

Strategies for Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Ability in Teaching College English Writing

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ABSTRACT. *Due to overemphasis on language knowledge, many college students are faced with the imbalance between language competence and critical thinking ability. It greatly hinders students' improvement of writing competence. The article makes an analysis on the development of college English writing in China and explores the strategies on how to enhance students' critical thinking so as to make them become better writers.*

KEYWORDS: *Writing competence, College english writing, Critical thinking*

1. Introduction

With the emergence of global integration and fast growth of China's economy, English is playing an increasingly important role in various social fields. Currently, it is crucial to improve overall English teaching quality and enhance students' ability to master and use English. As an effective way to evaluate students' comprehensive ability to use English, English writing can help test students' capacity in grammar, vocabulary and the overall planning of the composition. As a matter of fact, the present situation of College English writing in China is worrying and merits wide attention. It needs to be dealt with in an effective way. College English writing is designed to improve students' ability to convey facts, opinions, emotions, imagination and communicative information.

There are different definitions for "critical thinking", which can date back to John Dewey's reflective thinking. In the 1990s, Delphi Report, which was based on the research on critical thinking, gained worldwide recognition. It states that critical thinking is a purposeful and self-adjusted judgement, which manifests itself as explanation, analysis, assessment and deduction as well as description of argument, concept, methods, standards or context. Critical thinking is an indispensable exploring tool.

Critical thinking drives and lays the foundation for creative thinking. Critical thinking puts emphasis on "destruction" while creative thinking sets store

by“establishment”. It’s impossible to be creative without being critical. Cultivating students’critical thinking is helpful in motivating them to break traditional thoughts and building strong confidence in seeking for something new and original.

2. The Present Situation of College English Writing Teaching

The basic purpose of college English teaching is to help students have listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation ability and to make them capable of communicating with others in English. English writing is the presentation of one’s comprehensive English ability, including the abilities to logically analyze, organize and use language. Writing ability is closely connected with speaking, reading and listening ability. Nowadays, English writing ability is a must for modern top talents, in particular, in the positions of foreign enterprises. For example, employees are often required to write instructions, present their personal resume, email business letters and so on. With social and economic development and international cooperation and exchange, English writing ability will become increasingly important.

As there crops up problems in students’English writing, it is not easy for college students to be qualified for jobs required by the society. Specifically speaking, they can’t quickly write a concise and logical article and some common mistakes are often found in their writings. It seems to them that writing is hard work. Although they have enough thoughts to convey, they find it hard to get the right words. It takes good teaching measures to improve their writing ability.

In terms of college English teaching, students are supposed not only to develop language skills but also to have critical thinking skills so as to critically embrace and cope with the shock from diversified cultures. They should be helped to improve their cross cultural communicative competence and develop into talents with international vision. In the course of output, learners are obliged to express their views with target language, so it is appropriate to help develop students’critical thinking in college English classroom teaching. On the contrary, traditional writing instructions focuses little on cultivating student’s critical thinking and teachers tend to cram writing skills and sample compositions to students. Besides, they assign students writing practices to be completed either in class or after class. Students have no choice but to accept the topic assigned to them and they have little chance to talk with each other about how to complete the task better. After assignments have been handed in, teachers start to score them. If there are too many students in the class, only part of writing practices will be graded. Language problems will be pointed out in marking the compositions but students care more about their marks. In this traditional teaching, for a large part students can only become passive listeners for they have no chance to air their own views. Although they can absorb as much knowledge as they can, they fail to take the initiative to think and make judgement.

Critical thinking is of vital importance to writing. If students can not think critically while writing compositions, they will only follow others’footsteps without

their own ideas and they can present nothing more than something hollow.

Those with critical thinking skills are good thinkers, who have deep insight into language skills, in particular writing skills. As a result, they have made great progress in studies. In second language writing, the importance of critical thinking can not be overstressed. Those who can think critically are capable of taking into account different views, making rational analysis and clearly stating their thoughts with solid evidence. Therefore, cultivating students' critical thinking ability is conducive to them in presenting reasonable and logical points of view, thus improving their writing.

3. Factors Affecting students' Writing Ability

Cultivating college students' writing ability is an important part of English teaching. Although teachers have made great efforts to improve students' writing skills, it is hard to achieve desired effects. The factors affecting college students' writing ability are the following.

First, students are poor at English. Tenses and voices are often misused and words are misspelled. Without a large vocabulary, they do not know many phrases and sentence patterns which are basic frameworks of writings. English writings are different from Chinese ones in writing style. Only with enough words and sentence patterns accumulated can students write smoothly and coherently. Second, students are not good at writing in Chinese. Chinese writing ability can have great effect on English writing because the former has positive transfer on the latter. The more Chinese expressions one knows about, the more helpful it is to learn how to improve English writing. Third, writing assignments and conditions are not sufficient. In English writing, there are not enough assignments and not many words are used, usually not more than 200 words. On the contrary, in Chinese writing, one has to finish each assignment with at least several thousand characters and it takes longer to accomplish it.

Fourth, writing practice is not enough. For most of the time students still learn and communicate in Chinese. It is not hard for them to write a composition with more than several characters, but it is difficult to do so in English. One of the main reasons is that they do not have enough writing practice. They should be required to frequently fulfil English writing assignments. Fifth, cognitive ability should be strengthened. Students usually have negative feelings towards English writing. For lack of confidence, it is natural not to achieve desired effects. If one can not be too careful in writing and do not polish his writing repeatedly, he is only finishing the task without the chance to improve his writing.

4. Problems in English Writing and Their Causes

College students' writing ability is affected for different factors. The purpose of writing teaching is to improve their writing ability. It is of great help for students to improve their writing ability through analyzing the problems in writing. Meanwhile,

it can guide writing teaching to some extent.

The following are problems that often occur in writing.

First, the purpose of writing teaching is not clear and is not given enough attention. Many teachers start to conduct classes without knowing the purpose of the course while students learn for the sake of examination, which can not bring students new understanding or elicit their attention. In many universities there are no special writing courses or writing materials and assignments are mostly finished after class.

Second, there are some drawbacks in writing method. Teaching methods play an significant role in improving English writing. English writing is the comprehensive embodiment of English ability, so it is necessary to improve English. It is a wrong idea to think that writing is to cultivate writing ability. For example, in writing classes, students tend to be given more writing practice but some basic skills such as word building and grammar are neglected. Roughly, there are four teaching methods--product-oriented teaching, process-based writing, content-based writing and style-based writing. Nowadays most teachings are task-based, teacher-centered and exam-oriented. In English writing classes, teachers usually assign a topic for students to write about. When marking the assignments, most teachers will only find out mistakes in grammar or sentence structure without analyzing them as a whole, which can not arouse students' interest in writing.

Third, students themselves need to make progress. In English writing, teachers just play a supporting role. In the process of writing, some college students often find nothing to write about, maybe because they have less interest in writing, are not confident or optimistic. There is much to be desired as far as English learning is concerned. Appropriate teaching methods do not necessarily improve students' writing ability. After all, students themselves are the deciding factor in improving writing. But teachers also need to take some measures to deal with it. For example, they should inform students of the importance of writing ability and arouse their interest in writing.

Fourth, there exist differences in culture and context. Context. plays a crucial role in language learning. There are different written forms for different contexts. In writing teaching, teachers should explain them to students in detail. Cultural differences have something to do with our thinking patterns and expressions and have great effect on writing teaching.

College English teaching is designed to improve students' ability to comprehensively use English so that they can effectively communicate with others in English in the future. However, it can not be denied that there exist a lot of problems in college English writing. The following are causes for them.

First, there are some problems in writing teaching. When students start to write compositions, they have writing models to follow. So it is easy to analyze their writings because they do not think deeply while writing. Teachers only grade their assignments without telling advantages from disadvantages and instructing them how to make improvement. Students are given few opportunities to mutually

comment on their writings. As a matter of fact, feedback has great impact on English writing teaching. The combination of feedback from both teachers and students is of great help in improving students' writing. However, in a big class, teachers often fail to give immediate comment on each student's writing. For example, when teachers can't make sense of the writings, they will not mark them or correct sentences according to their own understanding.

Second, there are some drawbacks in teaching approach. For a long time, product-oriented teaching approach have been popular in China. It focuses on training students in writing style, paragraph organization and passage organization. At the same time, most teachers take writing teaching as part of exam-oriented education and lay stress on writing models. On the one hand, this teaching approach can help students learn how to write through following writing models. On the other hand, students will be restricted in their thoughts and they won't be able to display their creativeness to the full. The most ideal way is to regard writing models as abundant resources instead of the role models to follow.

College English writing teaching has a lot of problems in such fields as evaluation and teaching approach. How to enhance current English teaching approach and motivate students to become interested in writing so as to improve their writing has become a hard issue to deal with. As a result, college English teachers should try different teaching approaches to meet students' needs.

Third, students themselves also need to make improvements. The reason why students are faced with difficulties in writing is that besides such factors as teachers, teaching approaches, textbooks and evaluation system, students are poor in language ability and lack effective writing strategies. In English writing, most students can't effectively apply writing strategies to writing assignments and lack monitoring of the teaching process. Few of them practise writing skills on their own and they mainly do the writing through memorizing the model writings.

5. Strategies for Developing Critical Thinking Ability

The process of writing includes two parts--the formation of language forms and the formation of content. The formation of language forms involves how to choose words, make sentences and make writings cohesive and coherent as well as choose the right style. The formation of content is composed of forming concepts, setting topics, making illustrations and so on. The two parts do not parallel but influence and infiltrate each other. Only after knowing about the characteristics of writing process can instructors find out the converging point between writing instructions and critical thinking, thus helping students focus on the contents and standards.

5.1 Transforming Teaching Approach and Creating an Atmosphere of Innovation

Classroom teaching, the main way to improve students' competence, plays a crucial role in helping develop critical thinking. Therefore, in classroom teaching practice, teachers should plan teaching activities, transforming the traditional way of

cramming into an open, cooperative, exploratory and independence-focused learning way. Memory-focused teaching is replaced with thought-focused teaching. Students are happy to associate with others and like to present themselves, so teachers can arrange them to engage in discussions and debate in classroom teaching.

First, efforts should be made to carry out activities for students to discuss with each other so that they can join in teaching activities with a calm state of mind, which lays a psychological foundation for cultivating students' critical thinking. In accordance with teaching contents, teachers enlighten students on open and interesting topics and encourage them to freely air their views. In the discussion, teachers should not interfere too much. Instead, they should try to create relaxing atmosphere, helping students get over their nervousness and express themselves. Second, targeted debates should be carried out to spark inspiration of speculation and criticism and improve their capabilities of analyzing problems from different angles. After a debatable and intriguing topic is chosen, students should be required to collect materials so as to form their own views and volunteer to become positive side or negative side of the debate. After the debate contest is finished, teachers will summarize views of both sides, helping debaters find out good points and weak points of both sides and giving convincing conclusions.

5.2 Optimizing Teaching Designs and Expanding the Space for Using Critical Thinking

Classroom teaching is invested with new features with the application of modern educational resources, ways of education and educational technology. Teachers can bring into full play advantages of advanced teaching means, optimize classroom teaching design and expand the space for students to use critical thinking.

First, teachers can take advantage of such tools as computers and multimedia and create situations through such teaching aids as PPT or Flash so as to develop students' capabilities of observation, analysis and discrimination. Second, through making use of learning environment and resources based on Internet information, teachers can organize students to carry out cooperative inquiry learning and encourage them to make an in-depth exploration of social and cultural issues through dialogues, negotiation and argument. In the process of collecting, sorting and integrating information, students can be helped to gradually develop the habit of thinking critically. Third, as every student is different from others, teachers can use information technology to implement autonomous learning activities so as to facilitate the development of students' personality and stimulate their potential in innovation.

5.3 Advocating Process Evaluation and Focusing on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability

Scientific and reasonable evaluation ways can effectively motivate students to keep innovative and achieve good results. Under the background of quality

education, teachers should focus on the whole process of learning and take into account such factors as interest, method, cognitive style and affective attitude. For each new idea engendered in learning, more encouragement should be given to students to create a harmonious, peaceful and humanistic atmosphere of evaluation. Meanwhile, multiple ways of evaluation are adopted to help develop the thinking habit of daring to challenge. Through evaluation, students can experience joy brought about by criticism and innovation. At the same time, they can learn about themselves, build self confidence and develop the independent critical thinking skills, ultimately achieving full development.

6. Conclusion

To help students cultivate critical thinking ability, teachers should transform traditional educational philosophy, absorb the essence of modern advanced educational theory and draw on educational thought and teaching ways both at home and abroad. It is a gradual process to cultivate students' critical thinking skills as well as a process of moving forward side by side with knowledge, ability and quality. This systematic project needs educators to make unremitting efforts to make continual exploration.

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