



An Inquiry into Cultivating Critical Thinking Skills in English Writing Teaching in the Context of New Liberal Arts

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Abstract. How can we develop critical thinking skills in English writing teaching? How can language proficiency and critical thinking be built at the same time? By expounding the major blended class design and teaching techniques of critical-thinking-oriented writing class, this paper explores the effective strategies and guidelines for realizing synergetic development based on the integrated instruction of language, content learning and critical thinking cultivation.

Keywords: New Liberal Arts; critical thinking; English writing teaching

1 Introduction

With the implementation of China's "Six Excellences and One Top" Plan 2.0 in September 2018, the concept of "New Liberal Arts" has begun to emerge in China. The significance of the construction of new liberal arts lies in "leading the direction of disciplines, responding to social concerns, adhering to problem-oriented approaches, breaking down disciplinary barriers, with key work focusing on the exploration and practice in new majors or directions, new models, new courses, and new theories"^[1]. The construction of New Liberal Arts has given rise to new foreign language disciplines. However, traditional foreign language disciplines have specific deficiencies in the cultivation of students' critical thinking and innovative abilities, indicating a need for improvement. The training of English majors must align with the development strategy of New Liberal Arts, actively respond to the new academic orientation, and highlight the essence of liberal arts, which is people-oriented and focused on the development of individuals. This cannot be achieved without cultivating students' critical thinking abilities. Only in this way can the concept of talent cultivation be updated to adapt to the transformation of national development strategies and accelerate the disciplinary construction of English major development.

At present, the most prominent issue among English major students in China is the relatively low level of logical thinking, lacking strong abilities in analysis, synthesis, judgment, reasoning, thinking, and discernment, as well as a lack of critical thinking abilities and originality, which Professor Huang Yuanshen referred to as "absence of

critical thinking"^[2]. In response to this phenomenon, Sun Youzhong (2011)^[3] proposed to "highlight the cultivation of critical thinking abilities and guide the reform of English major teaching into depth." He emphasized that "the cultivation of critical thinking abilities should be integrated into the teaching of all courses, allowing the cultivation of critical thinking to enter every course and every class," and also pointed out that "writing is one of the most effective courses for cultivating students' critical thinking abilities"^[4]. Based on this, the article focuses on the reform needs of English major teaching, attempts to take the writing course of foreign language majors in the intelligent era as an example, explores effective classroom teaching methods for critical thinking in English writing, and discusses how to incorporate the formation and development of critical thinking skills into the teaching process of foreign language major writing under the new liberal arts background, thereby enhancing the critical thinking abilities of foreign language major students.

2 Definition of Critical Thinking

The concept of critical thinking itself is quite rich. Sun Youzhong suggests that critical thinking abilities include not only a series of typical "cognitive abilities" but also a series of "emotional traits"^[3]. Wang Zhiyin^[5] believes that critical thinking abilities encompass six core skills: interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation. From the highly regarded "Delphi Report" in the field of education, it is evident that only by combining the cultivation of cognitive skills and emotional traits can we cultivate excellent critical thinkers^[6]. In short, critical thinking originates from reflection, focuses on analysis and reasoning, emphasizes questioning, reflecting, and judging one's own and others' viewpoints, and plays an indispensable role in students' acquisition of knowledge, application of knowledge, problem analysis, independent formulation of opinions, and innovation.

3 Critical Thinking and Writing

Although writing is a crucial way to reflect students' critical thinking abilities, the critical content in professional English writing courses is very low. As we all know, English writing is a cognitive and thinking creative process that expresses emotions through the reorganization and construction of English knowledge and language. This process is accompanied by the use of critical thinking abilities such as analysis, reasoning, explanation, and evaluation. Currently, for English major students, being able to use language comprehensively from multiple perspectives to write fluently is a significant challenge. From the perspective of writing, English major students often face two main problems. First, the absence of writing critical thinking ability, regarding writing as a pure language skill training. Students' essays often suffer from poor structure, lacking in logic, depth of thought, and organization; their arguments lack persuasiveness, and they are unable to effectively summarize their viewpoints with convincing reasoning; they also show a deficiency in creativity when solving problems, finding it difficult to apply analytical, comparative, and synthetic skills to ad-

dress issues in research and real-life situations. "The absence of critical thinking directly affects a person's creative ability, research ability, and problem-solving ability, and affects a person's quality"^[1]. The second is the lack of writing initiative. The current English major writing teaching, especially the second-year English writing teaching, generally implements the "teacher explains writing skills, analyzes model texts, assigns compositions, and comments on compositions," which is a teacher-centred deductive teaching model. Students lack the subject consciousness of writing, lack interest in writing and independent writing ability, and have no opportunity to question and judge others' and their own views. Most students have many grammatical errors in English compositions, some students are even accustomed to using the formatted compositions provided by the network and are keen on simulating the "universal template composition", "four or eight level composition secrets," and other standardized writing methods, seriously lacking independent consciousness in English writing. In short, we can find that the problem of the absence of critical thinking ability still troubles foreign language teachers and students.

In order to adapt to the development needs of new liberal arts construction, China's higher education has entered a new stage of comprehensively improving talent cultivation ability. The "National Standards for the Quality of Undergraduate Teaching in Foreign Language and Literature Majors in Colleges and Universities" issued in 2018 clearly proposed that critical thinking ability includes the essential thinking qualities of being eager to learn, believing in rationality, respecting facts, making cautious judgments, making fair evaluations, being quick to explore, and persistently pursuing the truth. It also includes the ability to explain, analyze, evaluate, reason, and explain elements such as evidence, concepts, methods, standards, and backgrounds; the ability to consciously reflect and regulate one's own thinking process^[7]. It can be seen critical thinking is a core ability that talents must have in the 21st century. Integrating the cultivation of critical thinking ability into writing teaching is the only way to improve the comprehensive writing ability of English major students under the background of new liberal arts.

Critical thinking has become an indispensable core ability in improving the quality of talent cultivation. To meet the needs of "knowledge + ability" type talents under the background of new liberal arts, it is necessary to fully integrate the cultivation of critical thinking qualities and critical thinking skills required for comprehensive talent improvement throughout the whole process of writing teaching, and to create a writing teaching model that is suitable and conducive to improving students' independent writing ability and critical thinking ability. This is an urgent task in English writing teaching in China at present.

4 English Writing Teaching with an Emphasis on Critical Thinking

The English writing process under the new liberal arts context aims to cultivate students' subject thinking, critical thinking abilities, and innovative abilities. Instructors should carefully design essential thinking writing activities during classroom teaching,

integrate critical thinking education throughout the entire curriculum system and every teaching link, and integrate English learning with critical thinking learning and simultaneously improve their English writing and critical thinking abilities.

Next, let's discuss how to design effective classroom teaching methods for critical thinking in English writing, and how to foster the development of critical thinking skills in foreign language education within the broader integration of modern information technology and education.

4.1 Design of Pre-class Teaching Activities

4.1.1 Clarification of Teaching Objectives.

Teachers can set teaching objectives from three aspects: critical thinking skills, language skills, and subject knowledge. The critical thinking objectives include: (1) to cultivate students' abilities to interpret, analyze, reason, and evaluate oral or written input information; (2) to guide students to clearly propose and reasonably argue their own viewpoints based on this; (3) to be able to self-assess and self-revise, forming independent judgment. In the specific teaching process, the teacher should guide students to pay attention to reflection and revision, consciously focus on the basic elements of critical thinking skills, and lay a solid foundation for the development of student's critical thinking abilities from the low level of understanding knowledge to the high level of analysis and evaluation.

4.1.2 Online Delivery of Teaching Tasks.

Educational informatization is an inevitable trend in the digital age^[8]. Teachers enrich their teaching methods before class using "Internet Plus" as a vehicle^[9], which can be done through the following steps: (1) Teachers use ChatGpt to obtain a large number of authentic English texts and assign interactive task writing topics, encouraging students to make full use of ChatGpt's online dictionary, online translation, encyclopedic knowledge Q&A, and other functions. This helps students internalize knowledge, enrich their language input content, deepen their thinking dimensions, and record their experiences and innovative ideas in a timely manner to form ideas and writing purposes. Online learning tasks under the background of big data can effectively encourage students to use various information sources and channels to recognise learning content in advance.

4.2 Classroom Teaching Activity Design

The core of classroom teaching should shift towards solving complex higher-order problems and cultivating learners' critical thinking abilities^[10]. The teacher is the organizer of classroom activities and can start from the following aspects:

1. Offline Teacher-Student Interaction: Teachers can use ChatGpt to set up realistic scenarios, guiding students to make ideological, content, and conceptual preparations for the writing process. During the teaching process, teachers should focus on guiding students to learn through cooperation and inquiry, focusing on students' thinking,

content enrichment, and language organization processes. Only by designing and implementing specific teaching activities according to the training objectives of critical thinking skills can we extend and expand the online learning tasks, stimulate students' curiosity, highly stimulate students' critical thinking skills, and help improve students' enthusiasm for writing.

2. **Offline Student-Student Collaboration:** Collaborative learning is an offline practical project. Teachers can guide students to use ChatGPT to generate outlines for writing topics, list evidence for explanation and support, and arrange group discussions for in-depth exploration. Students discuss in groups according to the reserved tasks, trying to establish arguments from multiple perspectives, refine writing topics, and compare with their own outlines. Each group also needs to choose a representative to make an oral statement in class to promote knowledge internalization. In the collaborative learning process, teachers should encourage communication and discussion among students, share views, listen to each other, strive for consensus, and create a democratic, relaxed, and inclusive cooperative atmosphere. At the same time, teachers also need to urge students to listen to other students' speeches carefully, guide students to seek ideas and thoughts from ChatGpt. By engaging in deeper discussions on the topic of the report through audience questions, responses from report members, and teacher comments, oral presentations can become an extension and expansion of the main classroom discussion, supplementing the insufficiencies of the main text discussion. This kind of intellectual collision between teachers and students can further promote the development of students' critical thinking abilities^[11].

3. **Classroom Peer Evaluation:** In the second class of the course, students carry out peer evaluation feedback and self-assessment according to the writing text evaluation form issued by the teacher. In addition to focusing on the scoring of language form, the writing text evaluation form should also include the critical thinking dimension evaluation standards formulated by the teacher, such as the ability to analyze key information (identification, explanation, reasoning, etc.), the ability to deduce arguments according to the writing theme (hypothesis, inference, etc.), and the ability to properly evaluate the logical relationship between the other party's arguments and evidence in the discussion process. Integrating critical thinking skills into the evaluation of writing skills not only helps to unleash the potential of critical thinking teaching but also helps to internalize critical thinking standards as students' learning habits and ultimately externalize them as critical thinking skills. Students can also use ChatGpt as an automatic writing evaluation and correction tool to complete initial modification, intermediate polishing, and high-level output.

4.3 Post-Class Feedback and Evaluation

In the era of big data, the cultivation of critical thinking in English writing requires the collaborative efforts of both teachers and students. Students derive pleasure from writing through the process of revising multiple drafts, achieving self-exploration and self-innovation, and enhancing their autonomy and enthusiasm in writing. In the "ubiquitous" learning environment of the big data era, students can also participate in class forums organized outside of class to comment on, rewrite, or summarize the key

points of the weekly online reading materials, and write reflections on their writing experiences, especially the gains from interactions with ChatGPT, providing real-time feedback to teachers through the school's online teaching platform.

In summary, post-class feedback and evaluation also attempt to integrate language, content, and thinking to cultivate students' independent thinking abilities and to initiate extracurricular inquiry-based research learning.

5 Conclusions

The cultivation of critical thinking is vital for writing teaching. Currently, China's higher education has entered a new stage of comprehensively improving talent cultivation capabilities. The professional English writing course should meet the quality requirements, knowledge requirements, and ability requirements stipulated by the "National Standard". Teachers can use new technologies to enhance the intensity of critical thinking cultivation from aspects of teaching methods, classroom design, homework arrangement, and essay evaluation. They can explore innovative ability-oriented writing teaching, use multiple teaching concepts and approaches to guide, instruct, organize, assess, and supervise students purposefully, and implement the organic integration of language skill training and subject knowledge impartation with the cultivation of critical thinking. Students' mastery of language also transcends everyday language and enters the realm of academic critical thinking^[12]. Only in this way can we make a substantial contribution to adapting to the needs of the new liberal arts construction and the lifelong ability training of comprehensive talents.

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