The Interface between Intensive Reading and Critical Thinking Education for English Majors

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Abstract—**This paper intends to argue that the course of intensive reading is a potentially valuable platform where education on critical thinking can be fruitfully implemented. To this end, this paper focuses on three sub-areas: 1) teaching of language points, 2) teaching of textual analysis and 3) delivery of knowledge of language and beyond in an attempt to elaborate on their respective interfaces with critical thinking education. We believe that teaching strategies geared to such connections are important to the enhancement of the students' critical thinking competence, and that the reliance on and modifications of the traditional teaching paradigms of intensive reading are rewarding in practice.**

Keywords—critical thinking education; intensive reading; interfaces; teaching strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Education on critical thinking has become an increasingly important issue in foreign language teaching and research in China. Although scholars at home and aboard have not reached a consensus on the definition, tasks, principles, goals as well as teaching methods of critical thinking education, the existing studies have pictured a general pattern: 1) the key of critical thinking education is to develop thinking abilities of students, which are "absent" in current foreign language teaching [1]. 2) Critical thinking education involves concerns for both affective and cognitive abilities of students, and the purpose is to enable them to regard critical thinking as an essential attitude toward life [2]. 3) Critical thinking education aims to develop students' ability to discover, analyze and solve problems, along with strengthening the knowledge foundation of the foreign language system, thereby gearing foreign language teaching gradually away from purely repetitive patterns of language skill training [3]. 4) The theory and practice of critical thinking education is applicable to a wide range of subjects in foreign language teaching and it is compatible with module-based processing [4]. 5) To ensure an effective process in critical thinking education, we need to establish a pertinent theory framework and a critical thinking capacity scale [5].

These above-mentioned studies demonstrate two identifiable trends. Firstly, we have developed elaborate theoretical frames for critical thinking education, but there remains a shortage of practical guidelines as to how such an educational ideal shall be fruited into authentic teaching. Secondly, the current discussion about critical thinking education does not fully take into account the differences in the nature and level of domestic universities, so those outlines or suggestions seem to be relatively general. In view of this status quo, the article intends to integrate theoretical thinking and actual practice of foreign language teaching in China's universities (especially the non-prestigious universities as the one where the author works), in an attempt to provide a feasible paradigm to channel the speculative insights into the concrete design and operation of teaching on critical thinking that happens in classrooms, thus making contributions to the ongoing reform initiatives of foreign language education in China.

II. FEASIBILITY OF INTENSIVE READING AS AN INTERFACE

Currently, the course for English-major undergraduates can be roughly divided into two categories, namely, skill training courses and knowledge courses (language knowledge and the related).The former deals with basic language skills, including intensive reading, extensive reading, listening, speaking, etc.; the latter focuses on the English-related knowledge, including literature, linguistics, and surveys on major English-speaking countries and regions. This system, although in place for decades and successful in many aspects, confront us with three problems: Firstly, the skill-oriented courses require strenuous efforts in repetitive training and tests, but the ability to think critically is practically excluded from the teaching process. Secondly, the language knowledge courses are characterized of a large number of facts and figures, and the majority of students tend to acquire them merely by rote (some teachers allegedly agree with such a learning method to some degree), which makes it almost impossible for both teachers and students to think about the reasons and questions hidden behind. Thirdly, a gap has been formed between skill training courses and knowledge courses: many students tend to have attached undue importance to language skills at the primary stage and even have developed a lop-sided understanding that what a foreign language major is supposed to do is excel in language skills only. Hence, after they enter an advanced level, they may become uninterested in language knowledge courses, not to mention the improvement in critical thinking ability. The reason is surprisingly simple and clear: when language skills are proficient enough to facilitate foreign language use in real communications, it is no use trying to learn to how to think; the truth is that everyone knows to think. So why bother?

To solve these problems, we propose that intensive reading courses (including essential English and advanced English) can

be of great importance. We intend to borrow the term "interface" from computer science for the clarification of our proposals. "Interface" literally means "the surface where two things touch each other" and there has appeared a frequent extension of this meaning to "the way in which two subjects, events etc. affect each other"(see in Longman Dictionary). In this light, we may be able to address the long-standing gap between the training of language skills and the enhancement of critical thinking competence. Furthermore, an interface implies not only a mechanism to make sure things of different domains can meet and exchange with each other but also a reconsideration of the possibility where two things may optimize themselves in the process of exchange. Intensive reading, therefore, serves as a feasible interface for the following reasons: 1) Intensive reading is essentially a comprehensive or holistic course internationally involving both skill training and knowledge introduction. This means intensive reading is able to function as an "interface" between the two at least theoretically, but such an interface has been to a great degree reduced to a mechanical "combination" which overshadows what may happen when the two interplay with each other. Worse even, the comprehensive nature of intensive reading has been somewhat narrowed or dwarfed in that too much emphasis has been placed on the two existing components, while almost no attention has been paid to the possibility of having a third part involved. 2) Intensive reading is the very course which takes the longest time and most painstaking efforts for students to do well in. This allows a great potential of teaching critical thinking from the very beginning and carrying it out throughout at least two or three years. Besides, the relative predictability and stability of how intensive reading shall be accessed suggests that students are able experience an accordingly stable process of understanding how critical thinking may be developed on the basis of reading, writing, speaking and translating because these tasks demand not only good language proficiency but also abilities to identify, analyze and deal with problems that are not always purely lingual.

III. HOW THE INTERFACE WORKS

A. Language learning and critical thinking

In terms of the first aspect of the working mechanism, the interface between language learning and critical thinking lies in the different levels of language acquisition (mainly lexical and syntactic) and different cognitive operations highlighting the tasks of analyzing, comparing, summarizing, refining and integrating, which is conducive to improve students' critical thinking ability [6]. A good example is the teaching of vocabulary. As is known to all, vocabulary learning in intensive reading demands a solution to polysemy, synonym discrimination and lexical collections. Quite much teaching experience has shown that relying on mindless and repetitive practice alone can be useless; instead, what is precisely needed is to incorporate concepts associated with words and cognitive operations related to critical thinking into teaching methods, so as to trigger students' problem-solving awareness and deepen their understanding of the semantic content and the usage of words. For example, the method of teaching the synonym

"across" and "through" in Essential English can be divided into three steps:

1) To demonstrate different meanings of these two words by several concrete examples.

2) To ask students to describe their own perceptions by drawing pictures or making analog.

3) To guide students to get familiar with the different usage for different circumstances.

Step 1) is designed to make the students find out the semantic differences in the conceptual content of these two words by grounding the usage onto authentic settings, a step essentially aimed to help students identify the problems in the learning tasks. Step 2) aims to guide the students to realize that the different meanings can be regarded as different conceptualized icons or schemas to some degree, thus driving them to think about how words may represent commonly accepted and shared thinking patterns of language users. Therefore, this step is central to problem analysis. Step 3) focuses on leading students toward the inner connections between semantic differences and usage scenarios so as to make clear the important semantic functions of preposition in its representation of positions and tempo-spatial distribution. This step, therefore, marks a solution to the learning task. All in all, this process is designed to deal with synonym discrimination and heighten the awareness of conceptualization on the part of students. Therefore, it can be a valuable and feasible way for students to master the conceptual base and necessary discrimination of prepositions by arousing their potential of cracking down problems involved. Similarly, analyzing important sentence patterns in intensive reading can follow a paralleled path. As cognitive linguistics holds that the grammar itself is meaningful and it reflects the specific thinking mode of the speaker [7], the teaching mode of syntactic strictures is likely transform itself from a stereotyped mechanical memory-based drill into an innovation from the perspective of semantic construction. A text titled *The Middle Eastern Bazaar*, for example, adopts a special tense in its narration: historical present tense. More often than not, the teachers simply inform the students that this is an unusual grammar application, without any further explanations or analyses. However, from the perspective of critical thinking education, we can guide the students to ask questions on the rationale and applicability of this kind of grammatical phenomenon. On this basis, we can ask the students to discuss the necessity of tenses (because quite a few students are not sensitive to the tense in their writing and speaking), the emergence of sentence meaning (specific syntactic structure makes the sentence meaning more abundant) and the related questions concerned with the relations between structures and meaning.

B. Discourse analysis and critical thinking

In terms of the second aspect, the interface between these two critical thinking and intensive reading is situated in logical analysis of texts, which require students 1) to discover, summarize, and contrast the facts, 2) to tell the differences between facts and opinions, 3) to know the discourse functions of specific rhetorical devices, and 4) to be deeply aware of the

way to express opinions and make comments. In this process, students will have opportunities to be more dedicated and self-controlled in reading comprehension [8].

Take the teaching of rhetoric devices as an example. There are a large number of paralleled sentences in *The Speech on Hitler's Invasion of the U.S.S.R.* in Advanced English. According to the previous teaching experience, quite many students have only a vague and highly general perception of the functions of paralleled sentences, dubbed as "enhancing the forcefulness and persuasiveness of delivering a speech" and "reflecting the aesthetic feelings of the speakers". We deem, to seek a breakthrough for a better and more detailed understanding, we can usher the students in the following steps: 1) to analyze and compare the contents in the paralleled sentences and find out the similarities and differences; 2) to reconstruct those sentences without the use of paralleled structure and avoid the repetitive parts as well; 3) to describe the subjective feelings and point out the distinctions between the original and rewritten sentences (such as rhythm, intonation, tone and so forth).

Step 1) aims to lead the students to understand what is parallelism used for, or the semantic requirements of using paralleled structures. Step 2) is designed to allow the students to extract the core content from paralleled structures and point out the semantic difference between the direct presentations and the rhetorical presentations. Step 3) is to allow the students to question the context and conditions that cause those distinctions, and steer clear of an inflexible interpretation on the rhetorical effects of parallelism. This is a process to find, refine and analyze problems, which will benefit students to have a better understanding of the textual functions of parallelism and at the same time, it can serve as a reference sample for the learning of other rhetoric devices. More importantly, specific rhetorical devices are not isolated from the discourse, and the author's use of rhetoric devices often reflects the stark differences in terms of frequency. Therefore, we can pose the following questions to students: why are some certain rhetorical devices used so frequently in a certain discourse? Does this reflect the author's particular intention or consideration? Those questions make it feasible for students to think deeply on the relations between rhetoric and discourse. Another good example is the discussion on the way to demonstrate the viewpoints. Exposing students to plenty of argumentation skills and models, we may make sure they can be more accessible to the argumentation of a given discourse and the do a better evaluation job. Hence, we can help students to form a question-oriented learning strategy: What is the point? Why is the case? How to elaborate on it? Whether it is rational or not? If some students disagree with the point, what is their own opinion and how do they support their argumentation? [9]Taking *The Future of The English* as an example, here comes the following teaching pattern according to this learning strategy :1) to analyze the background, layout and writing purpose .(Q: What do you think of the necessity of the author in analyzing the "future of the English"? What does the writer intend to achieve by writing on this theme? If you were the writer, how would you develop your arguments and why?...); 2) to analyze and evaluate the author's main ideas and the methods to demonstrate them.(Q: To what degree do you agree or disagree with the author's point when he says...? How does the author prove he is right? Do you think there is any better way of elaborating on his point?...); 3) to refute some of the author's points of view.(Q: Can you find out any problematic arguments the author has made? Why are they not acceptable?...); 4) to evaluate the effectiveness of certain vocabulary, syntax and rhetorical devices. (Q: In this sentence, quite many abstract nouns such as "bigness" and "Englishness" are used. What cognitive endeavors may be reflected? Are such cognitive endeavors contributing to the author's argumentative efforts?...). This kind of teaching pattern renders students to be aware of the purpose of this article and the argumentation's logical pattern, which would help them to inject the preciseness and persuasion in their writing, especially academic writing, and daily communication.

C. Knowledge teaching and critical thinking

On the third aspect, the interface between critical thinking education and knowledge teaching does by no means lie in rote learning. On the contrary, for teachers, it draws upon the reconstruction of understanding, digesting and integration of knowledge, while, for students, it hangs upon the acquisition of knowledge after systematic comprehension, evaluation and suspicion of what is conveyed by both textbooks and teachers [10]. According to the current Teaching Syllabus for English Majors issued by the educational administration, "knowledge" used in this article refers to the language knowledge and the related, here we focus on the knowledge in a broad sense, especially knowledge of literature, culture, society, politics, economics and religions, etc.. Again take *The Future of The English* as an example, here are the following links: to consider if there are any possibilities that people talk about the similar topics in China (or other familiar countries), and lead students to think deeply about national identity.(Q: In China is any writer likely to produce any essay on the same theme? Why? In what social settings may the issue of national identity emerge and draw growing intention? Does the essay help you better understand the term of national identity?···)

This process is designed to combine the knowledge of national identity with intensive reading and stimulate students to be more critical when thinking about their own experience in reality. Aside from putting knowledge teaching after language learning and discourse analysis, it can also serve as a prelude to article learning and analysis. Taking *The Trial that Rocked the World* in Advanced English as an example, here are the proposed arrangements:

1. Introduction--A Trial: When; Who; Where; What

1.1 When and Where: 1925 in the US: Liberalism

A) Neo-enlightenment: to emancipate rationality for the sake of a better human race

B) Modernity: Humans deserve the brand-new patterns of life and belief characterized by capitalism and its underlying promises.

1.2 What: Fundamentalism VS Liberalism

A) How Christianity has defined, shaped, facilitated, interplayed with, conflicted with and harmonized with minds.

B) Fundamentalism as an old-fashioned and stubborn way to interpret God and His deeds.

--looking at solely what was originally put in the Bible;

--adhering to a word-for-word interpretation of the Bible;

--intolerance of any belief that contradicts what it upholds (why?)

C) Gaps that may be never bridged:

--new semantic and practical content of Christianity along with the profound transformations of Americans and American societies.

--willingness or reluctance to reconcile rationality with God's will so as to redefine who we are in a changing tempo-spatial setting.

It is significant that those closely linked background information such as culture, religions and society is to be unfolded as the narration marches on. The following elements such as time, place, characters and events are closely interdependent accordingly in this process. On the basis of a preliminary understanding of each element, several highly relevant questions can be reasonably put forward: Why did this trial happen at that particular time and place? Why did the author choose this particular person or group in response to that specific event? What were the specific effects of this event on the particular time, place, or characters?

Therefore, there are two advantages of this arrangement. One is that any explanation of background elements cannot be separated from the overall narration. The other is that the mastery of these background elements directly serves the purpose and essence of the article. In fact, the connection cognitively sought between knowledge and texts not only allow the works to be better understood with the aid of knowledge digestion, but also help the knowledge be better grasped through analysis works. When students gradually accept and get used to this kind of knowledge teaching method, their mastery of knowledge can be more solid and it will help them to strengthen the knowledge by text learning and appreciation.

IV. CONCLUSION

We had a brief discussion on the interface between critical thinking education and intensive teaching and our conclusions can be summarized as follows: 1)critical thinking is not an intangible and abstract ability and can't be improved by practice in a vacuum; instead, it should be grounded in tangible contexts with systematic arrangements .2) intensive reading is an ideal platform for the implementation of critical thinking education, but at the levels of language points, discourses, and language and the related knowledge, it is necessary to discover and delimit the interface that is available for critical thinking education. Admittedly, this paper simply proposes a teaching model which attempts to be theoretically feasible and logically justifiable, that is why it needs more testing, questioning and further improvement. But generally speaking, regarding intensive reading class as a platform is suitable for foreign language majors in a host of universities in order to develop the critical thinking education effectively.

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