On the Cultivation of the Critical Thinking Ability in the Teaching of College English Reading

Xue-min HENG

Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, Xiamen, Fujian, China

Jasonhxm7708@163.com

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Abstract. English language learning is a process of problem identifying, defining and presenting. In the learning process, it is very important to cultivate students’ ability of critical thinking, especially to train students’ reading ability in college English teaching. And the very training should be the perfect combination of language and thought, which may actually realize the teaching goal. By the means of the training of critical thinking that enables students to identify problems on their own and realize what problems they do encounter, it may make the efficient English language teaching come true. In the meantime, teachers may employ the critical teaching methods in the class to let the students put forward the problems they encounter, from which the goal of English language teaching will be put into practice.

Introduction

Whether students’ English grades in the college are good or not depends on students’ personal quality and their mastery of the knowledge about English. As for language learning, what matters most is the cultivation of the reading ability, specifically the cultivation of the ability of critical thinking while learning English. W.P. Hu states: “Reading is a process of psychological thinking, and the teaching of the reading curriculum focuses on the art of teaching in the classroom. However, as the thinking it is, reading is special and scientific with its own characteristics that distinguishes it from other kinds of thinking with common features.”[1] Chinese students learning English basically gets stuck in the mastery of knowledge about vocabulary and grammar. It does not mean that the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is not important. However, when it comes to the language learning, students should turn the language they learn into the practical communicative skills. Also, we should admit that the reform does not touch the essence of the problem even though many educational reforms are applied in the college teaching and the methods of English teaching, and vast changes in test models have been made, pushed by the China’s reform and opening up and economic development. Take Band 4 and Band 6 of College English Test (CET) as the example, a lot of efforts are made to explore the test modes, and indeed, to some extent students’ listening and speaking ability has been improved compared with the previous dumb English. However, in the practice of teaching, although the students’ ability of English listening and speaking has been improved, their reading ability is declining obviously. According to the teaching of college English reading, the discussion about the students’ critical thinking should focus on “the design and study of teaching in the college English reading”. Referred to many documents, I find it may mean a lot for enriching the study of the very field to research on it. The research will also be of practical significance and value, mainly in mobilizing the students’ learning enthusiasm, enhancing their consciousness and awareness of self-cultivating their ability to think critically in learning college
English reading, drawing the attention of the college English teachers’ to cultivate the students’ critical thinking and offering the relevant theoretical foundation and conclusion of research, and widening the research perspective of students’ critical thinking and further enriching the research results of students’ critical thinking in our country through the “cultivation of critical thinking ”in the teaching of college English reading.

The Ability of Critical Reading and Critical Thinking

Since the 1980s, the teaching of critical thinking has been given high priority in the western countries represented by the United States. The reason why western developed countries universally emphasize the cultivation of college students’ ability of critical thinking is that it is generally acknowledged that the critical thinking ability of labour is one of the important foundations of rapid and sustained economic development. Therefore, to maintain the economic development and its competition, it is a must to cultivate the critical thinking of the next generation’s labour. The critical thinking plays an essential role in cultivating the students’ creative spirits and innovative ability, which makes it an important part of the talents fostering. Many people benefiting from the reform and opening up and the globalization, we can get access to various kinds of language in many ways and the press overseas, and in the meantime, we become more confident to exchange cultural knowledge with more foreign friends, from which our personal quality has been improved. However, although the speaking and listening skills are improved, young people, especially the college students gradually forget the equipped basic language knowledge while facing the rapid life pace and the development of modern online information. “But we attached great importance to the results of examination all the time, which results in students tending to change the skills and methods to the static knowledge and keep them in mind. They neither have practice opportunities, nor have the courage to try creatively. In that way, it made our students to ask textbook or teacher for help firstly when they met some problems. They suffer from the dependency syndrome in thoughts: they don’t want to think independently, and they can’t think independently either.” [2] Students spend less and less time in reading, and reading has almost become a luxury thing. Because they prefer to use mobile phones to read headlines, watching lives and playing all kinds of Apps instead of reading a good novel written in foreign languages. The informationization offers people the opportunity to enjoy the convenient communication services, but meanwhile, it also prisons the people into an extremely tiny zone.

In a modern network-developed society, most information people grasp are fragmented. Even the direct knowledge people get in practice are universally influenced by the other indirect existent knowledge. Western countries’ emphasis on the education of critical thinking in college is accord with the unique background of the information era. One way to develop the students’ ability of critical thinking is to improve the students’ ability to choose, understand, digest and evaluate the knowledge in the age of knowledge explosion, from which the students’ ability to sense and differentiate the knowledge from the Internet and other mass media to avoid the impact of negative thoughts may be promoted. In other words, it may strengthen social labour’s adaptability in the new age. One of the most obvious features of the information era is that the knowledge is produced and spread in an unprecedented way. The development of information superhighway and Internet technology not only accelerates the speed of knowledge-producing and spreading, but also makes the good and bad knowledge mixed together, which makes the phenomena like clichés even worse. What’s more, even though the Internet may offer countless answers to any problem that people may
encounter in the life, study or work, if people do not understand the exact meaning of right answers, then the countless answers would be a heavy burden. Those students who lack critical thinking would be drowned by the overwhelming knowledge of information era. In order to avoid this issue, the training of critical thinking should be introduced to some certain subjects in college teaching. To cultivate the students in our country to think critically will be a systematic project, which means that we should cultivate the internalized teaching belief of critical thinking according to the valid practice of the foreign universities and the teaching status of education in our country.

If the importance of critical thinking is truly valued by the majority of English teachers, in the meantime, the teachers can research and study further on the theory and practice of critical thinking, and be adept in connecting the critical thinking and subject teaching, the method to combine the training of critical thinking and teaching of college English reading together is the best way, which will allow the critical thinking to have a long-term development and to overcome the main difficulties encountered in the process of setting up at the curriculum of critical thinking solely. Facing the challenges of the new era, there are many issues waiting to be settled in terms of China’s college English teaching. Although the listening and speaking in the teaching of College English teaching are very important, the fact that the reading is not improved may make it almost impossible to cultivate the ability to read deeply and to analyze the problems. When it comes to the future further study overseas or the reading of English articles of their own major, the meaning of the language in the context and the text may be misunderstood. The theory that listening and speaking go first does make sense. Since the listening and speaking are the foundation of communication, one can only communicate with others after he understands what others say. However, apart from oral communication, there are more other ways for us to communicate with others. Besides people’s facial expression, gestures and people’s attitude also help us maintain an efficient communication. What’s more, words can be used to communicate with others while learning languages. Ever since we learn the language, people can still exchange ideas with their hearts without face-to-face communication, which makes the reform of communication come true. In the meanwhile, the words in the books also define the civilization of our age. With the development of the globalization, the interpersonal communication of culture and technology has been accelerated. However, the communication in terms of culture and technology among people still remain in written form. I am not denying the importance of language speaking, but there should be the distinction between the primary and the secondary when it comes to how to master the language.

Many Chinese students lack critical thinking, which has become the common impression on the education sector. Our English teaching is basically stuck in the “cramming” traditional teaching modes. Despite of advanced equipment and courseware with abundant contents, the class like grammar teaching and language reading still follow the routine of “beginning with mouse clicks, teachers explaining the points, students being asked to stand up to translate the sentences and then teachers giving the right answers followed by students taking notes from the courseware”. The translation and the note-taking process can be done by any students. However, as college students, they should be qualified with the ability to analyze and judge, which means that they should be proactive to categorize the problems they identify. Then they should decide which the problems are that they are already able to solve or understand, and which the ones are that they cannot solve efficiently. In the process like analyzing the problems, after students classify the problems or decide which problems are the ones that they cannot solve, that’s when teachers should try to help them fix
the problems. Once the problem is solved, the very process would help students understand and know more about the problems they identify.

Sandra Silberstein in his article “Techniques and Resources in Teaching Reading”, introduced the research results of reading teaching in foreign languages that worth learning, and he proposed that “Reading comprehension is actually a complex process of cognition. In the process of reading, the relationship between the reader and the text is interactive”. [3] To build a good reading foundation, students should really spend more time to suck the marrow out of the foreign culture and absorb the good contents of other countries’ culture with intended emotion. “The reading teaching of college English cannot be simplified, instead, the reading should be regarded as a complex process of cognition, a communicative process and a discourse process in which the reader can interact with the text, create and make the new meaning. In the class, both teachers and students should clearly know the nature, the purpose, the type and the method, which makes the doing more with less realized”. [4] Reading is not restrained to places nor to the Internet signals, and you can grab a book you like to enjoy whenever and wherever you want. Gradually, if the language and grammar are improved in the reading context, their ability to listen and speak would be quickly improved accordingly. We mention the importance of reading in the previous section, and we should decide which is more important in the process of analyzing and learning English to make a firm foundation for the future further study. More importantly, we should focus on cultivating the critical thinking while reading. As an essential content and method of English learning, College English teaching is an important channel to cultivate the students’ critical thinking ability. In the teaching of College English reading, we can help students to improve their ability to access the information and to think thoroughly by launching the critical reading activities to cultivate the students’ critical thinking skills; launching critical English reading teaching to create a good atmosphere and educational environment and changing the concept of traditional reading to form the teaching culture of “reading with critical thinking” are the basic preconditions to cultivate students’ ability to think critically. Teachers should be good at designing questions and questioning in the teaching of reading, and reasonable class teaching designing would be the key to cultivate the students’ ability to think critically. And the proper evaluation of English reading teaching activities is to protect critical thinking ability.

Analysis on the Strategy of Cultivating Critical Thinking Ability in College English Reading

In the teaching process, we also find that students just wait for their teachers to solve the problems for them. In the class, teachers still talk too much, which makes them the authority of the students. Even if there are errors or mistakes, the students will not try to identify the problem to propose their own ideas. Most time of their four years are used to passively absorb the knowledge and skills that they already know, and barely develop their potentials. This problem may be even worse when it comes to the language learning, and many college students are used to be “the repeater” that lacks the ability to analyze and judge. Or they are only equipped with little ability to analyze and judge after four years’ study. In learning languages, how to improve the reading ability is the key to learning English, or even the foundation to adapt to the globalization. In the very process, it is a must to think critically. Combining the cultivation of critical thinking with the subjects teaching together and developing the students’ critical thinking though regular classroom teaching is the most common way to train the students to think critically in colleges.

The reading we discuss is not the simple reading or the rigid translation or simultaneous
interpretation but to understand the author’s intention with emotional judgement and analysis. The encountered problems in the reading comprehension should not be simplified or obscured, students should identify and analyze the essence of the problems referred in the texts to judge and analyze the opinions and arguments from different perspectives. What teachers should do is to help students to have their own opinions to identify the problem to make their system of theory instead of fully accepting the authors’ arguments. At the same time, teachers find that although we have a lot of multimedia courseware, good network platforms and a variety of videos, image and files to assist our practice of teaching, we lose the direction in the English language teaching. Students are confused about teachers’ hastily-paced schedule of teaching. However, the most important cause—Reading is placed in a very subordinate position, which makes students barely get the opportunity to be trained to think critically. Even they spend time doing reading-training, they actually just try to find answers and analyze the constituents instead of truly conduct the critical reading. Our English teaching is always looking for “the right answer”, and students may always anticipate or find the “the right answer”. In such an English teaching class, students may not put forward questions, always waiting for teachers to tell them the “the scope of testing” as if there is no such question that can make the students to put forward. And teachers may not know whether they have different opinions or judgement to propose or not. Teachers are not willing to share or discuss the questions they may not even know. Even some teachers who do have confusions would not give them to be discussed by the students for fear that their own authority would be challenged. Imagine that how could such class teaching cultivate students to think critically? Since the students can barely identify the question, how could they possibly go deeper to solve the problem?

Therefore, in the process of English teaching, teachers should be proactive to cultivate students’ ability of critical thinking. It is easy to talk about the ability of critical thinking, but it will be extremely difficult to practice it. Teaching is not to tell students what should be kept in mind but to encourage students to have their own thoughts and how to develop their ideas to make their ideas bear the test of logic and facts. The college English reading should be perfectly combined with the education of critical thinking, and teachers should encourage students to read extensively, think actively, discuss in groups and analyze in the class to discuss more profound knowledge. The close integration of teaching knowledge and training of thinking critically may instruct students how to think with their knowledge of majors. S.R. Wang said: “From the perspective that education is to impart professional knowledge and educate people, the cultivation of students’ cultural quality should be taken into consideration in college English teaching. The cultivation of humanistic spirits is accord with the learning goal that ‘the comprehensive cultural quality should be improved’” .[5] That exactly reflects the transition from the idea of taking English just as a tool to communicate to regarding it as the constituent of the quality education. As for its function of teaching, college English is a good carrier of the quality education, and it shoulders the responsibility of inheriting the culture of human-beings and integrating Eastern and Western cultures, which makes it one of the important invisible curricula of emotional education. From the perspective of curriculum setting, college foreign language teaching usually lasts for two years, accounting for half time of the students undergraduate years, which allows teachers to have enough time to help students think critically to conduct the education of humanity and quality. And the most efficient method is to cultivate the students’ ability to think critically.

In his article “Foreign Language Teaching and Cultivation of Students’ Creative and Critical Thinking”, R.F. Li pointed out: “In language teaching, especially in the teaching of reading
curriculum, teachers should help students to understand that not all things in the printed books are the truth. All articles we read are the opinions of the author, requesting us to keep asking questions. "[6] In the process of language learning, we often separate the language and from thoughts, vocabulary memorizing, translating and paraphrasing, failing to combine the language things with the thoughts. Reading is the perfect combination of the two. It requires the learner’s ability to identify and practice proactively. The teaching process only begins when the learner encounters a problem that he cannot resolve. “To create the culture of ‘reading with critical thinking’ does not require students to passively accept the knowledge but encourages students to conduct reasonable suspicions and makes them propose questions and probe assumptions.”[7] R.H. Li pointed out in his article “A Study on the Cultivation of Critical Reading and Critical Thinking in College English”: “In college English reading teaching, carrying out the critical reading and the cultivating college students’ critical thinking ability can further help college students master Learn English knowledge and enhance their ability to obtain information and think critically.”[8] The purpose of teachers’ teaching is not limited to the instilling of knowledge, but also to guiding students how to learn to explore knowledge, to teaching students the ability to independently find, think, know things, which makes students able to identify and analyze the problems outside the classroom and become the person who would be responsible for themselves and others. Besides, in the class teaching, teachers should try to establish the leaning community. “The effective learning community may exert a positive impact on students’ performance, behavior and the development of society and morality.”[9]

We often emphasize that teaching should be students-oriented. And that means students should be the orientation of identifying the question. Students may realize the problems in the process of identifying the question, which makes students know that some problems are neglected by themselves. It seems to be easy, but many students cannot make it. Teachers should guide students to identify the question so that they cannot develop the habit of being lazy. Also, students should be explicitly told that they should shoulder their responsibility to identify the problem, to break through their mental barriers and to treat the problems that cannot be solved on their own seriously. If students do not even have the desire for knowledge, you can imagine what it will be like if they proceed to further understand and analyze, let alone the training of understanding and critical thinking. “The spirits to innovate and the ability to practice” emphasized by “quality education” will be nothing without the teaching of “critical thinking”. [10] To Identify and put forward the question are closely related to the consequent effect of learning. The process of learning will be boring without taking questions while it will be a discovery process with a passion to learn with questions. Consequently, when the assignment has been done, students would be happy inside their hearts despite challenging process. To learn without questions in mind will end up with aimless wandering, which makes the learning process like that turn out to be inefficient. Consequently, students will be discouraged to learn, giving up on further understanding and deeper digging on the knowledge.

In addition to the methods above, teachers should select more diversified reading materials. In the meanwhile, the teaching materials used for the training of critical thinking should be more practical. If students can be given enough time to cultivate their critical thinking, to pay more attention to the deep structure of the problems they focus on and the teaching materials are based on the living environment of the reality, we believe that their critical thinking ability will be significantly promoted. Teachers may help create a good learning atmosphere, and reasonably arrange the
teaching contents and guide students to selectively receive the external information, offering students the opportunity to read critically and cultivate the ability of critical thinking. In the teaching activities of college English reading curriculum, the class teaching is the most important carrier. The critical thinking is both a critical skill and a critical quality. And the training of skills should be taught in the curriculum of the major. Therefore, the curriculum like logic and critical thinking should be established. Logic (especially the deductive logic) emphasizes the validity and inevitability of reasoning, focusing on training of formalized logical thinking skills. The critical thinking curriculum aims at finding, analyzing and developing the standards, procedures, and models applied to analyze and argue in people’s daily life, mainly cultivating the non-formalized critical thinking skills. These two curricula are indispensable to cultivate the critical thinking. Teachers should guide students to identify the question, prevent them from forming the habits of being lazy, in the meanwhile, students should be told that to identify the question is their own responsibility, and they should overcome the challenges inside their hearts and treat unsolved questions and ambiguous questions seriously. In the concrete teaching classes, the very process should not be omitted. In the teaching and practice of college English reading, teachers should set up critical and inspiring questions to conduct the discourse analysis, and facilitate the students’ critical thinking skills and creative skills through English learning under a reasonable evaluation mechanism. Creativity is the focus of quality education, and creativity derives from the improvement of students’ critical thinking ability; Teachers should focus on the cultivating methods and training ways of critical thinking in the teaching of college English reading, and further apply and practice the critical thinking in the teaching of college English reading.

Summary

Reading ability matters a lot in college English teaching. And the cultivation of critical thinking ability is of great significance in the teaching of college English reading. Therefore, we should enhance the training of critical thinking in college English reading, and gradually incorporate the critical thinking into the goal systems of college English Teaching. What’s more, efforts should be made to change the concept of the traditional college English teaching, transforming the passive reading into the proactive problem-based reading, which makes the efficient teaching of college English into practice. Thus students’ personality would be inspired, from which they may become the person who thinks dependently, the person with critical spirits and the person who can create the multi-dimension of spirits. College English teaching should not and cannot be the pure teaching of the language skills. Besides the cultivation of students’ ability to communicate and understand, there are a lot of things to be done. Students should be the master of their own learning, and they should use the knowledge they learn to present the unsolved problems for the teachers. In this way students are able to identify the question, define questions, in the meanwhile, they are capable of conveying the problems of their own in the written form to teachers, which is not dispensable in the concrete teaching of language causes. Teachers cannot neglect the essence of language learning, and they should combine the thoughts with teaching while explaining points of language and phenomena of grammar.

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