

# Teachers' Intervention in Developing English Majors' Critical Thinking When Teaching Writing in Chinese Universities

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**Abstract**—Developing English major students' critical thinking is very important to the development of students' overall competence. Compared with other language skills, writing asks for more critical thinking skills, and in turn writing is a proper media for teachers to develop student's critical thinking skills. From English major students' writing pieces, we can tell that most of the writing problems are related with the deficiency of critical thinking skills. Therefore, in different stages of writing teaching, teachers should intervene in students' learning and practicing by proper and purposeful directing and instructing so as to impel students to think critically and to write critically. And gradually students' critical thinking skills of interpretation, analysis, explanation, inference, evaluation and self-calibration will get improved.

**Index Terms**—teachers' intervention, English majors, critical thinking, writing teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

Developing students' critical thinking is an important educational goal at different levels of schooling, and writing, in particular, is an approach to develop one's critical thinking, because writing task itself is a process of planning, organizing, and expressing the writer's thinking. In English-speaking countries and in Europe, enlightened by Dewey's educational views (1909), the concept of critical thinking was introduced and defined by American scholar Robert Ennis in 1960's, and it soon became the core element of American education and spread to the other countries. However, in China, the idea of critical thinking did not catch the eyesight of the educators and teachers until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the research on it and practice of it in teaching started its way in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Though the study on critical thinking didn't last long in China, Chinese scholars have brought out fruitful achievements. For instance, Zhong (2002) discusses the concept of critical thinking and its application in teaching; Wen & Zhou (2006) study the cultivation and development of students' critical thinking in Chinese context; and Wu, Chen and Zhao (2014) explore the teaching modes in developing students' critical thinking. Their studies, however, are mostly general introductions to or discussions on critical thinking, and do not relate closely with specific English teaching. In recent years, some other scholars and teachers have done some studies on developing students' critical thinking in teaching English reading, speaking, or writing, but the number of the study is few. As for developing student's critical thinking in teaching writing, several pieces of research are available. Han and Yi (2009), for example, analyze the problems of critical thinking development and put forward the strategies applicable in university writing course. Wang (2015), then, analyzes the writing problems of students and discusses how teachers can use critical thinking skills to improve students' English writing. Guo and Song (2012) make a comparative study on the level of students' critical thinking showed in writing by questionnaire and compositions, and Yang (2014) makes a survey among non-English-major graduates and discusses how students' critical thinking influences their writing competence. Obviously, these studies are significant for the study on the relationship between writing and critical thinking, but none of them notice the roles of teachers in developing students' critical thinking when teaching writing. Therefore, this paper will take teachers as the key element in developing students' critical thinking in teaching writing and discuss how their intervention in writing process can help students develop such core critical thinking skills as interpretation, analysis, explanation, inference, evaluation, and self-calibration.

## II. DEFICIENCY OF ENGLISH MAJORS' CRITICAL THINKING DISPLAYED IN THEIR WRITING

Traditionally, critical thinking is defined as "the process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or conclusion." (Critical – Define Critical at Dictionary. com) In language teaching, according to Richards and Schmidt (2003), critical thinking is "to encourage students more actively with materials in target language, encourage a deeper processing of it, and show respect for students as independent thinkers" (p.135). The definitions seem to tell that critical thinking is mainly related with reading comprehension, and in Chinese schools, the practice of developing students' critical thinking also started mostly in teaching reading, and teachers usually don't think much of critical thinking in writing course. However, considering the nature of writing, we should say writing should be the course that asks for more critical skills like conceptualizing,

applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information.

Since teachers don't have much sense of critical thinking in teaching writing, their focus is usually on the structure of composition and grammatical correctness. With no proper instruction or training of critical thinking skills in teaching process, students' critical thinking competence is insufficient. Guo and Song's research (2014) shows that among the six core critical thinking skills: interpretation, analysis, explanation, inference, evaluation, and self-calibration, even in their fourth year of university, English majors are still under achieved in inference, evaluation and self-calibration. I teach freshmen's writing in my college, and from students' writing tasks, I found most of students can not use these critical thinking skills in their writing to a certain degree and demonstrate various problems in writing as follows:

(1) Without good interpretation, many students can't clarify a concept in writing, and write some round-about sentences like "There are many things happening in my life." or "However, we all know that the transgenic crops change the genes."

(2) Without analytical skill, still many students can't grasp the key words in the topic or thesis completely, and then they don't know how to use proper evidence to support the topic or thesis. So their writing often sounds empty in content and is not convincing. This is a paragraph from a student's writing titled *Are Transgenic Crops Safe?*—"Transgenic skill can increase food nutrition and quality and add categories of food. But transgenic skill is not entirely good, for it violates the nature. There are many uncertain factors that would add a lot of potential threats to food, or cause biologically pollution."

(3) Not good at explaining, students can not use proper examples to illustrate the topic, and can not develop their ideas logically, and then the unity of writing might lose from time to time. The above example paragraph also demonstrates the problem caused by lacking of explanation skill. The logic of the paragraph is confusing, and there is not a clean topic for the paragraph.

(4) Not sharp for evaluating, students can not assess the credibility of the views, and then they may use the others' views casually without questioning. The result is that their writing does not sound very convincing. In a writing titled "Should Live-streaming be Banned", a student gives such a paragraph: "If we use live-streaming effectively, we will obtain more. A professor said, 'Live-streaming is well accepted by the society. People are busy and under pressure. They need something to make them feel warm.'" This unknown "professor" is hard to persuade readers to take the idea.

(5) Lacking inference skill, students sometimes can not bring their writing to a proper conclusion naturally. They either say something unrelated at the end or start a new topic. For example, one student ends her writing titled "Is it Wise to Make Friends Online?" this way: "Ways of making friends have been greatly transformed by new technologies, which not only provide us great freedom but also create pitfalls that we shall watch out for. We should have a correct attitude to make friends online."

(6) As for self-calibration skill, without proper training in the process of writing, students usually can not assess their writing properly. For example, they don't know clearly whether their own writing or their partner's writing is good or bad. Even if they have a rough impression on the quality of the writing, they can't tell how and why. Or they don't know in what aspects the writing could be improved.

These problems show that English-major students can not think critically in English when they begin to learn this language systematically. As the matter of fact, they have not developed the critical thinking skills yet. Even when they read or write in Chinese, their mother tongue, they still can not do enough critical thinking. Therefore, developing students' critical thinking skills in English teaching will help improve their thinking competence fundamentally.

### III. TEACHERS' INTERVENTION IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING IN DIFFERENT STAGES OF WRITING

Learning English in Chinese context, as a general phenomenon, students rely much on teachers' instruction and guiding, for there are not rich English resources like native English teachers, textbooks with authentic materials, and target culture. Therefore, in developing students' critical thinking in writing, teachers play important roles in different stages of teaching. William and Burden (2000) explain four functions of teachers' intervention in language teaching: developing students' independent learning ability, helping students obtain and process learning materials effectively, interacting with students, and directing students to understand and give feedback to teachers' purpose of intervening. The aims of teachers' intervention mentioned here are consistent with the core spirit of critical thinking, and therefore in different teaching stages, teachers' active and purposeful intervention will help students to form critical thinking and write originally and critically.

#### A. *In Pre-writing Stage*

Pre-writing activities include presentation of writing knowledge and generating ideas, and these activities also provide with good timing for teachers to intervene in and to develop students' critical thinking.

In presenting writing theories or knowledge, teachers usually use some reading passages or paragraphs as samples for students to learn. Keeping the sense of intervention in mind, teachers can not only ask students to observe the structure of a passage and the use of words and sentences in it, but more importantly, teachers should direct students to analyze and evaluate the ideas expressed, the ways of argumentation, and language expressions by asking Wh-questions like "Are the ideas in the passage meaningful? Why?", "Is there any evidence? What is it? Is it relevant and workable?", "Is the arguing logical? Why or why not?", and "Do the words and sentences express the ideas clearly? And how?" Posing

Wh-questions like these, organizing students to discuss the questions and asking them to give specific answers are means of intervening by teachers to push students to think critically. Moreover, teachers can further ask students to compare different samples, to find out the differences among the ways of organization, argumentation, expressing, and to assess the strong points and weak ones in these pieces of writing. These activities will help students to touch the essence of critical thinking and to learn that reflecting and questioning are two important elements of critical thinking.

After a full observation to the samples and a full discussion of those questions, now it is time for teachers to choose a proper topic for students to practice the relevant type of writing. As a chance to cultivate students' critical thinking again, the topic the teacher chose should be interesting and thought-provoking, which enables students to think, to argue, and to look for evidence to support. However, if teachers only present a topic and then ask students to write without helping them to generate ideas, the frequent situation is that students have no idea of what to write. For example, when teaching how to write a piece of exposition with the way of comparison and contrast, I presented my students with the topic of "Young People Born in 1980's and 1990's". When reading the title firstly, students were very happy, because they are the ones who were born in 1990's. But when I asked them in what aspects they would make the comparison or contrast, most of them were at a loss. Thus understanding a writing topic and helping students to generate ideas are activities for teachers to use to intervene so as to improve students' awareness of critical thinking.

For generating ideas relevant to the given topic, teachers can introduce "brainstorming" to students. "Brainstorming" can be done collectively as a class work or a group work, in which way students can generate various ideas related to the topic. As to the above topic, the teacher can use class work and ask each individual student to give a word or a word phrase he/she thinks related with the topic. In order to make students think actively, the teacher must make clear to them that there is no "good" or "bad" ideas in brainstorming and that any idea is acceptable. Then the teacher writes the list of words on the blackboard. Usually students will give nouns or adjectives like "personality", "finance state", "job", "marriage", "relationship with parents", "values", "characteristics", "selfish", "generous", "independent", etc. Obviously, some are general words, and some are specific ones. In such a case, the teacher could guide students to do another brainstorming to those general words such as "job" or "values". And this time students will be more clear what jobs those young people born in different ages would prefer to. However, the more significant purpose of this activity is that teachers usually don't stop at those ideas generated by students, but further ask students to sort out the ideas according to the types of information or writing purpose and put them into a useful order. Surely, after a few brainstorming done collectively in class, teachers can require students to do brainstorming individually when they do writing assignments after class. Besides, teachers can also introduce the other similar ways for generating ideas like list-making, role-playing on paper, Wh-questions, etc. Teachers' intervention like this is likely to impel students to compare, to analyze, to evaluate, to negate, or to assert, in which process students develop their critical thinking gradually.

#### B. In While-writing Stage

Activities in while-writing stage include outlining, drafting, and revising. One of the effective ways of intervention in this stage is to organize students to interact with one another, during which process students have to listen patiently to their partners, trying to make sense of what they have heard. Moreover, they have to evaluate their partners' work, telling them their opinions; and they have to use facts and clear expressions to convince their partners.

The first task for students to perform in outlining is to write a good thesis. Most students at the beginning of learning to write don't know what a good thesis sounds like and what relationship holds between the thesis and the content in the outline. For example, some students might mention the importance of the topic instead of presenting the key points, like "It is important to know the differences between the young people born in 1980's and in 1990's." Or they may simply write "Young people born in 1980's and in 1990's are different." So for several times when students begin to learn to write outlines, the practice should be done in class and teachers should keep asking students to exchange their outlines and see if they have listed the key points or not by asking each other the question "In what aspects are you going to make the exposition?" Teachers' intervening like this will help students form the habit of thinking specifically. The progress of students is usually very evident, and after several rewriting some could write the thesis like "Young people born in 1980's and in 1990's bear some similarities, but they are different in their relationship with their parents, choice of jobs, attitudes to marriage, and values." With such a thesis, students can easily outline the main content of the writing.

When drafting, students will face the problems of illogic organization and Chinese ways of thinking in presenting ideas. Again, teachers can not assign all writing work as homework. For an effective intervention, teachers should take a few class times to do the drafting, in which process students can finish their first drafts, read one another's work, evaluate their partners' work and tell their opinions on drafts. Surely, teachers should demonstrate the questions that students will ask each other. The questions should include inquiries and evaluation on the use of words, formation of sentences, overall structure, development of paragraphs, arrangement of the details, etc. The following passage is an example from a student who just started to learn to write a descriptive writing:

*Mr. Zhao*

*Mr. Zhao is a special man. His teaching method is different from teachers in our department.*

*For example, he teaches us extensive reading. Other teachers tell us needn't pre-reading, and some words, if you don't know its meaning you can jump it, or guess it. But Mr. Zhao demands us pre-reading, he is a careful man, for*

*example, he always teaches grammars sentence by sentence.*

*He always says he is a good teacher, is a professor, and his method very well, and we know that, and we know can get many knowledge from him. We believe him that is a good teacher.*

*In a word, he is a different teacher.*

It is easily seen that there are many problems in punctuation, wording, sentence structures, paragraph organization, and content in the draft. If the students working in pairs follow the teacher's demonstration of questions and evaluation to read and make some inquiries, they both will realize the existence of the problems and make some improvements in writing. In fact, after this pair work, the writer made a great progress in writing. For example, she added a topic sentence to the second paragraph like "Mr. Zhao is different in his teaching methods." At least now she knew that she should use a topic sentence to start a new paragraph instead of using "for example" at the beginning of a paragraph. Moreover, she revised the third paragraph in tone, and also wrote a topic sentence for it and supported with some simple examples. More importantly, in such a reading and sharing, both students will deepen and broaden their thinking span and improve critical thinking skills of analysis, explanation, inference, and self-calibration.

And in revising, the serious problems are that students can not find the mistakes and inappropriateness in their writing. Then in these situations, for a few times at least, teachers should intervene in the classroom teaching by asking students to read one another's outline and their drafts in groups and to do some discussion. The discussion itself is a process of argumentation, in which process students learn to express themselves and persuade the others with facts. Similarly, teachers' intervention should also be done by presenting students some questions related diction, sentences, organization, and content. Teachers remind first of students that revising does not mean a simple correction of mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation and other mechanics, but they should focus more on organization and content. So the questions should include the ones like "What is the topic of the writing?", "What is the thesis? Is it supported by sufficient facts like examples, details, etc.?", "Does each paragraph have an idea? How is it expressed?", "In what order are all paragraphs arranged?", etc. In the whole discussion and exchanging, the writer will learn how to explain his/her thinking and writing, and the other members in the group will learn how to express their opinions in facts. They will all learn in these activities that facts speak louder.

### C. *In Post-writing Stage*

The main task in post-writing stage is to evaluate students' writing. Usually, three ways are adopted: teacher criticism, peer criticism and self revision. All these ways are useful in developing students' critical thinking.

In using teacher criticism, I find the best way of intervening is not to correct students writing word by word, but use some correcting symbols like underlining, inserting, labeling, abbreviating and so on to mark the wrong or improper places, and then ask students to explain the meaning of the symbols and do their own correction. In this way students have to reflect, analyze, explain, and correct.

Taking the method of peer criticism, both students could get improvement in writing skill and in critical thinking skills, because both of them have to learn how to express their own ideas clearly, how to make the other accept his/her opinions and suggestions, and how to make a complete and valuable assessment to a piece of writing. The job itself is a critical thinking skill. The teachers' intervention in this activity is to demonstrate the steps and the assessing questions, and observe students' interaction keenly so as to give a hand any time when needed. The steps include finding a partner and exchanging compositions; reading first time for understanding; reading second time to underline any words, phrases, and sentences that don't seem correct or that are difficult to understand; reading third time for contents and write down the questions on the Comments Sheet; and write at least three suggestions to the writer for improving the composition. This process is very useful in developing students' skills of evaluation and inference. As to the questions that students use to assess the compositions, Wh-questions again are best ones to impel students to think critically. For example, teachers should direct students to assess the content, the organization, sentences and words by asking Wh-questions like "What is the thesis of the composition? Is it clear?", "Is there a topic sentence for each paragraph? What is it?", "What facts are used to support the topic? How are they organized?", etc.

Self revision is an effective and convenient way for students to develop their critical thinking skills. After finishing each composition, students should check their work by asking themselves questions on content, organization, structure and expression, and then do some correction. A good habit of self revision will help students to think critically and improve all critical thinking skills, particularly the skills of evaluation and self-calibration. The teachers' intervention at this stage is to provide students with some self-checking questions and occasionally requires students to hand in both the first draft and the final copy.

## IV. CONCLUSION

In Chinese context, it is easy to tell that university English-major students are poor in critical thinking, because it is not well trained and cultivated in their educational progress. However, it is also well known that critical thinking is very important for students to improve their overall competence and their innovation. Writing is a cognitive and thinking process which involves expressing one's idea, structuring, organizing, composing, and revising. And in writing process, writers need to argue with evidence, to convince in facts, to make inference, and to organize logically. All these abilities are parts of critical thinking competence. Therefore, comparing with other skills of English language, writing is more

effective in developing students' critical thinking owing to the essence of writing itself as a complex process of critical thinking. Therefore, in the process of teaching writing, teachers' proper intervention with directing, questioning and organizing tasks in different stages of teaching will impel students to think critically. Proper intervention in teaching university English writing not only improves students' writing skill, but also helps develop their critical thinking skills such as interpretation, analysis, explanation, inference, evaluation and self-calibration.

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