

Unveiling a Pedagogical Approach: Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills among English Majors through an Exemplary Analysis of American Society and Culture

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Abstract: *Enhancing the all-around competencies of students has become one of the essentials for teachers of students majoring in English. As one of the most fundamental indicators of such competencies, critical thinking is overlooked due to the influence of examination-oriented education systems. To improve the competitive edge of English majors, it is necessary for instructors to reconsider ways of fostering critical thinking skills in English classrooms and modify their instructional strategies accordingly. This paper explores specific procedures to cultivate the critical thinking skills of students by using the teaching design of one session on the American value of freedom in “American Society and Culture” as an example. A review of students’ reflective writings demonstrates that, by integrating critical thinking into language teaching, instructors can enable students to think critically about the different facets of the value of freedom, thereby implicitly achieving value-based education. Feedback on the implementation of this course design has been overwhelmingly positive. By strengthening value guidance for students, this model meets its major objectives of enhancing their language competence, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking skills.*

Keywords: *Critical Thinking, Teaching Design, Value-based Education, American Society and Culture*

1. Introduction

For too long, English majors have focused on language acquisition and neglected training in critical thinking. Moreover, many college English textbooks highlight British and American literature and society, which transmit Western values and worldviews, thus affecting how students perceive the world. Furthermore, due to globalization and widespread internet access, students have access to various resources that lead to confusion and a lack of skills in discerning valid from false information. However, English education should serve as a channel to impart the gems of Western culture and as a tool to equip students with the skills to view values critically. Therefore, English teachers must deliver their educational mission in the teaching process and cultivate cultural sensitivity and critical thinking skills. In other words, educators must enable students to objectively view and analyse the world’s diverse cultures and ideological systems. In addition, against the backdrop of value-oriented education, English educators should tap into moral education elements in textbooks to enhance language learning and build cultural awareness.

2. Critical Thinking Skills and Students’ Language Competence Building

2.1. The Definition of Critical Thinking Skills

John Dewey, an American educator, introduced the concept of “reflective thinking” in “How We Think” at the turn of the 20th century, which became one of the essential origins of critical thinking^[1]. Researchers have investigated the meaning of critical thinking ability. The first scholar to define critical thinking was Robert Ennis^[2]. He believes that critical thinking is a rational and reflective method for deciding what to believe or do in the future based on the objective experiences of individuals. Richard Paul, an internationally renowned authority on critical thinking, argues that critical thinking is an individual mode of thought in which thinkers control the internal structure of their thinking and apply

knowledge standards to evaluate and improve it^[3].

In the Western nations represented by the United States, the teaching of critical thinking is highly valued. Numerous universities have developed critical thinking courses to enhance the critical thinking development of their students. The National Research Council of the United States issued the National Science Education Standards in 1995, stating that “the focus of school education should be to help students master a variety of skills used every day, such as creative problem solving, critical thinking and cooperative spirit in work^[4]. In 1998, the First World Conference on Higher Education issued the “World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century: Vision and Action.” Article 9 “Innovation of educational methods: Critical thinking and creativity” of the said issuance stresses that “institutions of higher education should educate students to become knowledgeable and purposeful citizens who can critically think about and analyze social problems, find solutions to social problems and use them to solve these problems, so as to assume social responsibility.”^[5] Nonetheless, Richard Charles Levin, stated at the 4th Forum of Chinese and Foreign University Presidents in 2010 that critical thinking is not cultivated in undergraduate education at Chinese universities. It is encouraging that the current foreign language teaching community has reached a consensus on reforming undergraduate English instruction and developing students’ critical language thinking skills.

2.2. Competence Building for English Majors

Thinking and language are interdependent and co-evolving. Once a man begins to learn a language, history, language, and thinking are inseparable from the perspective of personal development^[6]. Wu Yian emphasized, at the 2015 China Foreign Language Education High-Level Forum, that language and thinking have a deep connection and both are inseparable with culture. They are the media of high-level thinking and educate people on thinking and cultural character.

Thinking can generally be divided into three levels based on the developmental stages of individual thought: ① intuitive thinking, ② abstract thinking, and ③ dialectical thinking. Initially, high school students develop dialectical thinking^[7]. Most college students develop dialectical thinking skills^[8]. Critical thinking is the foundation of dialectical thought. Numerous historians have defined the precise meaning of critical thinking in recent times. Robert H. Ennis, is responsible for the most popular and widely accepted version. He defines critical thinking as follows: “Critical thinking is reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.” Developing critical thinking alongside disciplinary teaching through regular classroom teaching is the most common way to improve students’ critical thinking skills in school.

3. Teaching Design

This section illustrates the planning and execution of one American Society and Culture course session. The instructor will accomplish this by examining the curriculum’s value-based education components. This strategy will allow teachers to effectively nurture students and achieve the organic integration of value formation, knowledge transfer, and skill development.

3.1. Students’ Analysis

(1) Case Name: Critical Thinking on the American View of Freedom

(2) Teaching Target: This course is based on “American Society and Culture” for English majors and is taught to second-year English major students whose level roughly corresponds to Level 4 of “China’s Standards of English Language Ability”. The students have high motivation and good learning habits. In addition, they can collaborate actively with the teacher to complete teaching tasks.

(3) Course Schedule: Second semester of the sophomore year

(4) Student Characteristics:

First, English proficiency corresponds to Level 4 of “China’s Standards for English Language Ability”: Understand common language materials on general social topics in general social situations and comprehend critical facts. Communicate in familiar contexts on familiar topics, briefly describe events, and express personal opinions.

Second, common issues among students at this stage include their need for greater sensitivity and reflection on other cultures or even their own, as well as their propensity to absorb fragments from new

media, thereby developing a one-sided understanding.

Consequently, it is essential to uphold “strengthen value-based education” and cultivate critical thinking ability and cross-cultural communication awareness. It can be realized by enhancing students’ English language knowledge and skills.

3.2. Teaching Objectives

Teaching objectives are both the beginning and end points of the teaching process. They occupy the top spot in the design of instruction^[9]. The teaching objectives of this course can be broken down into three categories:

① Knowledge objectives: recall and master the epidemic-related vocabulary and expressions; comprehend the specific manifestations of the pursuit of freedom in American history.

② Skill objectives: objectively analyses the historical and cultural reasons for Americans’ refusal to wear masks and interpret the meaning of “freedom” dialectically.

③ Value objectives: Overcome selfishness, develop a sense of social responsibility, and appreciate the superiority of Chinese culture and system, as highlighted by the pandemic, and finally, increase awareness of “a community with a shared future for mankind” that transcends race.

3.3. Teaching Content

This course begins with the development of the American nation, combines it with social issues of concern to students, and adheres to the teaching philosophy of integrating language and culture teaching with thinking ability^[10], unfolding the content of 10 units, including minority issues in the United States, to form a panoramic view of American society and culture. This case selects the “American Values” unit, which forms a connecting link between the preceding and the following units. The overview of textbook units is shown in Figure 1:

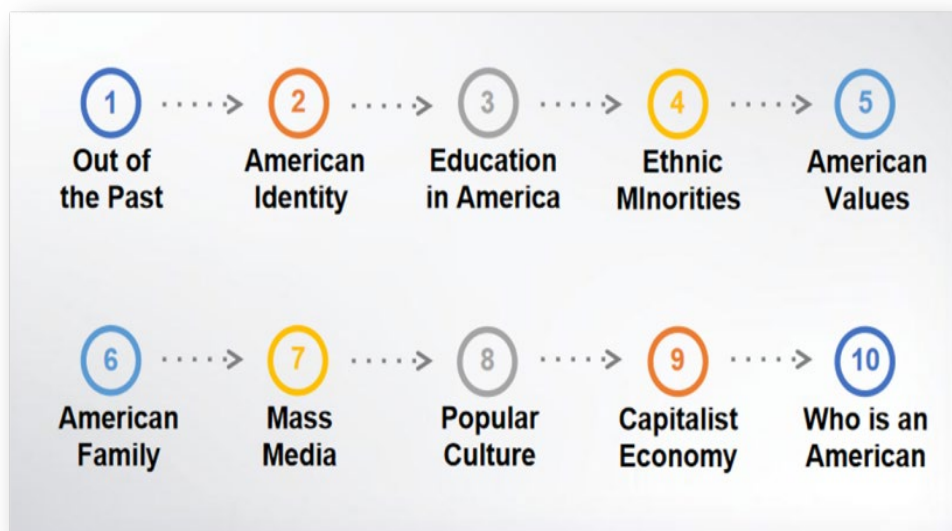


Figure 1: Overview of textbook units.

3.4. Teaching Procedures

(1) Teaching Organization

① Teaching Content

In this instance, the teaching content framework is as follows (Figure 2):

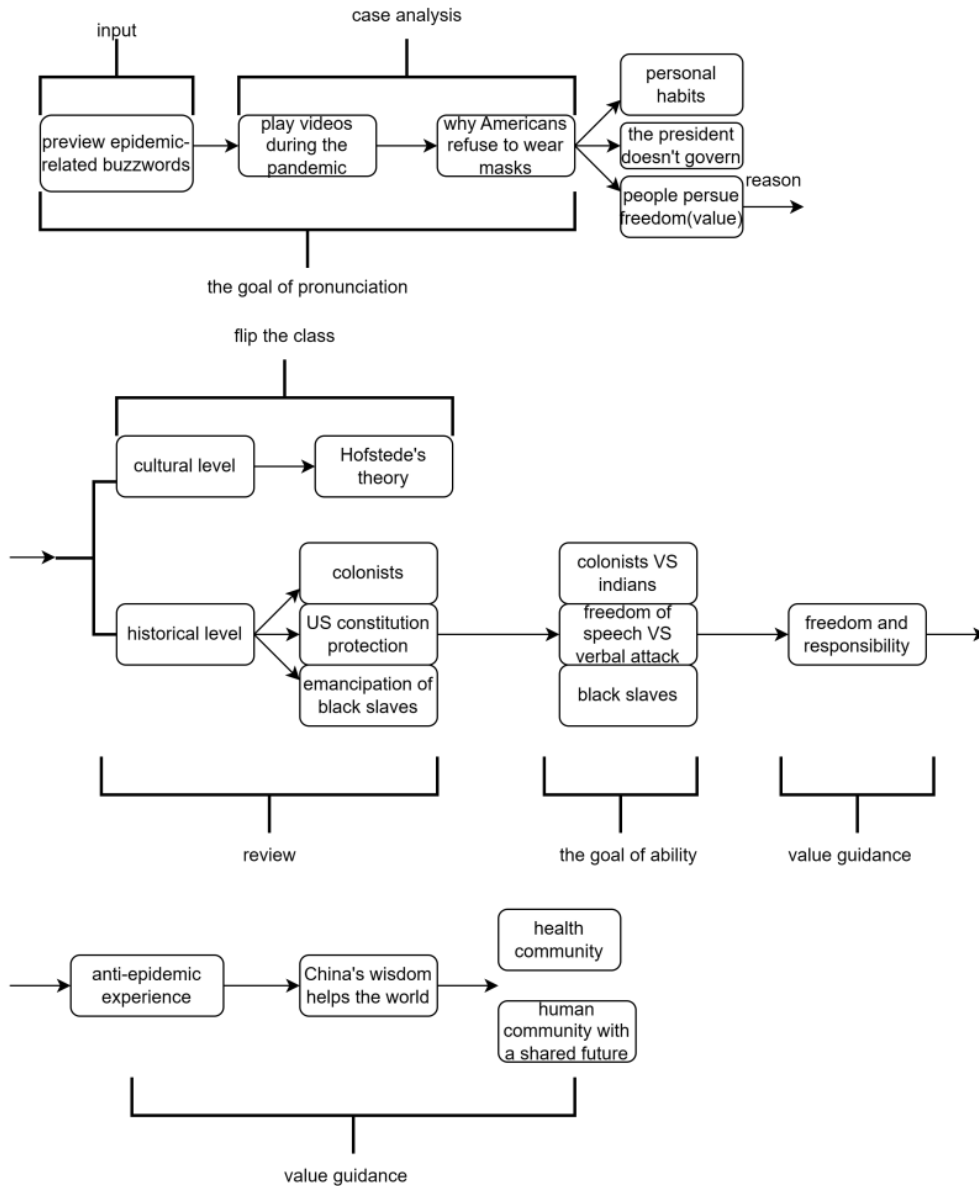


Figure 2: Teaching content framework.

② Teaching Process

The teaching process chart is shown in Table 1:

③ Teaching Focus: First, the historical and cultural reasons for Americans’ devotion to freedom, the multifaceted nature of “freedom,” and a dialectical understanding of its connotation; second, the cultivation of social responsibility and civic duty and the development of cultural confidence.

④ Teaching Difficulties: First, focusing on complex thinking and guiding students to think actively and avoid making hasty judgments; second, referring to the Chinese cultural concept of “A Community With A Shared Future for Humanity” and allowing students first to experience the cultural atmosphere of American freedom.

Table 1: Teaching process chart.

Teaching Objective	Teaching Step	Teaching Activity Design	Design Reasons	Teaching Evaluation
Knowledge objectives	Pre-class	Students will gain prior knowledge of MOOCs and epidemic-related buzzwords.	By requiring students to engage in independent study before class, they will better grasp the lesson materials. It will enhance their ability to participate in the lesson and ask questions during class.	The teacher will discuss and evaluate the students' classroom learning outcomes.
Knowledge objectives	In Class: 1.1 Vocabulary Review (2 mins.)	Review the pandemic-related vocabulary found in the news.	By reviewing pandemic-related vocabulary, students will be better prepared to comprehend the upcoming lesson's terminology.	The teacher will give the students immediate feedback.
	1.2 Introduction (3 mins.)	Explore why the death toll is so high by presenting data on the pandemic in the United States and elucidating its causes.	It will pique the interest of students and introduce the topic.	
Competence objectives	1.3 Case Analysis (12 mins.)	Play videos depicting Americans who refused to wear masks during the outbreak. Students will be able to comprehend the historical and cultural context of the "anti-mask" phenomenon. Means: Video Resources	Using multimodal teaching techniques, such as videos, will capture students' attention and allow them to integrate prior knowledge into their work.	The teacher will provide instant feedback to the students.
value guidance objectives	1.4 Class Seminar and Presentation (12 mins.)	Explore the multiple facets of freedom and its limits by reviewing the history of Americans' devotion to liberty and individualistic cultural theory. Encourage students to share, analyze, and demonstrate their knowledge.	It will assess the learning effect, increase interaction, and allow students to understand the limits of freedom and the individual-society relationship. Questions will be designed from simple to complex to flip the classroom and paired with real-world scenarios. Students will participate in peer evaluation.	Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment.
value guidance objectives	1.5 Teacher's Summary (5 mins.)	The teacher examines the various facets of freedom, freedom, and responsibility and the relationship between individuals and social groups. Successful Chinese cases will be utilized to illustrate the repercussions of unrestricted freedom and the importance of accountability.	Educate students to view and pursue freedom dialectically and scientifically while fostering cultural self-awareness and national pride.	The language proficiency and worldview of the students will be evaluated.
Integrated objectives	Class 1.6 Review (2 mins.)	Review language concepts and reinforce training in critical thinking.	Students will be able to evaluate the effects of their learning by examining the learning outcomes, enhancing thinking awareness, and enhancing cultural awareness and civic responsibility.	Students will evaluate their learning effects.
Ability objectives	1.7 Homework and Questions (1 min.)	Complete the fifth unit of the textbook and read the supplementary materials. Consider how to inform Americans about China's fight against the epidemic. It will foster a sense of responsibility and critical thinking in intercultural communication to spread positive stories about China.	It will move students from the cognitive to behavioral level and encourage them to apply their knowledge actively.	Feedback will be provided on the online BB platform, allowing for student-student and teacher-student evaluations.

(2) Assessment

The conductor of educational effectiveness is an appropriate assessment for education to guide values effectively. Through the necessary evaluation, teachers can quickly determine whether their teaching objectives have been attained.

The primary evaluation method is a summative assessment based on final exam results, supplemented by attendance and homework completion. The form is relatively straightforward, primarily written, and focuses on whether language points have been mastered but cannot assess students' comprehensive application skills^[11]. Consequently, this course employs a multidimensional and multilevel evaluation strategy. The teacher utilizes multi-channel data to achieve dynamic tracking and enhance learning capacity via evaluation. Class teaching evaluation includes student's self-evaluation (emphasizing "thinking," cultivating the habit of thinking independently, and creating

opportunities for independent exploration), peer evaluation (emphasizing “recognition,”) examining the same problem from different perspectives, and cultivating students’ thinking ability, teacher evaluation (providing feedback and summarizing), and self-reflection (developing students’ metacognitive and self-regulation abilities). Teaching evaluation integrates four functions and encourages students to view problems from multiple perspectives instead of excessively seeking “standard answers.” This strategy contributes to the educational objective of “improving students’ abilities to think critically and solve complex problems.

The grade evaluation incorporates both formative and summative evaluations. Students complete online self-evaluation, peer evaluation, teacher evaluation, and self-reflection exercises during class teaching. The evaluation criteria include formative evaluation (60%), which includes online tests, peer evaluations, teacher questioning, and other issues requiring oral presentation, and summative evaluation (40%), which includes after-class exercises and unit tests (30 minutes).

(3) Teaching Reflection

Teaching reflection is an integral component of educational and teaching cognitive activities that permeates the entire process^[12]. The following are the teaching reflections in this section:

① Enrich teaching methods: Incorporate ideological and political education content subtly and unobtrusively to enrich teaching methods.

② Strengthen self-cultivation: Enhance information science literacy, integrate cutting-edge research topics in culture, sociology, anthropology, and other related disciplines domestically and internationally, and enrich the humanistic knowledge structure of political philosophy and other related disciplines. Concurrently, consider whether one has fulfilled a teacher’s thinking and demonstration roles.

③ Improve the evaluation system: Use thinking standards to evaluate students’ classroom performance and homework to improve the evaluation system. According to Paul and Elder’s model of thinking ability, students develop “thinking habits”^[13].

④ Enhance portfolio: The empirical research of Howes demonstrates that regularly writing reflection journals can effectively improve students’ dialectical thinking abilities. Students must keep reflection journals after finishing each unit. The archive evaluation method requires students to document their thinking ability development process and develop self-awareness regarding their thinking habits.

(4) Teaching Mode

This course utilizes the pre-learning content of the MOOC to implement a portion of the flipped classroom, integrates multimedia resources with the aid of case analysis and inquiry discussion, and employs additional teaching strategies to achieve its instructional objectives (Figure 3).

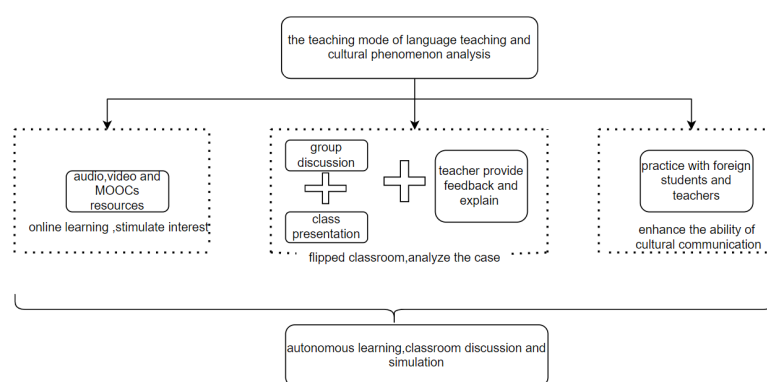


Figure 3: Teaching mode

First, students can conduct a targeted preview following pre-class learning requirements and master the relevant expressions about the pandemic and Hofstede’s’ cultural dimension of individualism.

Second, the teacher adopts classroom presentations, other methods, and routine classroom activities, as suggested by the Harvard scholar Ritchhart et al.^[14], to interact frequently with students. There is a need to implement heuristic teaching by introducing problems that become more difficult over time.

The flipped classroom can provide more targeted explanations, allowing students to comprehend the application of their analytic and evaluative skills.

Teaching content is integrated with value-based education, emphasizing the ability and awareness to tell Chinese stories well, cultivating a sense of responsibility for cross-cultural communication, and disseminating China's anti-pandemic stories in Chinese and foreign languages.

(5) Teaching Result

① The achievement of teaching objectives

When analysing this value, 90% of students can comprehend the multiple dimensions of individualism's value. When examining the positive aspects of individualism, some students believe that individualism encourages innovation and individual development. Some students believe it threatens social stability and is not conducive to social development when discussing the disadvantages. Students can also increase their cultural self-assurance and better understand the Chinese system's superiority during the epidemic.

② Students' feedback

Overall evaluation of teachers by students: exceptional, strong professional skills, rich classroom design, responsible, patient, adept at encouraging and inspiring, active classroom environment.

3.5. *The Organic Integration of Language Teaching and Critical Thinking Education*

1) Enhancing Political Identity and Cultural Confidence: This curriculum explores the historical factors and impact of American cultural values behind the "Anti-Mask" phenomenon, prompting students to consider the dialectical nature of freedom and its limitations. This curriculum enhances political identity and cultural confidence by emphasizing China's successful anti-pandemic strategies.

2) Cultivating Core Socialist Values: Through dialectical analysis of American history and reality, students learn to balance their freedoms with social responsibilities and cultivate the core socialist values of prioritizing societal "security" over personal "freedom."

3) Promoting Chinese Culture: This curriculum uses China's anti-pandemic measures to impress upon students the significant impact of traditional Chinese culture, such as "people-oriented" and "harmony with all nations." By leveraging both Chinese and foreign languages, students can effectively share China's anti-pandemic stories, demonstrating an accurate, detailed, and three-dimensional image of China and showcasing the voice and resilience of China to the world.

4. Conclusion

The country's rapid development necessitates many innovative, high-caliber foreign language speakers with creative thinking. Innovative professionals must possess the skill of critical thinking. However, cultivating critical thinking and resolving the "lack of critical thinking" issue among students majoring in a foreign language is a lengthy and systematic process. It is the responsibility of foreign language teachers to aid in this growth. To equip students with high-level thinking abilities and innovative potential, teachers of English should capitalize on critical thinking resources and integrate thinking training into their teaching. Students can achieve better outcomes if they learn to respect divergent perspectives and approach problems rationally, objectively, and comprehensively. The author attempted to apply the case teaching method to an English class and intends to improve the method's efficacy in future classes.

Acknowledgements

The research is funded by the Educational Reform Project of Dalian Maritime University: "Cultivating Critical Thinking Ability in Culture-oriented Courses". (XJG2022-88).

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