

A Research on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability in College English Discourse Reading

Nina Su

English Teaching Department, Xiamen Medical College, Jimei, Xiamen, Fujian, China

snn310@163.com

Key words: College English Teaching; Critical Thinking Ability; English Discourse Reading

Abstract. English discourse reading is essentially a complex cognitive process for Chinese English learners, which can serve as a vital approach to help learners to construct meaning and cultivate their critical thinking ability. Based on relevant research on the cultivation of critical thinking ability and the teaching principles of “TERRIFIC”, this study designs and applies a teaching action plan that integrates the cultivation of critical thinking ability into discourse reading, and discusses the effects of the teaching practice. The study might provide some insights for the development of college English learners’ critical thinking ability.

1 Introduction

In February 2018, China’s Standard of English (CSE) [1] was published which describes reading comprehension ability, including critical thinking ability. Wen Qiufang [2] expounds the key ability in college English teaching, shifting concept of “whole-person education” to “key competencies”. With this teaching philosophy, the “six key competencies” boil down to “2 Ls + 4 Cs” namely, “Language ability, Learning ability, Critical thinking ability, Culture ability, Innovation ability and Cooperation ability. It can be seen that college English teaching should undertake the important task of cultivating students’ critical thinking ability.

In college English teaching, discourse reading is an important part of classroom teaching. However, the status quo for the teaching of discourse reading is that teachers only attach great importance to language skills, emphasizing the memory of vocabularies and sentence patterns while weakening and even ignoring the cultivation of critical thinking ability. Besides, even if the teaching of discourse reading contains the goal of cultivating critical thinking ability, it is basically empty because there is no specific teaching practice to really attain the teaching goal. The lack of critical thinking ability will affect the improvement and development of English learners' reading ability. As a high-level thinking ability, critical thinking ability is an important condition and promoting factor for critical reading, while critical reading is an important way or even medium for the development and implementation of critical thinking [3]. Therefore, college English reading should not only teach students to “read and know”, but also guide them to “read and question” even “read and create”. In view of this, this study attempts to develop the critical thinking ability of learners through the teaching of college English discourse reading, to explore the methods and ways of cultivating the critical thinking ability of college students, and to provide practical references for the teaching of college English discourse reading.

2 Theoretical basis

2.1 Definitions of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking comes from “Critical thinking skills” in English. The study of critical thinking began in the Western countries. Philosophy of The United States in The Delphi Report in 1990 shows an authoritative and comprehensive definition: critical thinking is a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment process, as a result of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and explanation of the evidence, concepts, methods, standards that the judgement is based on [4]. Paul & Elder [5] believes that critical thinking refers to the ability of an individual to consciously think

with appropriate evaluation criteria in order to determine the real value of something and finally make reasonable judgments. Foreign researches on critical thinking ability can be roughly divided into three categories, that is, defining the sub-capability of critical thinking ability, constructing measuring tools of critical thinking ability and exploring the cultivation of critical thinking ability [6]. The three famous important definitions are Delphi's report, Anderson et al.'s taxonomy and Paul & Elder's ternary model. Foreign researchers have also carried out a series of researches on how to cultivate critical thinking ability, mainly focusing on whether critical thinking ability can be taught and how.

2.2 Critical thinking in Discourse Reading

Discourse reading is essentially a process in which learners use discourse as a medium to construct meaning and exercise their thinking ability. The cognitive depth of reading can be enhanced by learners' critical thinking in the reading process. Scholars in China have also carried out studies on the cultivation of critical thinking ability in reading. Yuan Chunyan [7] explored the features of critical thinking teaching in college English reading classes and put forward the existing problems, such as vague teaching objectives, lack of critical process and failure to help students build critical thinking skills. Yin Xiaofang [8] proposed the teaching pattern of innovative textual reading, which determined the cultivation of learners' critical thinking and innovation ability through the practice. Yang Lifang [9] explored the cognitive features of reading classroom questioning and critical thinking development and found that the overall distribution of the cognitive levels of questions is appropriate for the training of critical thinking, but it differs with the stages of teaching. Similar studies are beneficial attempts to actively implement the cultivation of critical thinking ability in the teaching of discourse reading, providing a model for cultivating critical thinking ability in college English discourse reading. However, most of the researches come from static teaching design, lacking the observation of teaching implementation in dynamic classroom, and failing to reflect the whole picture of college English reading teaching. In addition, the current research on cultivating critical thinking ability in discourse reading is mainly to discuss how to introduce the concept and practice of critical thinking ability in reading teaching, lacking the support of empirical research. Therefore, this study attempts to cultivate the students' critical thinking ability from the actual practice of classroom teaching in discourse reading, in order to bring some enlightenment to college English teaching.

3 Procedure

3.1 "TERRIFIC" Principle

Sun Youzhong [10] stressed that college English education should not only focus on the cultivation of students' language ability, but also emphasize the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability, advocating research-based learning and cooperative exploration. In order to develop students' critical thinking ability, he proposed eight principles of critical English teaching: "Target, Evaluate, Routinize, Reflect, Inquire, Fulfill, Integrate and Content", which can be abbreviated into "TERRIFIC". Target means "to involve critical thinking ability into the teaching goal"; Evaluation is to apply critical thinking standard to evaluate learning activities; Routine is the design of effective activities to repeatedly train high-level thinking; Reflection refers to the cultivation of meta-cognitive ability and self-regulating thinking ability through reflective activities. Inquiry is to provide the opportunity for inquiry through critical thinking; Fulfill is to promote students' self-realization and all-around development; Integration is to combine the cultivation of language ability and critical thinking ability. Content is the use of cognitively challenging language materials. The eight principles of critical English teaching are referred to as "TERRIFIC" and have guiding significance in the design of college English teaching activities.

3.2 Teaching Design and Practices

1) Teaching Content:

The teaching content is selected from a discourse "All grown up and still in tow" in the textbook

(New Progressive College English Integrated Course Book 1). The topic centers around freshman's enrollment in college. The teaching of language knowledge includes key vocabularies, sentence patterns, discourse structure, cohesive devices and other related writing skills. The teaching objectives include the skills of discourse analysis from the perspectives of vocabulary, syntax, discourse, theme and rhetoric; the ability to read discourse critically; to organize the thought of discourse effectively, and to make reasonable evaluation orally or in writing output; even the ability to learn autonomously and cooperatively. The cultivation of critical thinking ability is mainly through guiding students to think and discuss, put forward their views and elaborate, analyze positive and negative points of view, compare the parents of students in different periods of time in the United States, even extend to the comparison of students' parents in China and in the United States, and guide students to think about the reasons behind it. Besides, it also guides students to evaluate and make inferences.

2) *Teaching Practice:*

The target students come from Xiamen Medical College (62 first-year undergraduate students), who are intermediate and advanced English learners. Since it is a large class, in order to facilitate teaching management and students' interaction, the teacher divides the class into eight groups, each with about 7-8 students. The teaching design is guided by the principle of "TERRIFIC" for the teaching of English discourse reading.

The teaching practice adopts "PWP", a common method for the teaching of discourse reading, namely, "Pre-reading, While-reading and Post-reading". In the Pre-reading section, as the students are intermediate and even advanced English learners (the score of the college entrance examination for English in China is above 120), the teacher assigns the students to learn some language knowledge by themselves, including vocabulary, phrases and sentence patterns. First of all, the teacher makes students aware of the objective of developing critical thinking ability so as to carry out effective explicit teaching. Based on the content of the discourse and the general understanding, some lead-in questions such as "Do you have your parents' company when you attend college?" are raised, then the teacher helps the students to predict the content of the discourse through the title, pictures, keywords or some background knowledge, and guide the students to think about the discourse topic "Should parents stand back after their teenage children have entered college?" After that, the teacher requires the students to do brainstorming to list all possible views (pros and cons).

In the While-reading section, the teacher helps students to understand and analyze the overall structure and main idea of the discourse, and remove obstacles to overall comprehension. Questions such as "What is the author's purpose for writing this article? What is the key issue the article addresses? What conclusion does the author come to? What key concepts does the author use?" are put forward for students to think and discuss. The students are required to work cooperatively in groups to outline the overall framework of the discourse. Then the discourse is carefully analyzed and evaluated. The teacher leads the students to further understand the language details in the text, such as the interpretation of new words, phrases and difficult sentences. Students are asked to interpret sentences and predict possible meanings by answering teacher's questions like "How to interpret this sentence? Could you find an example in this paragraph which responds to this sentence?", which further develops students' ability to interpret, analyze and relate. In order to enable students to summarize and compare, questions like "what is the function of the two examples(student A and his father; student B and his mother)?" "How does the author argue that the claim is wrong?" are raised for the students to consider. Finally, questions like "How would you evaluate such way of arguing?" helps students to explore and reflect on the logic, rationality and coherence of the author's argumentation process. In the process of discourse reading, the discussion and answering of questions are mainly based on groups, and the views are shared in the form of "Think-Pair-Share".

In the Post-reading section, further in-depth exploration and production are involved, during which students are guided to summarize the main ideas of the discourse, compare these ideas with the ideas listed in the mind map before reading, and evaluate the author's views. Questions such as

“Do you agree with the author that parents today are different from parents twenty years ago? If so, what are the factors contributing to the change? Does the same thing happen in China?” are proposed to make students deconstruct or reconstruct the phenomenon or viewpoint, understand or raise their own doubts from different perspectives, enabling students to analyze the reasons and list the evidence. In this section, the teacher also guides students to conduct self-reflection, monitor their own thinking process, self-regulate their thinking ability, and make further rational reasoning and evaluation, so as to develop their critical thinking ability in discourse reading. Finally, the students are assigned different writing tasks, e.g. stating their own views on the discourse, or given a similar topic, “should parents make decisions for teenage students?” In this way, the students would master the author’s way of writing and develop their own writing output.

The whole teaching process of discourse reading is guided by the principle of “TERRIFIC”. Questions and activities are designed to cover the eight principles which run through the whole process. The application of the overall teaching design and the “TERRIFIC” principle in each stage of the teaching process is shown in Figure 1:

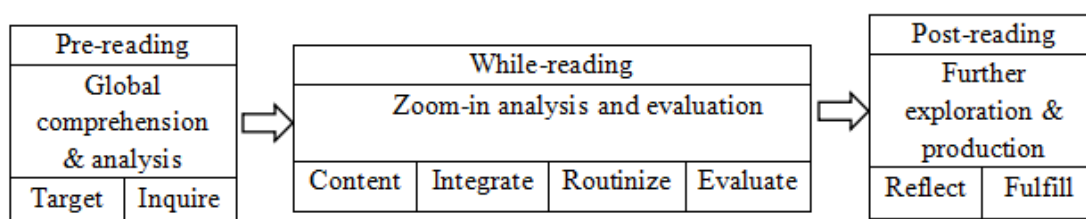


Figure 1. The Teaching Process of Discourse Reading under “TERRIFIC” Principle.

3) Research on teaching effect:

In order to obtain students’ feedback on the teaching effect of college English discourse reading, the study selected 8 students (4 boys and 4 girls) for an interview, and conducted a questionnaire survey on 62 students in the class. The interview questions mainly include students’ evaluation of the teaching practice and the development of their critical thinking ability. There are three questions : (1) do you think it is necessary to integrate critical thinking into the teaching of college English discourse reading? Why is that? (2) what are the main difficulties and challenges in critical English discourse reading? (3) what kind of help is needed in the process of critical English discourse reading? In addition, the effect of the teaching practice on students’ critical ability is examined from two dimensions, i.e. cognitive skills and affective dispositions. Due to the fact that the students’ ability to apply the skills is hard to be measured directly by simple tests, it can be reflected through questionnaire results to know students’ application of the cognitive skills and their affective dispositions, to understand the effect of teaching practice in promoting the cognitive skills and affective dispositions of critical thinking.

3.3 Analysis and Discussion

Based on classroom observation notes, teaching videos, students’ interview records and questionnaire survey tests, information and data are collected from multiple channels to further understand the teaching effect of critical English discourse reading. The following focuses on the development and changes of students’ critical thinking ability in two dimensions: cognitive skills and affective dispositions.

1) The acquisition of critical thinking skills:

Based on the “expert consensus” proposed in the Delphi report, Sun youzhong [11] concludes that, in terms of cognitive skills, critical thinking refers to the ability to elaborate, analyze, evaluate, reason and explain such elements as evidence, concept, method, standard and background; the ability to consciously reflect and adjust one’s own thinking process. Through the interview, it’s known that the students interviewed all agree that it is beneficial for students to integrate the cultivation of critical thinking ability into college English teaching. For example, during the interview, male student A mentioned: “in discourse reading, teachers will ask questions at various levels around discourse themes to guide us to think, evaluate and reflect, and stresses the cultivation

of our critical thinking ability, which is very beneficial to us and greatly exercises our thinking.” Female student B commented that “the teacher was not limited to helping students to understand and absorb language knowledge in the discourse, but more to let the students learn how to read the discourse critically. Although the process of thinking was difficult at the beginning, it benefited us a lot.” The questionnaire design was written in Chinese, in which there were twelve questions in total, with each two questions corresponding to elaboration, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, explanation and reflection skills, each of which was 1-5 points corresponding to the frequency of the activity. According to the statistics of the questionnaire results, 81% of the students scored above 45 points in these five cognitive skills, indicating that the vast majority of students can apply critical thinking skills under the guidance of teachers in the process of discourse reading and gradually acquire these skills. It is worth noting that students perform better in elaboration, analysis and explanation than in evaluation, reasoning and reflection. Among the 60 questionnaires collected, the total score of the first three items was significantly higher than that of the last three items. Moreover, students reflected that “when reading a discourse, analyzing the structure can better illustrate the author's ideas and views, and thus help them to express their own views on relevant issues”. “It is still difficult to make reasonable assumptions and inferences based on the available data, but teachers need to give some hints.” This shows that students’ abilities to interpret and analyze are more frequently used and easier to develop than evaluation, reasoning and reflection skills. Meanwhile, a student said “the teacher enabled us to read a discourse critically, develop our independent thinking, make evaluation of the author’s argument, which deepened our understanding of discourse, but in the process of learning, we still need the teacher’s guidance.”

The acquisition of critical thinking skills requires teachers to improve their teaching from the aspects of teaching design, classroom questioning, to make accurate judgment of student’s critical thinking skills, to timely adjust teaching content, teaching progress and teaching strategies, to provide students with opportunities for the development of critical thinking.

2) *The cultivation of critical thinking dispositions*

According to Paul & Elder [5], the emotional dimensions of critical thinking ability include curiosity, confidence, openness, fairness, honesty, prudence, studiousness and understanding. Sun Youzhong [11] believes that in terms of affective dispositions, critical thinking ability refers to: diligent and inquisitive, believing in rationality, respecting facts, prudent judgment, fair evaluation, quick to explore and persistent pursuit of truth. Wen Qiufang [12] proposed the hierarchical theory model of critical thinking ability, which proposed the affective dispositions related to critical thinking ability, including curiosity, openness, confidence, integrity and perseverance. The questionnaire for the test of affective dispositions related to critical thinking ability adopts the five dispositions of curiosity, openness, confidence, integrity and perseverance in the hierarchical theory model. Each item also corresponds to two questions, with a score of 1-5 ranging from low to high indicating agreement with the items stated in the question. For example, statements like “I am interested in the topics involved in college English discourse reading”, “I have a strong desire to learn the new knowledge involved in college English discourse reading” correspond to “curiosity” in affective dispositions. According to the results of the questionnaire survey, 89% of the students with a total score of 35 or above showed certain dispositions of critical thinking in discourse reading. Among them, “curiosity” and “openness” scored the highest. Students expressed their willingness to understand and accept views and opinions different from their own in college English discourse reading, and even make corrections if their views were inappropriate. Students also showed a certain tendency in terms of confidence, integrity, perseverance, etc one student said, “Learning the language in this way enables me to broaden my thinking, to challenge the teacher even the textbook, when encountered with reading difficulties, I would try to find the answer, I won’t give up easily.”

Based on the content and design of teaching discourse reading, students’ critical thinking abilities are exercised in applying what they have learned to solve problems. Through teachers’ questioning or guiding students to ask questions by themselves, students are inspired to think, and

even divided into groups for discussion, thus students can learn to cooperate with others and explore independently, which not only enables students to have a higher-level understanding of discourse, but also improves their critical thinking ability.

4 Conclusion

Guided by the principle of “TERRIFIC”, this study carries out the teaching practice of integrating English discourse reading with the cultivation of critical thinking ability through effective teaching design. The essence of discourse reading is the interaction between the reader and the discourse. The cultivation of critical thinking ability in discourse reading not only improves learners’ cognitive skills in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and reasoning, but also cultivates their affective dispositions in critical thinking. The cultivation of critical thinking ability in English discourse reading has certain effects, but there is room for further development. In the future, teachers can further improve their teaching from several aspects :(1) strengthen the application of modern information technology in the context of blended learning. Combined with Moocs, micro courses, SPOC and flipped classroom, the teaching methods should be updated to achieve the teaching objectives more effectively. (2) guide students to expand learning methods and approaches. Students can adopt a variety of learning methods, such as writing a reflective reading journal to make a critical summary of classroom discussions, so as to enhance their critical thinking awareness and improve learning efficiency and effectiveness.

Acknowledgement

In this paper, the research was sponsored by the Education and Science “13th Five-Year Plan” of Fujian Province (Project No. 2019CG0443) and Youth Fund Project of Education and Scientific Research of Fujian Province (Project No. JZ190028).

References

- [1] The Ministry of Education in China, China’s Standards of English [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press.2018:34-40.
- [2] Wen Qiufang, Cultivating Key Competencies through University Foreign Language Courses in the New Era: Reflections and Suggestions.[J]. Foreign Language Education in China.2018 1 (1) 3-11.
- [3] Chen Zehang, Critical Reading and Critical Thinking[J] .Foreign Language Education in China.2015 5 (2) 4-11.
- [4] Facione. P, Exclusive Summary: Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purpose of Educational Assessment and Instruction [M]. Millbrae: The California Academic Press, 1990.
- [5] Paul,R. & Elder,L. Critical Thinking: Learn the Tools The Best Thinkers Use [M]. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006: 20.
- [6] Wen Qiufang, Wang Jianqin, Zhao Cairan, A Conceptual Framework for assessing Chinese College Students’ Critical Thinking Skills [J]. Foreign Language World, 2009 1 (1) 37-43.
- [7] Yuan Chuanyan, Exploring Features of Critical Thinking Teaching in College English Reading Classes [J]. Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. 2018 29 (4) 109-117.
- [8] Yin Xiaofang, A Study on Innovative Textual Reading: A Teaching Pattern and Its Significance [J]. Foreign Languages in China. 2004 1 (1):41-45.

- [9] Yang Lifang, The cognitive Features of Reading Classroom Questioning and Critical Thinking Development[J]. Foreign Languages in China. 2015 64 (2) 68-79.
- [10]Sun Youzhong. Principles of Critical English Teaching [J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research. 2019 52 (6) 825-837.
- [11]Sun Youzhong. Foreign Language Education and the Cultivation of Critical Thinking [J]. Foreign Languages in China, 2015 64(2)22-23.
- [12]Wen Qiufang. On the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Skills of English Majors in Postgraduate Studies [J]. Academic Degrees and Graduate Education, 2008 (10) 29-34.