

Investigating Critical Thinking Skills in Chinese Undergraduate English Majors

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Abstract:

With the deepening of scholars' research on critical thinking, the question of whether students have critical thinking abilities has received widespread attention. However, there are still shortcomings in in-depth research on Chinese undergraduate English majors. This article focuses on the cultivation of critical thinking and theoretical teaching modules, analyzing the problems and solutions of talent cultivation models for Chinese English majors. This article analyzes that new teaching models which can be divided into three aspects. Conventional Chinese teaching models have limitations. Theoretical guidance is difficult to apply to reality. Teachers have not received professional training. Besides, in family, there is not enough assistance from parents. Additionally, there is a lack of sufficient attention at the social level. Based on this, this article proposes the following suggestions. Families need to provide sufficient support for students. Schools should increase courses that cultivate students' critical thinking, provide sufficient professional training for teachers, and encourage teachers to cultivate students' critical thinking. Meanwhile, it is necessary to call on society to attach importance to the cultivation of critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical thinking; theoretical teaching modules; talent cultivation models

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is an essential part of logical thinking, which is significant for stimulating students' logical thinking and helping them to develop a better and promising future [1,2]. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization pointed out that undergraduate students should use critical thinking to think and analyze social issues and seek out the solutions to the issues.

Focusing on Chinese university education, the aims of English major in Chinese universities are cultivating international talents and promoting communications between China and foreign countries. Besides, students of English major in Chinese universities ought to be capable of basic skills of English such as listening, speaking, writing, reading, and translation. These skills should be guided and aided by critical thinking, especially in English writing [3]. However, the notion of critical thinking originated from Western culture and Chinese people are not quite familiar with it, so students in China are not paying enough attention to developing critical thinking. In recent years, English major students have been required by the job market that they should be equipped with the corresponding

logical thinking, which may help promote companies to internationalization development. Hence, critical thinking is essential.

Nevertheless, since Chinese society emphasizes less on the cultivation of critical thinking, the current results of critical thinking training do not match the demands of employers. Many scholars have realized that universities should possess the fundamental ability to cultivate students' critical thinking and further their exploration [2]. Among them, Xiaodong Zhang conducted a case study on three students and proposed that an online textbook designed based on SFL can enhance students' critical thinking in their writing [4]. Carol Robinson-Zanartu proposed a teaching method called MiCOSA to help teachers cultivate students' critical thinking [5]. However, many studies studied other countries' students, instead of focusing on cultivating critical thinking among Chinese undergraduate English majors. Under these circumstances, this essay intends to explore further through this bullet point.

The goal of this essay is to investigate the specific reasons why Chinese undergraduate English majors lack the cultivation of critical thinking and to explore the corresponding measures and methods to improve students' ability

of critical thinking. The purpose is to study the problems and solutions of talent cultivation methods for Chinese English majors in the aspect of the cultivation of critical thinking and theoretical teaching.

2. Current Situations of Chinese University Students' Critical Thinking

Chinese universities are dedicated to cultivating undergraduate English majors with comprehensive qualities, professional abilities, cross-cultural communication, and international perspectives. However, the students can not match the requirements of employers, which leads to a contradiction between undergraduates and companies students find it hard to get a job and companies lack employers in companies.

According to the demand of the job market, in a survey of 433 higher education institutions, 81% of employers hope that university students can develop their critical thinking skills during their studies in universities. Universities and colleges also believe that the development of critical thinking is an essential goal for success [2]. However, the critical thinking soft skills required in the job market are not sufficient among students, such as those majoring in English. In a survey of 200 students selected from a certain university in China, it was found that the level of critical reading of English majors from freshman to junior has barely improved, and the development of students' critical thinking is very lagging [6]. This phenomenon shows that students in Chinese undergraduate English majors lack guidance and leadership, which makes it difficult for them to meet the cultivation goals of Chinese universities, and students also can not satisfy employers' needs because of lacking core competitiveness.

Chinese students who lack critical thinking also have a shortage of asking high-quality questions during the learning process. According to research released by the Institute of Education, Tsinghua University in 2012, over 20% of Chinese university students have never asked questions or taken part in discussions during classes, and only 10% raise questions frequently. Meanwhile, in the United States, 3% of students don't participate in questioning while 63% of American students frequently ask [7]. The huge differences in statistics show that the main reason that Chinese students cannot ask questions is that under different teaching environments, they are not well-equipped with the capability of critical thinking. This makes it harder for the Chinese education industry to cultivate innovative students who can adapt to the times under the circumstances that technology is developing rapidly and independent and innovative people are need-

ed.

3. Problem Analysis

Based on the circumstances that Chinese English major university students lack of critical thinking, the issue will be analyzed in three aspects: schools, family, and society.

3.1 Immature New Teaching Model

3.1.1 The limitation of the conventional Chinese education system

The traditional education model in China is deeply influenced by Confucianism, advocating the notions of "Zhong" (loyalty) and "Xiao" (Filial piety). These notions emphasize that people should respect and follow the teachings of elders and authorities [8]. The reverence for elders and authority has resulted in a teaching model in which teachers are centered when imparting knowledge to students, which neglects the central position of students [7]. In this situation, students, as the receiver of knowledge, are encouraged to believe and obey authorities such as teachers and textbooks, rather than practicing their independent and critical thinking like questioning teachers and textbooks. Such excessive pursuit of authority will only strengthen their obedience during their process of learning, while neglecting the practice of independent thinking and critical thinking models, leading to blindly obeying authorities and elders. Besides, classes have always emphasized the importance of discipline, order, and being quiet, which will decrease opportunities for students to express their opinions and ask questions, therefore students lack experience in practicing critical thinking.

Meanwhile, common educational methods in China are rote learning and exam-oriented education. During the education process from elementary school to high school, the primary goal of students is to achieve higher scores in the standardized exams, especially in the exam of college entrance examination, and be admitted to better universities. To achieve this purpose, the education model developed is called rote learning, which encourages students to memorize and repeat all the knowledge and exam points in the textbooks. Students are trained for memory, understanding, and application skills to the textbooks, which is a kind of surface learning, instead of cultivating students' critical thinking ability. In addition, standardized exams in China generally set standard answers, which cause simplified and flat learning. The exam-oriented approach is very limited for students' thinking development and does not practice their ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate [7]. Only pursuing standard answers blindly in the learn-

ing process may suppress the motivation and initiative for independent learning and thinking, and ignore the process of questioning authorities and criticizing, which lowers the level of students' innovation and critical thinking. This is opposite to the aim that universities want to cultivate innovative talents. Additionally, pursuing standards alone can not adapt to today's diversified society. It is easy to be replaced by technology nowadays by simply memorizing knowledge points since they do not have their core competitiveness.

For English majors, the conventional undergraduate teaching model in China still focuses on training students' basic language abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, which is a deepening learning in high school. However, only imitating the high school teaching model is a huge waste of learning resources and erodes students' independent learning motivation [7]. Lack of cultivation of critical thinking causes barely any chance for students to practice their critical thinking, which may lead to shortcomings that may not be compensated for in a short time in students' following study and work, and may also be lacking in the cultivation of innovative talents among students.

Nevertheless, due to the strong influence of traditional Chinese education models, the reform of conventional teaching models is still in the trial and error stage, and teaching methods have not been popularized and improved properly. Even though many Chinese universities have included critical reading as an optional course in their students' curriculum, it is not widely accepted. Besides, the content of critical thinking courses is not systematically arranged, and the traditional courses lack of progressing and updating, which has further delayed the nurturing of critical thinking and missed the golden time of receiving education. Meanwhile, the notion of critical thinking is based on Western culture and society, it is difficult to localize it in China and combine theory with reality in a short time [7].

3.1.2 Lack of combination with an idealized and practical approach

Although critical thinking research has developed rapidly in recent years, most of them are still in the stage of theoretical exploration and lacks specific practical operations. There is a great shortage of research on critical thinking cultivation methods, textbook curriculum design, and so on [7]. The research on critical thinking in China is still in its early stages, and the related concepts and evaluation of the research still need further study.

Meanwhile, students may only learn the definitions and

general theory of critical thinking and do not further down to practicing in reality effectively, which is a disadvantage of surface learning and rote learning.

3.1.3 Lack of adequate professional teacher training

In the process of educating students' critical thinking, teachers play a crucial role in guiding students. However, Richard Paul found in a survey of 38 public universities and 28 private universities that even though 89% of teachers believed that critical thinking was the primary teaching objective, only 19% of teachers were able to clearly and properly explain the definition of critical thinking, and 9% of respondents taught critical thinking courses in the classroom [9].

In a study investigating the level of Chinese English teachers' critical thinking, it was shown that teachers should have more advanced training in analysis and systematic, and they may be more open to students' thoughts [8]. From the study, it can be shown that teachers themselves lack a systematic understanding of critical thinking, which is a manifestation of a lack of systematic and specialized training courses. Since teachers do not have adequate, professional, and comprehensive training, it is unreasonable to ask them to properly guide students in developing their critical thinking.

3.2 The Influence of Family

Family conditions can have a certain impact on students' critical thinking. Cheung, C. K. investigated 577 Hong Kong university students and found that upper-class families performed better in critical thinking, including critical learning and elaborative learning [10]. Hence, the conditions of families have a certain influence on students' critical thinking.

Besides, due to the emphasis of Confucianism that people should respect elders and authorities, the family also pays attention to letting students obey and follow elders, instead of encouraging students to express their thoughts and opinions. Sometimes, disobedience to the opinions of elders can be seen as being against "Xiao" (Filial piety), which greatly suppresses students' hunger for knowledge and motivation for independent thinking, and enormously decreases students' critical thinking ability.

3.3 Limited Societal Emphasis

Chinese society advocates collectivism, which believes that individuals belong to society and serve the common interest of the whole society. Collectivism encourages students to study for the collective interests and ignore the own thoughts and opinions of individuals, thereby reducing the motivation of students' independent thinking and

the development of critical thinking.

During the learning process, students tend to follow the crowd and agree thoughts and ideas of the majority, rather than stick to their point of view, which is a lack of adequate attention and confidence in their characteristics and personalized perspectives. Compared to the individualism in Western countries, Chinese students are not encouraged to develop critical thinking and express their points of view.

Furthermore, with the consistent development of “Zhong” (loyalty) and “Xiao” (Filial piety) in Confucianism, society puts more emphasis on praising elders and authority, which has also deepened the “faith” in authority. Under these circumstances, people gradually lose their critical thinking ability may not be able to judge others’ opinions from right to wrong, and also may not have their perspectives and attitudes. They may only follow the majority and are easily incited by seemingly authoritative rumors.

4. Recommendations

4.1 In Families

Family is the primary environment for cultivating children’s growth. Education of children from an early age can profoundly influence a person’s thinking and behavior. To better stimulate students’ critical thinking, parents should consciously guide children’s thinking style and not excessively pursue the conventional thoughts that people should respect elders and authority.

To make further approaches to achieve the goal, parents may encourage their children to raise questions more bravely and not to be afraid of making mistakes, to make children aware of the methods and effects of critical thinking and independent thinking, so that children may adapt to this kind of thinking faster and apply it to practical life. Encouraging children to ask questions and not to criticize their mistakes may help them learn that not all viewpoints put forward by elders are correct. Instead, children should judge their opinions through logical thinking, which makes children think deeply and use critical thinking for theoretical deduction in such a restless social environment and fast-paced surface learning atmosphere.

Furthermore, to avoid a single standard answer teaching method, parents themselves need to be more open-minded. By widening their perspectives, parents can encourage their children to explore and study the reasons for questions on their own, without evaluating whether the answers are correct or not, but rather making reasonable statements, allowing children to adhere to their views and opinions on problems, and try to construct their logic,

thereby helping their children in their growth.

These two ways may help guide children to develop critical thinking and construct their logic in their growth by adjusting parents’ thoughts and encouraging children to think independently, which does not cost much.

4.2 In Schools and Universities

Schools should pay attention to the importance of cultivating students’ critical thinking. They may add courses that are related to critical thinking, and provide professional and systematic training to teachers on how to scientifically guide students to think independently and cultivate their critical thinking. Only when teachers have sufficient knowledge and experience to guide students can students more effectively absorb their theoretical knowledge and try to apply it to reality, gradually cultivating their critical thinking ability.

Besides, schools should encourage students to dare to question authorities like books and teachers, rather than just following standardized answers. It may be helpful to let students apply theoretical research to reality. Students may try to break through the shackles of excessive pursuit of authority and elders, and instead enable students to use critical thinking and not blindly follow others.

In addition, perhaps schools can try to modify the criteria for evaluating students, and change the standardized exam to an essay that reflects students’ critical thinking, which may help to practice students’ ability. Students’ motivation may be driven by evaluation criteria because it is hard to promote students’ awareness of the importance of critical thinking in their individual development by only maintaining traditional standardized exam grading methods. It is also difficult to assist teachers in innovating and reforming teaching models. Therefore, modifying the evaluation criteria can subtly influence the intrinsic motivation of students and teachers, and stimulate their learning and application of critical thinking.

4.3 In Society and Country

Society may call for publicity through various platforms such as online platform and offline about the correct understanding of critical thinking to the public. Society should encourage people to think and solve problems critically and make the public aware of the important role that critical thinking plays in people’s future development. This may create demand and arouse the importance of cultivating critical thinking in society.

Additionally, it is helpful to support scientific research on critical thinking and give assistance to train teachers, so that scholars may investigate critical thinking more rap-

idly. Besides, this can be combined with the actual situation in China to form a scientific and systematic teaching model for cultivating students' critical thinking, helping schools and parents to cultivate students' critical thinking ability more effectively.

5. Conclusion

This article focuses on the current situation of critical thinking deficiency among Chinese undergraduate English majors and investigates the reasons for this phenomenon from three aspects: school, family, and society, and provides corresponding suggestions.

For schools, the new teaching model is still not mature and the problem can be divided into three aspects. First, there are limitations to the conventional Chinese educational system. Besides, the critical theory is lack of combination with reality. Additionally, teachers lack adequate professional training to guide students to learn critical thinking properly. For family, there are influences on students' critical thinking, such as the class and the way to guide students. In society, there is a lack of correct understanding and emphasis on critical thinking.

To ease the problem, families should encourage students to raise questions and parents may need to be more open-minded. For schools and universities, they should add a curriculum about critical thinking, encourage students to challenge authorities, and provide adequate training for teachers to guide students. For society, it is helpful to arouse public attention by publicizing the importance of critical thinking for people's future growth.

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