

A Study on Critical Thinking in Integrated English Course from the Perspective of Sociocultural Theory

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Abstract: *Speaking and writing seem to be two basic forms of the English foreign learners' thinking output. And they are two important approaches that help EFL to improve their critical thinking in English learning. In China, speaking and writing training have long been separated in teaching of English major. In other words, Chinese teachers tend to focus on English writing rather than speaking. Thus, it produces a number of "dumb" English learners. Based on Sociocultural Theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky, this study tries to provide "scaffold" for improving students' critical thinking and helping them to form their own opinions by adopting oral tasks during class, cooperation and inspiration approaches. After the oral tasks practiced in class, writing will be assigned to them for consolidating the thoughts they expressed in the oral tasks. Combined with speaking and writing training, students will be close to their Zone of Proximal Development.*

Keywords: *critical thinking; teaching of Integrated English Course; Sociocultural Theory*

1. Introduction

As the frequent communication over the world, many students choose to foreign language as their major when they enter the university. In China, English is regarded as one of the most popular majors among all the foreign language majors. Meanwhile, China's foreign language majors are working to adapt their talent training programs to meet changing environment both at home and at abroad. They aim at cultivating new talents who meet the requirements of our times and acquire science and technology.

Integrated English Course is one of the key courses in the first two years of English major students, which focuses on cultivating students' application of English basic knowledge and communicative skills [4]. It is a fundamental and comprehensive course in most universities that have English major. As for the author of this paper's university, the course occupies 96 class hours and 6 credits. According to different topics in each unit, teachers who are responsible for the course are likely to help students acquire four basic skills including reading, writing, speaking and translation. Teachers in the author's university have been long focusing on a balanced development of those four skills in students' English learning. They help students to consolidate basic language knowledge by adopting cooperated and inspired approaches. Thanks to teachers' help, some students have made progress in their English learning and mastered learning methods that suit for themselves. However, at the beginning, teachers find that some of the students have a superficial understanding of the topic of each passage in the course. Particularly, students often use some simple words and sentences to express their superficial viewpoints. The situation remains the same in the writing.

The Guide of University English Major Teaching has pointed out the teaching objectives of Integrated English Course is to think critically by applying learned knowledge and skills. It also requires English major students to hold a discussion on the hot topics in the world, to express their own ideas so that cultivate their critical thinking [4]. In accordance with this guide, teachers launch an activity that is called "speaking facilitates writing". To be specify, it focuses on the topic in each unit, stimulates students to discuss the topic first in the class and write an essay that shares with the same topic after class. Students are supposed to apply the viewpoints in the class discussion to their essay writing. By this way, it aims at helping students to improve their critical thinking.

2. Sociocultural Theory and Critical Thinking

Sociocultural Theory is put forward by Lev Vygotsky, a well-known psychological scholar from

former Soviet Union. He believes that learning first is a social and interpersonal activity rather than an individual one^[8]. In 1980s, guided by this theory, a number of scholars started to study the connection between Sociocultural Theory and second language acquisition. They tried to analyze the development of thinking when learners were handling with challenging learning tasks.

There are two important concepts in Sociocultural Theory, which are Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding Theory.

ZPD refers to the gap between students complete the task by their own and complete the task by the help of an adult's instruction^[2]. To be simplify, ZPD is the learning potential that students apply in a learning task. Stimulating students' potential in a correct way is the key of knowledge acquisition and popular issue that most educators focus on recently. Scaffolding is first occurred in construction field, helping workers to finish the construction smoothly by setting up scaffold. When it comes to teaching, teachers set up "scaffold" to help learners get across their own ZPD successfully so as to realize their potential maximally. Those "scaffolds" includes the activities, tools and sources that can help and instruct students to reach their ZPD. Once they have reach their ZPD, "scaffold" will be dismantled. Scholars have studied this field a lot in recent years. By analyzing ZPD, Zhang Zhirong summarized some teaching strategies for English classroom teaching in vocational college^[7]. He thought students could achieve an all-round development by adjusting teaching objectives, teaching methods, teaching content and optimizing feedback as well as evaluation. Guo Haiyan put forward a reformation in university English teaching, including hierarchical teaching, scaffolding teaching, situational teaching, coordinated teaching and interactive teaching^[3]. She believed that the reformation can instruct students to learn college English course in an effective way.

Critical thinking skill was born in the west. According to some proper standards, learners can think consciously and produce reasonable judgement^[1]. The Guide of University English Major Teaching has defined this concept as follow. Critical thinking skill will facilitate students to study hard, respect truth, judge reasonably, evaluate fairly, explore repeatedly and pursue truth continuously. It requires students to elaborate, analyze, evaluate, reason and explain the evidence, concept, method, standard and background etc. Meanwhile, students can introspect and adjust their own thinking^[4]. Chinese scholars are interested in the studies between English teaching and critical thinking skill. Li Liwen adopted teaching action research and discovered Chinese university students are lack of reader awareness and critical thinking skill^[5]. She discussed how to cultivate the reader awareness and critical thinking skill in English writing course. Liu Yanhong and Zhang Jun studied and analyzed the elements related to critical thinking in University English Critical Thinking for English major and discussed the textbook's important function in the ideological and political education^[6].

The previous studies on Sociocultural Theory and Critical Thinking Skill tend to be theoretical. Those case studies in this field are mostly based on middle schools and college English teaching. Few of them study English teaching for English major students in China. This paper, based on the author's teaching case will discuss feasible methods for improving English major students' critical thinking skill in China.

3. Case Analysis

3.1 Research Object and Teaching Task

The research object is comprised by sophomores of English major from Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. There are 30 students in the class, including a boy and 29 girls. Students from the class study hard and response quickly to the questions teacher raised during the class. Most of them can complete the online and offline homework according to teacher's requirements. Moreover, their average score of Integrated Course of English in 4 semesters are all over 70 (the total score is 100). However, some of them have a weak learning foundation. Therefore, there is a polarization in students' English score in the class. And learning burnout has occurred among few of the students.

The teaching task has been divided into 2 sections. Both of these sections have a close connection with patriotism. The first part is an oral activity which includes quotes from the Law of the People's Republic of China on the National Flag and news. The Article 19 of the Law says:

"Whoever describes the National Flag of the People's Republic of China by publicly and willfully burning, mutilating, scrawling on, defiling or trampling upon it shall be investigated for criminal responsibilities according to the law; where the offense is relatively minor, he shall be detained for not more than 15 days by the public security organ in reference to the provisions of the Regulations on

Administrative Penalties for Public Security.”

The news is about a Chinese Internet celebrity, Xu Dabao who walked on the red carpet in Cannes Film Festival and wore a China's national flag dress on May, 18th 2017. The five small stars were cut and separated from the big star in her dress. Teacher shows a picture to specify how she dressed in the Cannes Film Festival and some screenshots of how people judge her dress. The case has attracted people's attention in China. And most of the Chinese people believe that she violated China's Law of National Flag. However, Xu Dabao thinks it is a reflection of her patriotism. In order to help students to understand the cultural differences between eastern and western countries, teacher shows some pictures that American stars wear their national flag in their concerts. And such cases are regarded as fashion. Western people are quite used to it. For that situation, students are supposed to show their opinions to the case of Xu Dabao. Whether they support such behavior related to "patriotism" is required to them to answer in their oral activity. Five students are formed a group. They first discuss in their group and choose a representative to speak out their views in the class. For most students, they don't support Xu's behavior in Cannes Film Festival. They think Xu has violated China's Law of National Flag. Her behavior is just for attracting people's eyes, which by no means has connection with patriotism. In addition to show their own opinions, students need to present at least three arguments to support their views. Most of their arguments are overlapped, but all the groups believe she violated the law. Because the five stars in her dress have been cut and separated. Such behavior is only to attract people's eyes by violating the law. It is a way that can increase her popularity for making money easily in the future. Teacher's comments are presented based on students' replies. And both teacher and her students discuss what are supposed to be seen as patriotism. Patriotism in China doesn't mean to wear the national flag, but to remember the connotation of the flag. It is to remember the history, inherit the distinctive culture with the shared China's dream in the daily life. More importantly, all the people, in particular the young around the country should work hard to build modernization in China.

The writing is followed by a piece of material about the introduction of Flag Day in the United States. Students are asked to write an essay of the importance of national flag in no less than 200 words. The writing homework should be submitted in Pi Gai.com (a website used to give scores to students essays automatically). Students' revision of their own essays should be based on the comments in this website. Each essay should at least be submitted twice. The website shows only 2 students got the scores under 80, which means the other 28 students have achieved the scores above 80. The student who got the highest score has revised 29 times. It indicates that most students have an active learning attitude, and nearly no major mistake would be found in their essays.

After students submit and revised the essays, each group comments an essay with the aid of PPT. The representatives need to analyze the structure, argument and choice of words and sentences in the presentation. Teacher gives her comments to each group at the end of their presentations. According to the six groups' presentations, the merits and demerits are shown as follow. Their merits include a clear essay structure, argument and expression. Thus, the oral activity held before their writing has played a role of scaffold in their writing. Students tend to have positive transfer in the similar topic. Nearly all the students can use 3 or over 3 points to support the topic—the importance of national flag. Their opinions include national flag can strengthen people's pride and cultural confidence, symbolize a nation's sovereignty and dignity, carry a country's history and culture. However, most of the essays have some grammatical errors, overlapped arguments, short and simple discussions, less conjunctions. Students may feel easy to express their opinion in essay but difficult to expound their view by using some writing techniques, like example. For this aspect, students are less sensitive to news and current affairs. In other words, they haven't formed a deep understanding on news and current affairs. After teacher's comments, students revise their essays by adding some new arguments and expound the point by using example. Each member needs to submit the revised essay again to the website.

3.2 Analysis on the Questionnaire

The questionnaire used a Likert scale with five from high to low, the choices beside each of the statements are numbered 5-1. "5" means always (75%-100%). "4" means often (50%-75%). "3" means sometimes (50%). "2" means seldom (25%-50%). And "1" means never (0%-25%). Questionnaires were issued to the students after a week of the completion of writing task. Among the 30 questionnaires, 29 of them have been successfully received. It has contained the following aspects, learning interest and attitude, oral and writing activity.

Question 1-5 aims at investigating students' learning interest and attitude. Question 1: I tend to think of the questions my teacher raised in the class. There are 10 and 13 students choosing "Always" and

“Often” respectively, accounting 34.48% and 44.83%. Question 2: I am interested in the topics discussed in the class. 8 and 12 students choose “Always” and “Often” respectively, accounting 27.59% and 41.38%. Question 3: Since the topics are about current affairs, I don’t like such topics. 8, 13 and 4 students choose “Sometimes”, “Seldom” and “Never”, which accounts 27.59%, 44.83%, 13.79% respectively. Question 4: I often browse the current news on the Internet, focus on the news happened around me, and express my own opinion toward it. Students who choose “Always” and “Often” are 5 and 10 respectively, accounting 17.24% and 34.48% of the total number. Question 5: I think Integrated Course of English should focus on the knowledge related to language itself rather than topic discussion. There are 10, 11 and 4 students choosing “Sometimes”, “Seldom” and “Never” respectively, accounting 34.48%, 37.93% and 13.79%.

Question 6 to 10 design to investigate students’ oral activity during the class. Question 6: I am eager to express my viewpoints in a group discussion. 3 and 7 students choose “Always” and “Often”, accounting 10.34% and 24.14% respectively. 15 students choose “Sometimes”, 51.72% of the total number. Question 7: My views are quite different from others in the topic discussion. 62.07% students choose “Sometimes”. Question 8: I am a positive speaker in my group, but my group members often disagree with my opinions. 48.38% and 34.48% students choose “Sometimes” and “Seldom”. Question 9: When my group members disagree with my views, I will not insist on my points. 15 and 8 students choose “Sometimes” and “Seldom”, accounting 51.72% and 27.59% respectively. Question 10: I would like to write down other students’ viewpoints in the discussion of oral activity. Then my views are formed based on others’ opinions. There are 3, 10 and 9 students choose “Always”, “Often” and “Sometimes”, accounting for 10.34%, 34.48% and 31.03% respectively. Based on the above questions, it is clear to see that most students are eager to speak in their group discussion. They would like to insist on their own opinions, summarize and form their own views based on others.

Question 11-15 concentrate on students’ writing. Question 11: I feel hard to form my opinions in the English writing. Students tend to choose “Sometimes” and “Seldom”, which accounts for 48.28% and 27.59%. Question 12: I pay more attention to my sentence structure and grammatical errors instead of the arguments of the essay. 12 and 8 students believe “Sometimes” and “Seldom”, accounting for 41.38% and 27.59% respectively. Question 13: I will use the viewpoints that come from the discussion during the class. 10 and 12 students choose “Often” and “Sometimes”, accounting for 34.48% and 41.38%. Question 14: The supporting points in the essay are quite similar with those in the oral activity. 4 students choose “Always”, accounting for 13.79%. “Often” and “Sometimes” both have 11 students choosing them respectively, accounting for 37.93%. Question 15: I quite benefit from the revising suggestions my group members gave to me. There are 20.69%, 31.03% and 44.83% students choosing “Always”, “Often” and “Sometimes” respectively. From the above data analysis, over half of students can transfer the opinions from oral activity to writing task. They pay special attention to the arguments of the essay, improve their own writing from peer learning. But at the same time, some students input the views that they gained from the oral activity without any critical thinking.

3.3 Analysis on the Interview

Eight students would be chosen to be the interviewees in the class, including a boy and seven girls. There are five questions in the interview. Eight students are marked by the letters, from A to H. Question 1: Would you notice the current news in your daily life? Would you apply the news in oral activity and writing? Please give an example to explain it. Eight students claim that they would like to focus on current news in their lives. However, only six of them, namely Student A, B, E, F, G, H have given examples to support it, for example people fight against Covid-19 in Beihai Guangxi province, Pelosi visited Tai Wan, low-carbon life and Double Reduction Policy etc. Those six students believe that they are able to adopt the news as examples into their essays. Student C and D only mention the news from Tik Tok, WeChat public account and microblog. They seldom use news as example in their essays.

Question 2: Do you think the oral activity in this course is helpful to your writing? What do you gain from the activity? All the interviewees believe that their writing benefits a lot from the oral discussion. First, the brainstorming can help them to form their own arguments in the essay. Second, students better understand the background of the given material. By this way, it will enhance their critical thinking skill. Lastly, Student D and H mention oral activity stimulates them using various English expression, making their essays more vivid.

Question 3: What is the biggest challenge you’ve been come across in your English writing? How to solve it? Among those eight students, Student A only mentions her difficulty, without any solution. The other students all have given solutions to their challenges. According to their answers, the difficulties are

mainly divided into three categories. First, students still have weak foundation in their language usage, for example, simple expressions, small vocabulary, grammatical errors etc. Student A, E, G, H have mentioned this kind of challenge. They think increasing vocabulary, practicing grammatical knowledge and reading English articles will be effective to them. Second, they feel hard to form their supporting views in the writing. They are willing to focus on more current news and hot spots, enhancing their thinking skill. Third, they feel difficult to fully understand the material that given before their writing. Student C and F say their essays are likely to off the point for their misunderstanding the material given before the writing task. They think daily accumulating vocabulary and expressions as well as cultivating a good reading habit are effective solutions for this case.

Question 4: How many topic sentences will you set to support your argument in the writing? Apart from Student A, the other students think three topic sentences are both reasonable and enough to support their views. Based on their replies, it is delight to see most students have acquired the structure of writing a material essay, which includes presenting views, expounding views and summarize views.

Question 5: Can you give some advice to peer-assessment? Eight students have their own opinions toward this assessment. Student D thinks the views came from their group members tend to be subjective. Thus, it is not as professional as that of the teacher presents. She wants teacher to give more instructions in their writing. The other seven students claim that peer-assessment can help them correct the errors in writing, improving their writing to some degree. Meanwhile, Student A, B, C, E claim that few individual tasks have been assigned in the peer-assessment, causing some students, especially those with worse self-discipline don't complete the assessment in reality, which is not beneficial in the peer-assessment. Student F and G hope more excellent essays are available to refer before they start to write an essay. Student H suggests more sentences that contain grammatical mistakes will be shown to the class so as to help all the students learn from the mistakes. And he thinks the more oral activities in various forms will be held in the class, which students can benefit a lot from such activities.

4. Conclusion

According to the case analysis, most students believe that oral activity can help them enhance their writing skill, brainstorm and form vivid expression in their writing. In the classroom teaching, students will concentrate on the current news and express their own opinions toward public hot spot with the help of topic discussion related to current news. Such topic discussion not only fosters students' English language usage, but also helps them to set up a correct world outlook, by which it can enhance their critical thinking skill. But in the practical teaching, some students who have worse self-discipline feel difficult to adapt a cooperative learning mode. Speaking and writing improve very slow in their study. As for this problem, teachers can make some improvements as follows. First, teacher should walk to the students and try her best to attend to each group discussion. Students are required to submit the record of their discussions. Second, each student in the group should write down their comments to all the group members' essays and show on their PPT. Third, more comments will come from teacher which uses to compensate the weak link in peer-assessment.

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