

The Cultivation of Critical Thinking in Senior High School English Reading Class

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Abstract: Critical thinking plays an important role in students' study and life, and many countries have listed it as one of the educational goals of higher education. However, Chinese middle school students' critical thinking is generally weak at present. In order to change this situation, The Ministry of Education has successively promulgated new curriculum standards for high school and compulsory education, requiring teachers to pay attention to cultivating students' critical thinking while imparting knowledge. By sorting out the definition of critical thinking, clarifying the importance of critical thinking, and combining with the shortcomings of high school English reading class, this paper puts forward some suggestions to cultivate students' critical thinking in senior high school English reading class to improve senior high school students' critical thinking.

Keywords: senior high school English; English reading class; critical thinking

1. Introduction

Thinking capacity, together with language ability, cultural awareness and learning ability, is the component of core competencies of English subjects, referring to students' skills employed in thinking and the quality of their thinking in terms of logicity, criticality, and innovativeness^[1]. Critical thinking is considered to be the centralized embodiment of the core competitiveness of individuals and even groups in modern society. Therefore, cultivating students' critical thinking has become one of the hot topics in the educational field. In the information age, it is not easy to accurately grasp and filter the information one need in the massive amount of news and it's a challenge to students' critical thinking level and their reading ability.

2. The Definition of Critical Thinking

The word "critical" is derived from the Greek words "kriticos" and "kriterion". "Kriticos" refers the ability to discern or judge and "kriterion" means standard, that is, "critical" is to discern or judge something with a certain standard^[2].

Confucius in China and Socrates in Greece were educators who paid the earliest attention to the cultivation of students' critical thinking. When educating students, they take advantage of various occasions and opportunities to inspire students, guide them on how to learn and think, and give them time and opportunities to think independently, so as to achieve the purpose of cultivating students' critical thinking. In recent times, more research on criticality has been conducted abroad. It is Dewey who first systematically elaborated and promoted critical thinking as an educational idea and teaching tool. At that time, critical thinking is called reflective thinking. According to Dewey, thinking is questioning. Critical thinking is repeated, serious, continuous and in-depth consideration of a specific question. Inquiring, investigating, pondering, exploring, and studying intensively to discover something new or gain a new understanding of something known is what thinking is^[3]. Galser believes critical thinking is not only knowledge but also the skills to apply knowledge. What's more, it's a kind of attitude. People equipped with critical thinking must have a skeptical attitude, logical knowledge, and the recognition skill of analysis, synthesis and evaluation^[4]. Experts from the Delphi project team believe that critical thinking is a purposeful and self-regulating thinking process that determines the process, theory, method, background, evidence and criteria for evaluating knowledge^[5]. Dr. Paul states that critical thinking is the active, skillful, and dexterous application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of information obtained from observation, experiment, reasoning, and using it to guide beliefs and

actions^[6]. According to Wu Hongzhi, critical thinking consists of the abilities, knowledge, skills and habits or disposition towards critical thinking^[2].

In a word, critical thinking is high-level thinking. Faced with new information received, students raise reasonable questions and think proactive according to their cognition instead of accepting the information they received blindly.

3. The importance of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is of great importance to individuals and nations. Here are three ways in which the importance of critical thinking is demonstrated.

3.1 Being the Educational Goal

Since the 1980s, developed countries, led by the United States and Britain, and even some developing countries, have taken critical thinking as one of the goals of higher education. In the Declaration of the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in 1998, it was mentioned that higher education institutions must take the cultivation of students' critical spirit and independent attitude as the mission of education and training, and take critical thinking and creativity as an educational innovation to educate students^[7]. Li Peigen, the academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, has repeatedly stressed that the cultivation of critical thinking must be incorporated into university education^[8]. The English Curriculum Standards for general senior high school and compulsory education encourage teachers to improve students' critical thinking so that they can discover problems, analyze problems and solve problems, and make a correct value judgment on things^[1]. It shows critical thinking has become the educational goal of different levels in many countries.

3.2 Being the Foundation and the Source of Creativity

Critical thinking is the foundation of creativity. People with critical thinking are able to analyze problems rationally from multiple perspectives and eventually draw scientific conclusions. There is no innovation without criticism, and without the whole process of dealing with problems critically, there will be no burst of creativity and no creations can be produced. Critical thinking makes innovative thinking more logical and reliable. Due to the purification and sorting of critical thinking, innovative thinking increases rational thinking and avoids blindness and impulsiveness, making it easy to transform innovative thinking into scientific practice. Critical thinking is also a source of creativity. Just as Li Peigen, the former president of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, said when critical thinking is combined with science and technology, it is the source of innovation and creativity^[8]. It can be seen that critical thinking is not only the foundation of creativity but also the core of it.

3.3 Helping Individuals and Society to Develop

China Education Innovation Institute of Beijing Normal University and the Partnership for Twenty-first Century Learning cooperated on the research of Twenty-first Century Key Competences and summarized the five key competences in the twenty-first century, including critical thinking^[9]. Similarly, UNESCO has also found out that life skills and general professional skills required by the 21st century society characterized by the information society, globalization and sustainable development all include critical thinking^[10], so the cultivation of critical thinking is an inevitable requirement for the development of individuals and society. Critical thinking can help students to think critically and analyze problems, find solutions to social problems and assume social responsibility. To sum up, critical thinking has become the general consensus of the international community and attracted great attention for the great differences it makes to individuals and society.

4. Deficiencies in Senior High School English Reading Class

Due to the pressure of the college entrance examination and historical reasons, the following problems have long existed in traditional senior high school English reading teaching in China.

4.1 Teacher controlling the class and students being the audience

In traditional reading teaching, teachers are the controller of the class, the whole class is in their hands. In a 45-minute class, from the beginning to the end, from the teaching content to the teaching pace, teachers occupy the vast majority of the class, and the students hardly have their own thinking. Teachers explain the textbook content without stopping on the platform and the students copy the notes and highlight the key points, passively accepting the knowledge instilled by the teachers. They should have been the master of the class, but in terms of their behavior in class, they are just the audience. What students learn depends on what teachers teach, and there is a lack of a democratic teaching atmosphere. The traditional reading classes attach too much importance to the transmission of knowledge, ignores the development of students' personality, and lacks the consciousness of cultivating students' critical thinking.

4.2 Teaching Models Lacking Innovation and Students Lacking Interest

In traditional reading teaching, most of the teachers adopt the bottom-up teaching mode, and the teaching process is no more than vocabulary, grammar, translation and superficial interpretation of the discourse. The explanation of vocabulary and grammar is done in a straightforward manner, lacking artistry and showing no attraction to students. As for the explanation of the discourse, teachers only analyze and understand the content of the discourse without digging deeper into the material, let alone expanding students' understanding based on the existing material. The activities used in the teaching are repeated again and again, and some of them are very old and even out of date. Thus, students are easy to lose interest quickly and are unwilling to participate in the teaching.

4.3 Students Lacking Question Awareness and Having No Spirit of Questioning

Students' behaviors in traditional reading classes are mechanical. They spend most of their time listening to the teachers, recording the key points that teachers said, reciting after class, and they rarely think independently. Students dare not to question the teacher and the book, and they are afraid of being criticized because they do not fully understand the teachers' meaning, so they hide their confusion and doubt, and be silent obeyers and receivers. Students are used to walking at the teachers' rhythm, causing them short of initiative and inquisitive spirit.

5. Suggestions for cultivating critical thinking in High school English Reading Teaching

5.1 Establishing A Student-Centered Concept and Adjusting Teaching Material According to Students' Actual Situation

The teacher-centered traditional classroom emphasizes the authority of the teacher and ignores the fact that students are the subjects of learning, which seriously limits students' development. In order to promote students' overall development, teachers should establish a student-centered teaching concept in their subsequent teaching, and the teaching content should not be taught exactly according to the textbook, but can be reasonably adjusted according to the actual situation of students, including adaptation and deletion. For example, pork should be avoided by Hui students when the topic is delicious food. The teaching activities should be designed according to the students' cognitive level and interests, so that they are interested and willing to actively participate in them.

5.2 Diversifying Teaching Activities and Stimulating Students' Interest

The learning of vocabulary and grammar is very important. In order to improve the teaching effect, teachers can choose to embed the content of these two parts into the text to help students master the vocabulary in the specific context, and understand the scope of grammar use. Interest is the best teacher, and new things always make people who cannot help trying them. Teachers should keep abreast of the times, and know students' interests and hobbies. Sparing no efforts, the teachers design various activities that meet students' demands and respond to social hotspots, they are sure to increase the interest in the classroom, arouse students' curiosity, stimulate their desire to explore, and make them actively participate in the classroom activities.

5.3 Cultivating Students' Question Awareness of and Encouraging Them to Question Boldly

In order to cultivate students' question awareness, teachers should create appropriate situations from students' existing cognitive experience and life background which contribute to providing students with opportunities to communicate and discuss, create cognitive conflicts, and guide students to discover problems. The classroom atmosphere is another important factor that affects students' question awareness. Teachers should also try to create a relaxed and democratic classroom atmosphere, where students' opinions are respected. Besides, teachers had better not criticize students when they raise their confusion even if the confusions seem to be meaningless to them. What they should do is encourage their students to express their thoughts freely and let students dare to put forward different views and the questions they found.

6. Conclusion

As a kind of advanced thinking, critical thinking is a necessary ability for students, but it has not been developed well in the traditional senior high school English reading class. In response to the problems that exist in traditional reading teaching, such as teachers' too much control of the classroom, single teaching mode and students' lack of question awareness, teachers should take some effective actions, such as establishing student-centered concepts in reading teaching, conducting diversified teaching activities and cultivating students' question awareness, to promote the common development of students' knowledge and critical thinking.

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