

The Features and Practical Strategies of Debate Teaching in College English: Guided by the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract: Debate teaching is a teaching method that flexibly applies debate competitions in the classroom. The combination of debating teaching and college English comprehensively cultivates students' language ability and critical thinking skills, and improves the current situation of the separation of language ability and thinking ability. This paper analyzes the features of debate teaching from four aspects: teaching form, teaching objectives, teaching content, and teaching evaluation, and proposes five practical strategies for applying debate teaching to college English: taking both language ability and critical thinking skills as objectives; improving student participation; flexibly applying debate competition system; timely guiding the debate content; encouragingly evaluating and summarizing.

Keywords: Debate Teaching, Critical Thinking skills, College English Teaching, Practical Strategy

1. Introduction

Critical thinking skills include the ability to reasonably interpret, analyze, evaluate, infer and explain things or problems [1], which is the core ability for people in information era. In China, the *Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Educational System and Mechanism (2017)* proposes four key competencies of cognition, cooperation, innovation, and vocation, among which the critical thinking skills is the sub-competency of cognition [2]. Therefore, it is not only of great significance to students, but also one of the important tasks faced by China's education.

Among many ways to develop critical thinking skills, debate is one of the most effective methods [3]. Debate enables the debater to use knowledge in an all-round way and to think from multi-perspectives. Most scholars agree that debate promoted the formation and development of students' critical thinking skills. Sun believed that the debate competition has consciously cultivated the ability of college students to use two-way thinking and multi-directional thinking [4]. Zhang pointed out that the key factors involved in debate were the main components of critical thinking skill. Experimental research also showed the same idea [5]. Since the 1940s, a teaching and research institution in the United States has conducted many investigations on whether debate courses in universities have improved students' CT based on the standard test results. The research showed that the students who take the debate course had a much higher ability of thinking than those who did not take the debate course [6]. Wang found that different critical thinking skills were required at each stage through the analysis of the debate and reflection practice of 24 students [7].

The field of the application of debate in the classroom in western countries covers almost all disciplines and educational stage. In China, debate has also gradually played an important role in the modern education system. At present, it has been introduced into the ideological and political courses in higher education, as well as many professional courses such as economics and English.

To sum up, critical thinking skills is the priority and focus of the education in China. In foreign language education, how to promote the development of students' critical thinking skills has become the key proposition of deepening the reform of foreign language education and teaching [8]. And scholars hold a positive attitude towards introducing the debate into the classroom to train learners' critical thinking skills.

2. Definition of debate teaching

The study of debate abroad can be traced back to ancient Greece. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have begun to study and use debate to stimulate students' enthusiasm and initiative in thinking. For centuries, debate and speech have been important subjects in western education. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, debate began to develop as a modern educational method [9]. In the middle of the 20th century, debate was not as popular as before. But in the 1980s, when critical thinking skills were mainly emphasized in the universities, scholars put forward the concept of debate in teaching, and debate as a teaching strategy became popular again [10].

In China, the application of debate to teaching could be traced back to the educationalists Mencius and Mozi in the Warring States Period. Mencius used debate in teaching to cultivate students' thinking ability; Mozi made a comprehensive summary of the level, method and attitude of debate [11]. The research on the theory and practice of debate teaching began at the beginning of the 20th century. Feng and Chen defined debate teaching as a method of applying debate competition to education. It is a three-dimensional teaching method system that taking teaching content and teaching tasks as the center, students as the main body, and the teachers as the leading [12]. The specific form of debate teaching method is: teachers design debate topics based on the course content, then organize students to support different positions, next students conduct debate competitions in the classroom, including pre-competition preparation and post-competition explanations [13].

Applying debate teaching in college English is flexibly apply the debate competition system in the classroom by combining the teaching environment, which not only enhances and showcases students' language abilities, but also cultivate their critical thinking skills. In the three stages of debate preparation, classroom debate, and debate evaluation and summary, students are able to use language to solve problems and learn relevant knowledge, taking into account the instrumental and humanistic nature of language.

3. Theoretical basis of debate teaching

3.1. Bruner's cognitive-discovery theory

Bruner proposed the "discovery learning" in cognitive-discovery theory, which referred to all forms of knowledge that learners obtained personally with their own minds, knowledge including not only things that humans have not discovered, but also existing human knowledge [14]. In discovery learning, students are knowledge explorers and that teaching should be "learner-centered". The process of discovery teaching can be divided into four steps: firstly, teachers create a situation for students to raise questions; next, teachers encourage students to make assumptions; then, students test the hypothesis; finally, students draw their own conclusions and teachers provide evaluation. The four steps are exactly consistent with debate teaching: firstly, teachers inform the debate topic to students, which encourages them to raise a question: what is my opinion; then, students need to choose a side as their hypothesis; next, students need to collect a lot of information to support and defend their side through the debate; finally, students make a conclusion after the debate.

The discovery learning emphasizes the importance of thinking and solving problems independently, rather than relying on teachers to provide answers. The debating teaching embodies the characteristics of discovery learning theory: it provides a platform for students to independently explore and learn; through the organization and guidance of teachers, students collide with each other in the debate, deepening their understanding of issues and improving their thinking.

3.2. Manabu Sato's dialogue learning theory

Learning is not an isolated, abstract, and programmed activity. It is a social process based on communication. Manabu Sato believed that the nature of learning was a kind of dialogue practice in which learning was a trinity of reconstructing the world, partners and self [15]. That is, learning is achieved through dialogue between learners and the objective world, with themselves and with others [16].

According to the theory, dialogue with others is a kind of learning form, which is a part of the learning system. Therefore, dialogue learning theory advocates using dialogue to explore knowledge and truth. Among them, "dialogue" is a way of communication between two parties in terms of knowledge,

discourse, thoughts, emotions, and other aspects based on mutual respect and equality, using speech as the main intermediary [17]. Using dialogue as a means of learning, learners will be inspired by questions and answers, gain deeper understanding, improve their cognitive level, and generate insights and inspiration with others. Debate teaching is based on the "dialogue". It is the collision of different viewpoints, helping students rebuild their knowledge structure, and building their critical thinking of objective things through questioning and refuting others' opinions.

4. Features of debate teaching

4.1. Form of debate teaching

In terms of teaching form, debate teaching embodies the subjectivity of students. Before the debate, the debate topic is given by teachers, and the preparatory work, such as the collection and arrangement of materials, and the division of labor among team members, requires students to complete independently. Teachers do not interfere with students except for necessary guidance. During the debate, group members of the same side should cooperate with each other and rebut the statements from the other side. Members of non-debate groups are also required to collect relevant information before class, carefully listen to the statements of both debaters during the debate, and supplement or rebut the debater during the free debate time. After the debate, teachers' evaluation is not the only criterion. Peer evaluation can provide a new perspective for students. Therefore, all aspects of debate teaching highlight the main role of students, who is the center of teaching and learning.

At the same time, debate teaching relies on a student-centered flipped classroom. The main activity of debate teaching is classroom debate. Students collect information before class, debate in class around arguments, then constantly revise and confirm their views through debating. This kind of learning relies on a large amount of extracurricular learning as a foundation. In the process of debating teaching, teachers are planners, guides, and supervisors of the whole debate, who just provide selected debate topics before class, and provide guidance and assistance to students in the classroom debate. Under the guidance of teachers, students need to organize, prepare, arrange, evaluate, and summarize by themselves, reflecting the autonomy, participation, and exploration of students.

4.2. Objectives of debate teaching

The objectives of debate teaching reflect the critical thinking skills and value guidance. The primary objective of debating teaching is to change the rigid form of the traditional "spoon-feed teaching method" and improve the critical thinking skills of students. In the information age, the quantity of information is not only huge, but the quality is also uneven. To distinguish between good and bad information, and make choices and decisions, the critical think skills is an indispensable ability. During the debate process, students argue over a certain topic, which requires students to be able to analyze the issue critically, infer a certain argument from a comprehensive perspective, and explain the argumentation with evidences. Therefore, in debating teaching, students solve problems through their own thinking, which is a great exercise in students' deep thinking and critical thinking skills [18].

Another important teaching goal of debate teaching is value guidance. In today's era, information, ideology and culture are diverse and complex, so students need to form scientific values. The purpose of conducting debate teaching is to deepen students' understanding of a certain issue, enhance their awareness of value analysis and judgment, and promote students to view the issue from multiple perspectives during the process of statement and refutation, thereby enabling them to make correct choices. Through the guidance of teachers and their own insights, it is beneficial for students to form a scientific outlook on life, value, and world view, which is a deeper level of classroom value guidance.

In addition, debating teaching cultivates students' autonomous learning ability, cooperative ability, etiquette and morality, such as treating others equally, persuading others with reason, tolerance, and the spirit of competition [19].

4.3. Content of debate teaching

The teaching content is characterized by openness and critical thinking skills. Openness is reflected in the fact that the teaching content is not limited to textbooks, and students can explore and apply knowledge from multiple perspectives and approaches. On the one hand, the debate topic is not only limited to textbooks, but also the hot social issues in society that students can debate. At the same time,

students need to collect a large number of materials related to the debate before class, which breaks away from the limitations of the classroom and expands their knowledge, such as utilizing the library, searching on the Internet, talking with others, etc. On the other hand, debating teaching enables students to speak freely during learning. Various viewpoints can be expressed without standard answers. Compared to traditional teaching, debate teaching focuses more on open and different ideas, and students are more likely to generate creative and innovative ideas during the debate.

The feature of critical thinking skills embodies in the teaching content coincide with the teaching objectives. Only with sufficient input can there be corresponding output. It is mainly reflected in the choice of debate topics. Firstly, the debate topic should be worth debating. The topic should be related to practical and hot issues, with a certain depth and breadth. Through debating, students improve their core competences and promote the development of comprehensive abilities, which makes the teaching content valuable in education. Secondly, the debate topic should be debatable and of moderate difficulty. Only logical, fair, and adversarial debate topics can trigger confrontation, so that students can think and argue from multiple perspectives and dimensions about the two viewpoints of the topic, thus achieving an understanding of the essence of the problem. Besides, during the evaluation time, teachers should also pay attention to the critical thinking skills that students used in the debate and give suggestion to help students use skills correctly and frequently.

4.4. Evaluation of debate teaching

Teaching evaluation reflects the effectiveness of debate teaching and has the functions of guidance, diagnosis, and feedback. Therefore, evaluation is necessary and crucial. In evaluation, the characteristic of debate teaching is pluralism. Evaluation diversity is reflected in two aspects. First, there is a diversity of evaluation subjects, which includes students themselves, group members, other classmates of non-group members, and teachers. The purpose is to comprehensively evaluate the performance of students from multiple perspectives, making students experience different roles and making debate teaching more comprehensive. Secondly, the contents of evaluation are diversified, that is, comprehensive evaluation of student performance. For example, whether the speaking content is logic or with breadth and depth; whether the speaker uses body language, such as eye contact and other gestures; whether the group has good cooperation, etc. Diversified evaluation is conducive to enhancing the overall development of students.

5. Practical strategies of debate teaching

5.1. Taking both language ability and critical thinking skills as teaching objectives

In the reform of foreign language education, the teaching goal of college English is to cultivate students' comprehensive English application abilities, including various language skills, language knowledge, and pragmatic abilities. Therefore, as a course, college English teaching should never only help students master proficient foreign language skills, but also expand their abilities and strive to cultivate their thinking abilities. Debating has a significant effect on the cultivation of critical thinking skills, which has been confirmed by many scholars and related studies. But conducting debate teaching does not mean neglecting the cultivation of other abilities and knowledge.

When debate teaching and English teaching are combined, a win-win effect can be achieved. Firstly, debate teaching is not independent of language, it requires students to use language to persuade others. Therefore, debate teaching provides students with a real language usage situation. During the debate, students not only exercise their critical thinking skills but also their pragmatic abilities. Secondly, debate teaching is not independent of language skills. In college English teaching, debate teaching can be combined with reading, writing, and oral teaching. Through reading and debating, students can develop a deeper understanding of the problem; through oral debating, students' language sense, speaking confidence, and logical ability will be improved; through debating and writing, students can make their writing ideas clearer and more logical. Therefore, debate teaching can not only cultivate students' critical thinking skills, but also enhance their language skills.

Interest is the best teacher. Debate teaching has changed the traditional way of teaching that is taught by teachers. New learning methods and learning atmosphere can better stimulate students' interest and motivation in learning. Therefore, teachers should fully cultivate students' language skills and critical thinking skills in debate teaching.

5.2. Putting students at the center and improving student participation

Selecting the debate topic in a student-centered way. Debate topics can be selected from textbooks, extending the content of the textbook, or from social hot topics, expanding the content of the textbook. The core of choosing a topic is to meet the needs and interests of students, with moderate difficulty. For example, topics closely related to students such as online learning, online shopping, employment and job hunting, and learning beliefs, etc.

Designing the debate scale based on student-centered principles. The main body of debate teaching is students, and a large amount of classroom time is given to students. But in order to achieve good teaching results in classroom debates, teachers must make efforts on the scale of the debate, and as many students as possible should participate in the debate. Generally, there are about 50 students in a class. If students are only divided into positive and negative groups for debating, each side will have 25 students. The more students there are, the less participation each student has, so group collaboration can be adopted. Teachers can divide groups based on the number of students in the class, such as 10 students in each group, and each class can be divided into 5 groups. There are 6 debaters in each group, as well as one timekeeper and three evaluators. Students have the autonomy to assign roles by themselves. In order to maximize the participation of more students in each debating, one group will present the debate, while the other groups will conduct feedback, support, and evaluation during the free debate stage based on the debate content and the information collected by their own group, so as to ensure all students listen attentively and think deeply. It should be noted that each debate group has the same opportunity to present the debate.

The advantage of this design is that ensuring each group has the same opportunity and frequency of debating; ensuring the quality of each member's participation in the debate; ensuring the audience engages in in-depth thinking; and trying to involve as many students as possible in the classroom in free debate stage.

5.3. Flexibly applying debate competition system to meet classroom needs

The rules of debate competition mainly include the British parliamentary debate system, the Singapore competition system and the American parliamentary system. No matter applying which system, teachers should apply flexibly according to the actual situation of students and teaching.

Taking the British parliamentary debate system as an example, which is mainly introduced in English debating courses, having a certain teaching foundation and having achieved good results. In the debate system, each debater has a specified name to speak, as well as the time, order and responsibilities. However, the debate system is strict and complex. Each competition takes a long time, and only eight debaters are involved, so most students cannot participate in the debate, which is not conducive to college English classroom. Therefore, here could be some changes in: extending the preparation time, usually one week before the debate; appropriately reducing the number of debaters and the speaking time, for the general language ability of non-English majors is not so strong; adding the free debate to make more students join in the classroom debate. But the order of speeches, which is alternating between two sides, and main responsibilities of each debater should be retained.

Debate teaching is not a competition. The main purpose of debate teaching is to enable students to learn knowledge and improve critical thinking skills, so it cannot require the same level and effect as the formal debate competition, nor can it mechanically apply the strict competition system to classroom.

5.4. Timely guiding debate content to maintain classroom atmosphere

Debate teaching is different from the debate competition and specialized debate courses. Students' knowledge and skills of debating are relatively weak, so there are often some problems during the debate process, such as biased questions during the group debate and free debate or lack of student participation. Teachers should provide timely guidance to ensure the smooth progress of the debate.

For example, when the content of a group debate is limited to a certain perspective or aspect, teachers should promptly shift the perspective of the topic and expand the scope for students who engage in the free debate. At the same time, when there is a deadlock in the debate, it is often due to limitations in thinking and the inability to propose new arguments and evidences to support or oppose. Therefore, teachers should provide guidance, point out areas that students have overlooked in the debate, then stimulate students' thinking, and enable the debate to continue again. Furthermore, teachers should also

guide students to abide by the basic etiquette of debating, such as treating others equally, observing others with reason, being tolerance, and recognizing the spirit of competition.

5.5. Encouragingly making evaluation and summary to stimulate students' confidence

During the debate, students are unable to identify their shortcomings in the content, logic and language of the debate [20]. In order to improve students' critical thinking skills and language abilities, it is important to have feedback from peers and teachers after the debate. Classmates usually identify problems from another perspective, but the comments are usually about the shortcomings. At this point, teachers should guide students to observe and comment on strengths. In addition, teachers should also objectively evaluate the debate content and language knowledge, acknowledging the effectiveness and the highlights of debating from different aspects, and also pointing out specific shortcomings and improvement methods in the debate with an encouraging attitude.

In order to achieve good results in debate teaching, teachers need to make a summary. The content of the summary is more focused on the overall performance of students and the progress students have made compared to the evaluation. Debating is difficult and challenging for students. Therefore, in order to prevent students from losing confidence and interest, teachers should adopt an encouraging and inclusive attitude to summarize each debate, so as to encourage and stimulate students' enthusiasm for the next debate.

6. Conclusion

In higher education, the cultivation of critical thinking skills is not a teaching objective for some professional courses. Each course has the goal of cultivating students' professional knowledge and thinking ability. Therefore, as a public course for non-English major students, college English should also take on the responsibility of cultivating students' thinking ability, which is one of the educational goals of the whole higher education. Debate teaching, as a new teaching method, has the characteristics of balancing the cultivation of critical thinking skills and professional knowledge, and has a good effect on cultivating students' comprehensive abilities. In debate teaching, students are the main body of learning, and their enthusiasm for learning is enhanced, which can also enhance the effectiveness of classroom teaching. However, debate teaching is still challenging for both students and teachers, which requires teachers to adapt to the teaching needs, apply debate teaching reasonably, and continuously explore debate teaching processes that are suitable for themselves and students.

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