

A Study on Developing Critical Thinking of English Major Students through the Teaching of Comprehensive English

Xianxian Wang
Dezhou University, Shandong, China

Abstract—This paper reveals the definition, connotation and significance of critical thinking. It further improves and explores approaches to develop students' critical thinking capability through Comprehensive English teaching and verifies the validity of those approaches through Comprehensive English class implementation and students' class presentation. However, it also suggests that developing critical thinking of instructors shall be prioritized before cultivating that of students', which is worth reflecting in the long run.

Index Terms—critical thinking, comprehensive English, instructors, reflections

A great number of innovative talents are called for in the rapid developing society, and the universities are the places which cultivate and graduate such talents with three aspects, fine character, broad knowledge and creative thinking intelligence. However, the innovative capability of the college students in China falls behind the developed countries. To a large extent, the negligence of the importance of students' innovative capability in some universities leads to the loss of students' innovative thinking capability.

I. THE CONNOTATION OF CRITICAL THINKING

The innovative thinking capability, in a broad sense, denotes the operation, realization and materialization of human innovation with new methods, new technologies and new products. From the definition and development of the critical thinking and innovative thinking, it could be seen that the critical thinking capability is united with the innovative thinking capability. Critical thinking, as the precondition for innovative thinking, also pushes forward development of innovative thinking, while the innovative thinking works as the target and extension to critical thinking. The two thinking intelligences are mutually integrated and influence each other.

In contemporary studies, John Dewey first points out that learning to think is the central purpose of education. He is the first to define critical thinking as "reflexive thinking". Dewey (1933) believes that active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge lies in light of ground which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. Pragmatic reflexive thinking theories have greatly influenced the development of cultivation of thinking intelligence.

Later, Tsui. L. (2003) expresses that to think critically, the thinker should have the mind to "assess and scrutinize knowledge prior to its assumption." The understanding is a kind of judgment about the outside world. But as to solve any differences between understanding and the outside world, the specific way isn't given. He realizes the point that critical thinking is to use certain skills such as assessment and analysis to evaluate things to be used and the willingness to do it.

It can be seen from the above definitions that critical thinking is not composed of a single skill or a static state. Rather it is a multivariate aspect. In Brookfield's definition (1997), critical thinking is regarded as a phase, which makes adults recognize, search and research the assumptions that elevate their ideas and behaviors. He also interprets that the assumptions are the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it and that they seem so apparent that they don't need to be interpreted specifically. Assumptions give meaning and purpose to who we are and what shall we do. Critical thinking is judicious reasoning about what to believe and what to do. Besides, critical thinking is a skill. It is not something that can one can memorize or look up.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING TO HIGHER LEARNING

For the higher learning in China, to cultivate students' critical thinking capability is really urgent because:

First, it is the one of the core objectives of higher education in China. It is stipulated that the task of higher education within the *Education Law of Higher Education of PRC* is to cultivate the professional talents with innovative spirits and practical capability. Here, the core values of innovative spirits and practical capability lie in critical thinking.

Second, it is one of the strategic subjects of the *Mid-and-long Term Program Reform and Development of Education in China* (2010-2020) that: to optimize the knowledge structure and enrich social practice of the students and pay prior attention to the cultivation of students' capability-the learning capability, the practical capability and innovative capability. It could draw that the cultivation of each capability comes about as the top concern of Chinese education in

the coming ten years and the promotion of the learning, practical, innovative capability is based on the development of students' critical thinking intelligence.

Third, cultivation of critical thinking has been reiterated in the *New Syllabus* (2000) that the English major talents should possess the solid lingual competence, broad knowledge, professional knowledge, high capability and all-round quality. Here it could be concluded that apart from the adequate knowledge structure and the overall language basics, students' capability should be especially noted as to acquire knowledge, think independently and solve problems innovatively with high moral, cultural and psychological quality. During English teaching, the relationship between the training of language skills and the cultivation of students' critical thinking and innovative capability are supposed to be adequately balanced.

Apart from that the intelligence of critical thinking and innovative thinking of college students, especially the English major is greatly required by the higher institutions. At a 1990 national summit the National Education Goals Panel clarifies the significance of cultivation of a great number of college graduates who demonstrate an advanced ability to think critically, communicate properly and solve problems independently.

Hu (2008) stresses that excellent English talents are expected to possess solid basic knowledge, overall language capacity and also the critical and innovative spirit. Sun (2010) concludes that qualities of English major are expected to be solid English language basics, systematic professional knowledge, profound humanistic quality and in particular, the excellent critical thinking capability and communicative competence. However, Huang (1998) argues that the public are deeply concerned about the lack of critical thinking cultivation in English teaching.

Through the ideas put by the Chinese scholars, it could see that not only the solid English language basic knowledge and skills are greatly needed for the English major, the critical and innovative thinking competence are urgently to be promoted. Therefore, it is a key task to strengthen critical thinking competence during English teaching. Yang (2009) maintains that the quality of students' critical thinking is highly required and in Comprehensive English, students' critical thinking is greatly demanded in that through text analysis, students are expected to comment and extend their different viewpoints from their critical thinking independently and logically, and that they are encouraged to raise questions, doubts and pose challenging attitude whenever necessary.

Therefore, it is urgent to cultivate and improve students' critical thinking capability. For the English major students, it could be achieved in Comprehensive English class. Since Comprehensive English is one of the most importance courses during their basic study, it feature integrated lingual skills of the English major in the first and the second year, and it has been one of the core courses of English major curriculum of higher learning. It constitutes about 108 teaching hours/ term and 4 terms, which covers the best teaching hours in the English major course in accordance with the English major curriculum. To a large extent, the teaching effect of Comprehensive English determines the professional quality of English major students. In this sense, to cultivate students' critical thinking capability is the principal target of the Comprehensive English, otherwise, without a proper thinking pattern, students would not make the best of their potentials or could not acquire sufficient knowledge skills and their practical capability would not be totally developed. Different from the teacher-centered traditional teaching which merely imparting knowledge to the students, the current Comprehensive English teaching takes students as the center and the teachers as the instructor, which encourage and guide students to think, to solve problem through learning. In this sense, a 3-dimentional teaching approach is invited to Comprehensive English teaching, which centers on the cultivation of student's thinking capability and innovative capacity.

III. CULTIVATING F STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE ENGLISH TEACHING

A. *The Teaching Objective of Comprehensive English*

From the new syllabus, it can draw the objective of Comprehensive English teaching: first, students' English basic knowledge will be consolidated; secondly, students' critical and innovative thinking intelligence will be enhanced through class tasks; thirdly, students' practical competence featured by English speaking proficiency should be developed. It shall be noted that imparting knowledge is just the basic requirement for the course while the other are regarded as the higher level objective.

B. *The Basic Procedure of Comprehensive English Teaching*

In the Comprehensive English class, the author adopted the face-to-face instructions to the students from the experimental class with 3-D teaching approach. The teaching material is Contemporary College English, textbook 3, which applies to the second-year English major for the first semester. This textbook covers 15 units. Each unit is supposed to be completed between 6 and 8 teaching hours.

Each unit includes three phases of teaching, pre-class preparation, in-class instructions and after-class assignment.

In the pre-class preparation, students are supposed to preview the text, including the basic knowledge, studying the background information through self-learning and group work about the author and the text to catch the general idea of the theme. In search of the background knowledge, students are expected to make full use of internet and relevant books to collect as much information as possible by themselves. And then, individual student is encouraged to exchange their information with classmates and team members so that their information could be greatly widened.

With regard to the team work, the experimental class is divided into several working groups (either by choice or at

random, which depends on the general condition of each class) which contain certain members. Say, the students in the experimental class are divided into 8 teams at random. And each team is assigned the task of class presentation for which is supposed to demonstrate at the beginning of the comprehensive English class each week, which means each group is responsible for the presentation three times in Comprehensive English class in line with the teaching syllabus. The theme, content, form, the style and performance of the class presentation is at the choice of the team members, therefore, each team takes the initiative to think, to brainstorm, to cooperate and to complete the task in the simulated situations. In this sense, students' professional knowledge and skills are practiced, and their way of thinking are stimulated and high sense of teamwork are gradually developed.

During the in-class instructions, the teacher first welcomes the group to demonstrate their presentations, and the audience students are expected to raise suggestions and make comments on their presentation. After that, the teacher will instruct the students in text learning, during which, class discussion, debate, impromptu speech are employed whenever necessary to further emphasizes on students' English speaking proficiency and overall language skills.

As for the after-class assignment, the exercises included after the text are necessary for the students to master, apart from that, theme-related writing, prepared speech and discussion are also invited for the students to further consolidate the in-class information.

C. A Sample Lesson Plan of Comprehensive English

In order to have a clearer glimpse of daily teaching of the 3-D teaching approach and further illustrate how the 3-D teaching approach is applied in Comprehensive English class, a sample lesson plan is employed. Right here lists the lesson plan-*Your college years*, Unit One, Contemporary College English, Book 3 (The printed text, *Your college years* is attached).

Your college years start at the very beginning of the first term of the second year. It is about the university education and university life. It aims to help the college students find out their targets through four years study in university and complete their university life with the sense of passion and fulfillment. Unit one is close to students' practical life, therefore, it is fit to be adopted as an example to reveal how the 3-D teaching model is carried out.

Unit one is projected to be completed in 6 hours. Here lists the first two hours of class teaching. The teaching plan of the two hours is as following.

Time: 8th, September, 2013

Teaching objective of Unit one:

Through learning the unit, students are expected:

1. To master the important terms, grammar points and useful language expressions.
2. To grasp the main idea of the text and draw the message about university education
3. To help students build up a positive world outlook

Teaching focus:

1. Helping students grasp the main idea of the text
2. Stimulating students to think over and reflect upon the significance of university education
3. Encouraging students to participate in various class activities to enhance professional skills through class presentation, report, discussion, debate and role-play, etc.

Difficult points:

1. Analysis on the structure of the text which helps the students will have a clear understanding about the theme of the text and will have an in-depth reflection upon university education.
2. Interpretation on the terms-developmental stages, identity, identity crisis, internalize, world citizens so that students will acquire the key language expressions.
3. Teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction which offers opportunity for the students to practice their pronunciation, speaking and related practical skills.

Teaching procedures:

Step 1: Lead-in- Students' presentation and questions for consideration

Step 2: Analysis on the structure of the Unit One

Step3: Interpretation on terms and language points

Step4: Open discussion: interaction and class report

Step5: Assignment

Step 1: Lead-in:

Form: Interview

Time span: 5 minutes at the beginning of Comprehensive English class

Participant: members in group one and the rest of class

Questions: (prepared by group one and also complies with the theme of unit one)

What do you think you have learned in the first year in university?

What qualities do you think a qualified English major is expected to possess?

How to make university life rich and colorful?

Student-student interaction:

The hostess of the performing group interviewed 5 students, during which students' real voices and opinions were

heard and arouse the resonance among most students in class.

With regard to the students preview and preparation about the text, the teacher raises another three questions at random based on the text subject.

Effect: the participants are active, the rest are attentive and class atmosphere livens up.

Step 2: Analysis on the structure of the text

Time span: 15 minutes

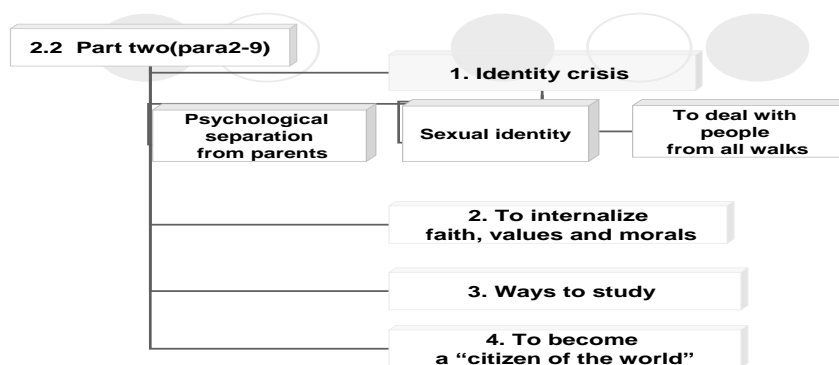
Your college years

Part One (para 1) Questions for consideration

Part Two (para 2-9) The main body of the text

Part Three (para 10) Conclusion: objective of university education

The Graph 1 as following displays the structure of the second part of the text in detail, which is also the key section of the text. As for this text, which is full of complex terms, language points and expression, the primary task is to analyze the outline of the text and make the students have a focused catch upon the subject. Then the further interpretation on the terms, grammar point comes about much easier



Graph 1

Step 3: Interpretation on terms and language points

Time span: 15 minutes

1. Identity is determined by genetic endowment, shaped by environment, and influenced by chance events.

2. Identity crisis

You are unsure about who you are, what are your strengths and weaknesses.

as an individual

How people perceive themselves and how other people perceive them.

as a man in the society

3. Internalize: to absorb a certain belief, values, moral or a way of behavior as your own so that it becomes a natural and indispensable part of your own

Question: How to overcome the identity crisis

Step 4: Open Discussion

Time span: 10 minutes

In this section, students are grouped into five teams of their own will and each team is headed by a team-leader. They are supposed to discuss the three questions in five minutes raised at the beginning of the class by the teacher. The team leader takes charge of the smooth organization of conducting the discussion and each member is expected to state their viewpoint.

1. What is the objective of university education?

2. What qualities shall the qualified English major talents possess?

3. In students' eyes, what qualities shall a qualified English teacher possess?

4. What qualities shall a citizen of the world possess?

At the end of discussion, one representative from each group is expected to summarize and comment their group discussion and elaborate on their opinions upon the topics. Then, the rest of the students have access to different opinion, if they don't agree to the point stated by other groups, a debate is necessary. Finally, the teacher makes comment on students' class discussion and debate. It is necessary for teachers to comment in an objective way that there is no fixed answer to such an open discussion and students' different perspectives of thinking are greatly encouraged.

Step 5: Assignment

Time span: 5 minutes

John Dewey (1916) stresses the crucial role of the proactive assignment in the school curriculum. He believes that the proactive assignment offers the real initiative and direct experiences to the students so that they are able to connect to

the reality. Therefore, the assignment is designed and expected to consolidate students learning through multiple aspects.

1. To improve students speaking competence

Class report: Students are supposed to prepare on a class report entitled “My viewpoint upon the university education”. In the next class hours, students are expected to present a short speech.

2. To further strengthen students understanding of the theme of the text

Writing: A piece of writing is assigned to the class with the topic that “How to live a rich and colorful university life”.

3. To extend the class knowledge to the professional practice

Group work: Students are expected to work out a piece of questionnaire and conduct a survey in English across the campus to find out what the students from different departments expect of their college life.

Summary

It is worth noticing that the teaching on students’ English basic knowledge should not be ignored in class, however, were it the sole task in class, the objective of teaching would never materialize. The teacher is expected to offer the students more platforms and opportunities to speak, think and practice during classes.

D. A Sample Record of Class Presentation

Class presentation has been an indispensable task in Comprehensive English teaching, which is instrumental to promoting students’ critical thinking and professional practice. Different from the traditional way of class presentation which students conduct one by one, the innovative class presentation features that: students are grouped at random and are expected to deliver various patterns of presentations, and the content, style, design of class presentations are out of their choice. Under teacher’s instruction, the class presentations were employed as a major platform for the enhancement of students’ professional skills as well as the improvement of their critical thinking capability. The first round of class presentation last from September till November, 2016, which involved each student in the class. They demonstrated different forms and further developed their multi-skills. Here the following Graph-2 lists the brief information of class presentations by the eight groups.

Graph-2

Group	Time	Form
1	12 th ,9-16 th ,9	1 Interview on the Sports star-James 2 Interview a Famous Film actress 3 News report Great Events of 2008
2	19 th , 9-23 th ,9	1 Play A Detective Story (original) 2 News Chinese and Western Festivals 3 Poems Declamation on Life and Love poems
3	26 th ,9-30 th , 9	1.Star show Interview a German & a Press Conference 2 Film Appreciation Roman Holiday& Garfield 3 Dialogue Public Etiquette & Business Etiquette
4	10 th ,10- 14 th , 10	1. Debate Whether NO CAR DAY counts 2. Current affairs Impact of World Financial Crisis 3. Jokes Differences between Chinese &English humors
5	15 th , 10-19 th ,10	1. Dialogue Expression and writing style of news 2. News Influence of China Open Tourism & Development of E-Bay 3. Introduction Words& expressions in Movie Production
6	22 nd ,10-26 th ,10	1. News Obama’s election speech 2 Film Club An excerpt from Ghost 3. Jokes Funny stories & Humors
7	29 th ,10-2 nd ,11	1. Comedy a Bad Day of a Taxi Driver (原创) 2 Arts of Translation on Poems, Dishes and Movie Titles 3 News Chen Shui Bian fasts
8	5 th ,11-9 th ,11	1 Culture Express Coffee, Wine and Music Culture 2 News Coverage Tourists Stranded in Thailand 3 Psychological Test Testing your Love Attitude

It is apparent that that each group has delivered various forms of class presentations. During the preparation, they were so intent on brainstorming and bursting into new ideas to design and present the performance as vividly as possible. The member of each group has shown great interested in their tasks in the presentation. Despite that the first group was a bit shy in the very beginning, in the following weeks, they got more keen on their demonstrations. The diverse forms of class presentation reflect students growing initiative and interest in the approach. Through a two terms of class presentation, students’ innovative thinking has been largely motivated. Besides, they come to realize the significance of the cooperation and collaboration and they turn to be attentive to exploring new approaches to fulfill various tasks. In this sense, the new approach model of class presentation was worth trying.

IV. REFLECTIONS

A. *A Question to Be Raised*

To cultivate and improve students' critical thinking is quite a tremendous task which requires great efforts from both teachers and students. Apart from the problems the students may face nowadays, there have been plenty of challenges for the instructors.

In such a context, a question is raised. It is urgent to cultivate students' critical thinking, is it also necessary to improve instructors' critical thinking? The answer is absolute, Otherwise, the objective of teaching shall come out in vain and the quality-education shall result fruitlessly. However the fact that most of teachers in higher institutions also face tremendous problems lies in that: first, the way teachers teach is what they were taught which lacks personal experiences and training in liberal learning; second, curriculum tradition since the early 1950s has made instructors narrow focused; third, social environment fosters more of the employment rate and more of the applied subjects, which has greatly restricted critical thinking.

In this sense, the instructors shall come to realize the limitations in their own way of thinking and endeavor to explore new approaches to develop their critical thinking.

B. *Urgency for the Improvement of Instructors' Critical Thinking Capability*

The instructors also need to develop their own critical thinking capability from the following aspects.

First, they are supposed to reflect their own understanding of critical thinking and how it is applied to the discipline and the course. The qualified teachers shall know well about the merits and demerits in their thinking pattern and take the initiative to make up for the shortcomings in their thinking habit and explore more perspectives to view the problems rather than from a settled angle.

Second, they will lead the students how to thinking along a critical thinking pattern. The best teachers don't emphasize on how well students perform on the exams but on cultivating students' reasoning skills. The instructors create the natural learning situation and environment. They propose tasks in such a situation which require the students to raise questions, solve problems independently and challenge them to rethink their assumptions and evaluate their mental models of reality. In solving tasks, the instructor is supposed to design diversified activities which can best tap students' potentials of thinking.

Third, with regard to the assessment criteria, the instructors shall learn that students are best evaluated by how well they think and behave beyond the class rather than they are scored just through the final exams. It is expected that teachers' shall have more control over designing the assessment criteria and that they shall have more freedom to make the final assessment on students' performance from various criteria. However, it is an ideal object and it takes more time to achieve that.

V. LIMITATIONS OF THE EXPERIMENT

First, the limited numbers of the subjects and the experiment period may lead to the unreliability of the result. The experiment just involved 40 students of English major. It would be more reliable if it could apply to more classes in the department. Besides, the period of the experiment is relatively short to test the overall improvement of students' English competence.

Second, the enhancement of students' critical thinking competence lies in a subtle and complicated way, to some degree, it also rests with students' different personality traits and character development. It is almost impossible to unify a sole evaluation system to measure how effectively students have developed their critical thinking competence and practical competence.

Third, students' participation into the diverse class demonstrations and professional practices is part of the reflection of the enhancement of students' critical thinking and practical competence, whereas, not an overall reflection.

To conclude, teaching and learning are highly complementary. It takes a long process to cultivate and improve students' critical thinking capability. It should be stressed that in the meanwhile the critical thinking capability is also highly demanded for the instructors, without which the "teaching quality" would be an empty word.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brookfield. & Stephen D. (1997). (17). *Assessing Critical Thinking*. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education.
- [2] Cortazzi M. & Jin L. X. (1996). *Cultures of Learning: Language Classrooms in China*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Hu G. W. (2003). *The People's Republic of China Country Report [R]*. English Language teaching in the People's Republic of China. English Language Japan, and Singapore. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, English Language Education in China, and Masakazu Iino.
- [4] Huang Yuanshen. (1998). Lack of Critical Thinking. *Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching*. 7. 20-28.
- [5] Hu Wenzhong. (2008). A review and reflections on English major teaching reform in China. *The World of Foreign Language*. 5. 10-15.
- [6] John Dewey. (2001). Translator: Xucheng Wang, *Democracy and Education*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- [7] John Dewey. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York; Macmillan.
- [8] John Dewey. (1963). *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- [9] Reed. & Jennifer H. (1998). (12). Effect of a Model for Critical Thinking on Students' Achievement in Primary Source

- Document Analysis and Interpretation, Argumentative Reasoning, Critical Thinking Dispositions, and History Content in a Community College History Course. South Florida: College of Education University of South Florida.
- [10] Richards J. & T. Rodgers. (1986). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Sun Youzhong. & Jin Linin. (2010). A Probe into the English Major Curriculum Pattern. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*. 4. 50-61.
- [12] Tsui L. (2003). Reproducing Social Inequalities through Higher Education: Critical Thinking as a Valued Capital. *Journal of Negro*, 72. 105-112.
- [13] Yang Linin. (2009). Some thoughts on the Comprehensive English of English Major and Reflections on Problems Incurred. Hunan University of Science and Technology: The National Symposia of Constructing the Excellent Courses for English Major of Higher Learning.
- [14] Zhang Chuting. (2003). *Curriculum and Teaching Philosophy*. Beijing: People's Education Publisher.

Xianxian Wang was born in Dezhou, China in 1980. She studied at the School of Foreign Studies in Shandong University of Finance and Economy between 1999-2003, English major. She received her B.A in 2003. Later she studies for her Master's degree in Shandong Normal University between 2009-2012.

Since 2003, she has worked in the foreign language department in Dezhou University. Her professional title is lecturer. Her research interest includes: English curriculum and teaching methodology, English phonetics. She won the title of the "most promising young teachers in Dezhou University" in 2012. And she was the second prize winner for the "excellent research paper" at the teaching methodology forum which was hosted by Shandong Provincial Department of Education in 2014.