical thinking as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p.118).

Richard Paul, who is recognized as an authority in this field, once defined critical thinking as “a unique kind of purposeful thinking in which the thinker systematically and habitually imposes criteria and intellectual standards upon the thinking, taking charge of the construction of thinking, guiding the construction of thinking according to the standards, assessing the effectiveness of the thinking according to the purpose, the criteria, and the standards” (1995, p. 21). According to Halpern (1999), “Critical thinking refers to the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase

the probability of a desirable outcome” (p. 70). Both Paul and Halpern have focused on critical thinking skills.

Siegel (1988) put individual emotional intention into critical thinking, believing that critical thinking means the ability and intention to make objective and impartial judgment on the basis of facts. Bailin, Roland, Jerrold, and Leroi (1993) pointed out that only the thinkers with knowledge, strategies, and attitudes that superior thinkers have can form reasoned judgment. The above studies have emphasized the integration of critical thinking skills and individual quality.

Most Chinese scholars think spirit and intellect are the two major elements of critical thinking. One of the representative views is that critical thinking is a kind of personal quality to make the judgment of the process, theories, methods, and criteria of evaluation in generating knowledge (Luo, 2001, p. 216).

Critical Thinking in Education

Critical thinking has become a catchword in education in recent years. In the 1980s, the United States paid high attention to critical thinking and listed it as a major issue in education reform. In the 1990s, fostering critical thinking ability and skills gradually became the core of American education reform (Li & Li, 2014, p.14). Researchers explored the content of critical thinking, critical thinking teaching design, critical thinking teaching theories, and critical thinking’s training mode and strategies. Many teaching programs consider critical thinking as a crucial teaching and learning goal. The California Critical Thinking Skills Test (hereafter referred to as CCTST), unlike other traditional tests, focuses on how knowledge can be applied and interpreted. CCTST includes nine tests which are applied in different academic and related fields (Terry & Ervin, 2012, p. 25). A lot of scholars made use of CCTST in order to find the important relationships between critical thinking and academic achievement. “Jacobs (1995), made use of it

to examine the role of critical thinking in private university students' scores on the Student Aptitude Test" (Hashemi & Zabihi, 2012, p. 173).

Current American university teachers pay more attention to the teaching of a specific design and content, advanced teaching concept and mode, information technology's supporting role, and the close relationship between the fostering of college students' critical thinking ability and logic teaching and interdisciplinary teaching (Li & Li, 2014, p.14).

In China, the study of critical thinking starts late. In recent decades, Chinese higher education gradually realized the importance of critical thinking cultivation. Liu Rude (1996) began to study critical thinking and explore its connotative meaning and training methods in the middle of 1990s. Luo and Yang (2002) also made some related research and worked with other scholars on revising CCTST and testing tools. In recent years, the scientific research team led by Wen has studied critical thinking measurement tools and their reliability and validity (Li & Li, 2014, p.14).

According to the National Medium- and Long-Term plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), education should raise students' innovation spirit and practical ability to solve problems (Li, 2010, p. 68). Without critical thinking, the innovative spirit and practical abilities cannot be achieved. Comprehensively promoting the reform of foreign language teaching and cultivating the critical thinking ability of students has become the consensus among Chinese foreign language researchers and educators (Li, 2010, p. 69).

After the 1960s, studies of thinking were more extensive, and critical thinking teaching was more valued in the 1990s (Hong, 2003, p. 85). These provide good support to critical thinking teaching. But on teaching content, there are different views and claims. What should be taught when using critical thinking for teaching? Ennis (1985) advocated teaching should focus on general principles of criticism and the training of thinking skills. While others argued that teaching

should be integrated with disciplinary knowledge, and develop students' critical thinking ability (Hong, 2003, p. 86). Both of the claims require teachers to know and grasp the composition factors of critical thinking.

Because of the different understanding of critical thinking, there are two different viewpoints of critical thinking teaching approaches from a broad view. One is setting up the specialized courses that aim to teach students the strategies, principles, and implementation steps of critical thinking and cultivate students' critical thinking ability; another is combining subject teaching and the cultivation of critical thinking (Han & Wang, 2009, p.68). The latter one seems to be the mainstream of critical thinking teaching and also is the flexible approach to foster college students' critical thinking ability (Luo, 2001, p.217).

Talking about the specific teaching approaches in class, there are also two different views. Some scholars and researchers tend to use the method of explanation and practice to teach students critical thinking skills, while some other scholars and researchers pay more attention to the use of discussion, questions, and conversation to guide students to think critically, and then gradually cultivate students' critical awareness (Hong, 2003, p. 86). Both approaches stress the consistent implementation of critical principles in the whole process of teaching.

Critical Thinking and College EFL Teaching

In China, college English is a compulsory course in most colleges, and it occupies a large amount of class time and involves almost all college students. As societies develop in the 21st century, the aim of college EFL teaching is also changing: learners have to grasp the language skills as well as use it flexibly and comprehensively. So critical thinking becomes an essential part of college EFL teaching.

Why do college EFL students need critical thinking? Firstly, critical thinking is important in

fostering English learners' cognitive ability. As Xing (2014) argued, English is developing and changing; it is not a discipline that only requires learners to memorize vocabulary or other language elements; it requires learners to know how to learn (p. 160). Meanwhile, in an era full of diversified information, critical thinking can help learners identify and filter the information, giving students the proper cognition of the valuable and meaningful information in English learning process (Li& Sun, 2011. p. 104). So critical thinking needs learners to have certain cognitive skills or abilities. When developing students' critical thinking skills, linking students' needs and cognitive ability in teaching is indispensable for teachers as well (Dong, 2006, p. 23).

Secondly, critical thinking can stimulate students' creative spirit and innovation ability. Han (2015) stated that "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" (p. 87). Critical thinking as the prerequisite of innovative thinking can help students have new thinking and new cognition. If students only absorb the knowledge without thinking, they will never understand the problem and probably never develop problem-solving abilities. Moreover, it is also greatly helpful to develop students' autonomous learning ability.

Lastly, critical thinking can promote students' language learning efficiency. Han (2015) used the research carried out by Rashid and Hashim (2008) to indicate the relationship between language performance and critical thinking competence. If students have the sound critical thinking skills, they can learn English more efficiently and use it more freely and fluently.

Critical Thinking and Language Competence

Most Chinese EFL instructors stress language skills rather than critical thinking; however, Han (2015) noted that "language and thoughts are inseparably interconnected. Words embody what we think, and one's thoughts influence his [or her] words" (p.86). So paying attention to the

relationship between critical thinking and language competence is of great significance.

According to Dong (2006), language is closely connected to critical thinking in specific subject matter; English learners need to receive teaching and training that integrate literacy and critical thinking skills (p. 23).

A lot of scholars and educators have studied the relationship between critical thinking and language competence or skills. Fahim, Bagherkazemi, and Alemi (2010) examined the relationship between students' critical thinking ability and their performance on the reading part of TOFEL. TOFEL, a worldwide important English test, has gauged critical thinking ability in its testing content. The finding indicates that there is a significant correlation between learners' critical thinking ability and their performance on the reading part of the paper-based TOFEL. Kamali and Fahim (2011), investigated the relationship between critical thinking ability, resilience, and reading comprehension, which contains unknown vocabulary in the materials. Sixty-three intermediate EFL learners were selected to research the topic questions and hypotheses around three key terms—*critical thinking ability*, *resilience*, and *reading comprehension*. The results and the data analysis show that learners' critical thinking levels greatly influence their reading comprehension ability, especially when they are faced with some unknown vocabulary (p. 109). Kamali and Fahim (2011) suggested that “it may due to the fact that critical thinking and reading are both cognitive abilities which have some identifiable cognitive skills in common” (p.110). Li (2012) has conducted the research on college English reading and critical thinking ability training, arguing that in college EFL reading instruction, carrying out critical reading and cultivating students' critical thinking ability can further help students master English knowledge and improve their access to information.

Golpour (2014) pointed out that the major problems students usually meet in the writing

process are not because of their lack of knowledge in the fixed topic or subject, but because of their low level of critical thinking (p. 104). And critical thinking is also an important standard to judge whether the writing is good or not; to a great extent, good writing should reflect the aspects of critical thinking (Kurland, 2000).

Yang (2014) researched the impact of critical thinking on writing using a questionnaire and data analysis. The two dimensions of critical thinking including analytical and systematized abilities have great influence on students' English writing. Along with the increase of analytical ability, students' English writing performance increased (p. 61).

According to Li and Sun (2011), in the speech and debate, how speakers and arguers use fluent English to give a lecture and debate depends on their way of thinking to a large extent. The speakers need to use the way or skills of critical thinking to form and demonstrate the speech views and content, and the arguers need to use critical thinking ability to consider how to seize others' weakness to attack (p. 104).

There is little research on the topic of critical thinking as it is related to listening. Ya-Ting and Jeffery (2013) designed and carried out some critical thinking-integrated course activities to examine critical thinking's influence to EFL teaching and learning. Comparing an experimental group that was taught using critical thinking methods to a control group that was not, they found that the experimental group performed better than the control group in listening, debate, reading, and writing. By providing the relevant critical thinking tasks, students can better capture the core information from the listening content (Ya-Ting & Jeffery, p. 407).

Additionally, Critical thinking can help students learn more efficiently as well as help them to be more confident in English learning (Han, 2015. p. 87).

The Strategies for Applying CT in College EFL Teaching

Contemporary Chinese college students are inclined to passively acquire knowledge from teachers and textbooks; they seldom put forward their own views and opinions. Meanwhile, the focus of traditional English teaching in China is on students' language competence (Li & Sun, 2011, p.103). Therefore, strategies of applying critical thinking from the perspective of college EFL teaching has practical significance. A lot of scholars and educators, both abroad and domestic, have studied critical thinking in the EFL classroom. Their ideas and recommendations can be generalized as follows:

a. The selection of teaching materials. Teaching materials are an important part of teaching Content and play an extremely important role in college EFL teaching. To cultivate students' critical thinking ability, teachers should also try to select controversial materials, in addition to the textbooks, which can stimulate students to further understand, think, question, and solve problems in some new ways (Jiang& Ge, 2013, p. 93).

Li (2012) pointed out that providing students diverse real interesting reading materials, such as English magazines, newspaper, and internet resources that aim to broaden the scope of English reading, can help students really understand different comments from different medias on the same topic and think critically (p. 105). Moreover, in the teaching process, teachers can actively guide students to gradually build their own views from the different comments.

The accessibility of the assigned materials that contain rich concepts and can increase students' curiosity is also an important factor to spur students to read and think more critically (Ivey & Fisher, 2006).

b. Creating proper class environment and atmosphere. Li and Sun (2011) stated that the traditional teacher-centered enclosed classroom in college EFL teaching has caused students'

negative and passive mentality; the major problem in the Chinese classroom is the lack of respect for students. Establishing a new relationship between students and teachers is the crucial step in the process of developing students' critical thinking ability in college English class (p.105).

According to Shi (2014), a good learning environment for cultivating critical thinking must be open, equal, and democratic. To create this learning atmosphere, teachers firstly need to change their role in the EFL teaching class, encourage students to put forward different opinions, respect students' views, and actively learn from students because they, as the younger generation, can accept more new knowledge from diverse channels (p. 93).

Additionally, the interaction between students and teachers is also an important factor in building a relaxing and inspiring learning environment. To let the class be more active, it is important to let students and teachers interact and affect each other. By doing this, both sides can have the joy of interaction and be more creative (Li & Sun, 2011, p. 105).

c. Adopting new and diversified teaching approaches and methods. In Chinese college EFL teaching, the grammar-translation method has been the traditional teaching method for a long time. Because of the demands of the information era and the requirements of English competence and critical thinking, it is essential that EFL instructors in China adopt new and diversified teaching methods.

As Jiang and Ge (2013) stated, discussion and debate are important supplementary methods in college EFL teaching, especially in an intensive reading class. For example, in an English reading class, through discussion and debate, students can make a more rational evolution of the writer's attitudes, views, and arguments; students can even question, express their own opinions, and have deeper thinking of the theme (Jiang & Ge, 2013, p. 95). Teachers should also speak less and apply discussion-based teaching more often, which can let students understand and acquire

the relevant knowledge in reading (Li, 2012, p.105).

Some other scholars also put forward some specific teaching methods. Ivey and Fisher (2006) considered reading aloud and thinking aloud very helpful when students have difficulty understanding complicated texts, because most students enjoy listening (p. 19). And when teachers share their own ideas after reading the texts and put forward questions, students are stimulated to think critically. Besides the activities in class, some extracurricular activities can provide more opportunities to students to practice their English skills and cultivate their critical thinking ability; when facing challenging tasks, letting students think and prepare after class is a good choice because usually students do not have much time to do good preparation, and students who have enough time to think critically and look for information comprehensively can have deeper understanding of the fixed topic or assigned texts (Han, 2015, p.88).

Asking questions is a frequent and common teaching approach for English teachers to use, but applying critical thinking in EFL teaching also requires students to pose their own questions. Teaching students these questioning techniques is also important, which instructors can do by example. Christine that Dong (2006) said that instructors should help students clearly point out their confusion and pose thought-provoking questions. Once students have the ability to do this, they will be more willing to reveal their confusion and dig out more from the texts (p. 25).

When talking about critical thinking's cultivation in college EFL teaching, *reflective teaching* is a term that is often mentioned. As Han (2015) stated, "critical thinking always happens along with reflective thoughts" (p. 88). Reflective teaching and critical thinking teaching actually are complementary to each other. In the reflective process, students need to think critically to gain positive information and eliminate negative or useless information (Li& Sun, 2011, p. 105). Additionally, through reflective teaching means, teachers can guide students to evaluate their own

learning outcomes and know their own weaknesses and strong points, so that critical thinking modes and ability can be cultivated and formed in students' mind (Han, 2015, p. 88).

In general, the above teaching approaches and methods have emphasized students' learning initiative and a student-centered mode in teaching. Teachers should change their traditional concepts of education, improve their overall quality, and guide students to think critically.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

According to Dewey, Paul, Siegel and other scholars' studies on critical thinking, we can see that critical thinking is the result of reflection, uses the standards of skills and knowledge to judge thinking or thoughts, and can be cultivated by learning and training. The above characteristics of critical thinking can be seen as the basis and foundation to discuss the application of critical thinking in education.

Our society is now in the information era, and innovative talent is needed now more than ever before. As a result, more and more emphasis is being placed on students' critical thinking abilities. In the last thirty years, in the field of higher education in developed countries such as Britain and America, the critical teaching movement has burgeoned (Li, 2010, p.68). In current Chinese college EFL teaching, letting students know the purpose and the basic knowledge of critical thinking is necessary in the early period of critical thinking teaching. After students' identification of critical thinking, teachers can further use the methods of discussion, questions, and conversations to develop students' critical thinking awareness and ability.

Language, as the carrier of thought, has a strong connection to critical thinking and language competence. According to the review of relevant studies, applying critical thinking to college EFL teaching can greatly enhance students' comprehensive English competence. Moreover, critical thinking can stimulate students' creativity as well as their learning efficiency.

Applying critical thinking in the college EFL classroom also requires proper strategies. Textbooks need to be considered carefully; teachers should choose the textbooks or materials that can stimulate students to read and think; supplementary reading materials can also be provided to students. Creating a comfortable class atmosphere is vital to inspire students to think and interact with teachers or other classmates.

Teachers should reconsider their role and the relationship with students in teaching process. Teachers should guide students and “help them acquire both the critical thinking skills and critical attitudes to deal with the changes and challenges given rise to be the information age” (Rezaei, Derakhshan & Bagherkazemi, 2011. p. 775). The class should be student-centered not teacher-centered; teachers should be the designer, organizer, and prompter, not the imparter of knowledge in college EFL teaching.

Teachers should design illuminating questions and encourage students to pose challenging and critical questions in class. Designing challenging assignments and activities after class is also very important in students’ critical thinking training and English learning.

Additionally, making good use of modern educational technology and network resources is very helpful to stimulate students’ interest and motivation in active thinking. Students are attracted to the new teaching mediums and materials that are closely related to their lives outside of the classroom.

Lastly, teachers should reconsider evaluation methods. They should not only pay attention to the assessment of students’ knowledge acquisition, but also focus on their critical thinking ability. Teaching students to evaluate themselves and conduct self-reflections are vital because students can cultivate self-awareness and self-learning ability through personal evaluation.

To cultivate students’ critical thinking awareness and ability in EFL teaching is a long-term process. Teachers should be equipped with patience, creativity, and a willingness and ability to teach critical thinking.

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