

Study on the Significance and Development Strategies of Critical Thinking in English Writing

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Abstract—Critical thinking, as a necessary quality that college students should possess, has become a greater concern and received more attention from higher education institutions with domestic and foreign scholars actively studying and researching the topic. English writing courses, as one of the core curriculum in English teaching, is an important standard for testing students' English proficiency and an imperative way to cultivate all-around talents. This thesis will illustrate the significance of critical thinking ability in English writing courses by discussing their interactions and will put forward three teaching strategies to improve students' writing skills from the perspective of critical thinking. The thesis will enrich research on critical thinking and also bring positive effects on the improvement of English writing courses through the cultivation of critical thinking.

Key words—*Critical Thinking, English Writing, Teaching Strategies, College Students*

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Concept of Critical Thinking*

The ability to use critical thinking is an important goal for talent cultivation in the 21st century and is an intellectual resource that plays a long-term role and benefits people of all ages. It is also the essence of a quality education for students in higher education institutions. Speculative ability is an important part of human thinking; although it cannot comprehensively cover all the thinking methods, it should be the main thinking ability for accurate description, including abstract thinking, logical reasoning and argumentation evaluation. The definition of speculative ability can neither be too narrow, nor too broad, otherwise its intended meaning cannot be accurately grasped. The ability to think critically is the ability to discern, analyze, reason, and judge as well as other thinking activities to conduct arguments and research on situations, categories, and connections of various things [1]. In the past two decades, research related to critical thinking ability has been highly valued in Western countries. Scholars have actively explored and practiced from different perspectives and aspects, and have achieved fruitful theoretical results. Compared with foreign countries, domestic scholars have been actively exploring the problems associated with college and university students' critical thinking abilities [2]. Faced with the increasingly urgent background and national conditions that need innovative talents, it is progressively important to pay attention to the cultivation of students' critical thinking in foreign language teaching. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the current thinking tendencies of college students and the influence of speculative skills on college English writing.

B. *The Importance of English Writing Development*

At this stage, the focus of education and teaching has gradually turned to the cultivation of students' comprehensive abilities and quality, so as to cultivate more versatile talents for use in society. In college English teaching, the five modes consisting of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating are mainly used for implementing teaching. "Writing" is one of the key points of teaching content among these modes. Strengthening the cultivation of college students' English writing abilities can timely check the mastery of students' knowledge within all aspects of English. Effectively teaching the writing ability to English majors is a significant part of promoting English teaching in higher education institutions and an effective way to increase students' comprehensive qualities [3]. However, as an output skill, English writing can reflect higher levels of English acquisition in language learners and their ability to use the language proficiently. English writing should receive sufficient attention from both, teachers and students. Good writing ability is a prerequisite for deep and thought-provoking language expression (including verbal expression) and, at the same time, can foster the abilities of innovation and logical thinking. However, the development of college English writing teaching has always been worrisome, because current English teaching in colleges and universities still contains traditional methods and strategies and has not fully utilized the teaching concept under the background of the new era [4], thus affecting the situation of college English writing teaching.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN ENGLISH WRITING

The improvement of writing ability and the cultivation of speculative ability are complementary. Writing is a mental labor process that uses the symbols of language and characters to reflect objective things, express thoughts and feelings and transmit knowledge and information, making it extremely creative. Writing requires great energy and perseverance, which is a mental labor process involving thinking and cognitive activities resulting in a combination of creative thinking and interactive processes. Students should actively participate in interactive thinking and ultimately achieve the goal of improving their writing skills [5]. True critical thinking means that in the process of interaction, students must discover and ask questions, learn to exchange ideas, and learn to accept or evaluate others' opinions. In the process of student writing, the ability to think can play a significant role. First of all, students need to have a holistic grasp of the article, and present their own opinions in the essay. Moreover, students should listen to different ideas, reflect seriously and give feedback. These are inseparable from the guidance

of speculative ability. To a certain extent, the cultivation of students' writing abilities can enhance the improvement of their speculative abilities, and the improvement of speculative ability can promote effective writing.

English writing is a form of expression that explains what someone thinks about or how they view things. The surface behavior is the use of language, but in fact, it reflects a person's own thinking ability. The most essential feature of writing is to express thoughts through the written language. Thinking is the foundation, premise and soul of writing. Without thinking, there is no writing. Writing is a method of thinking, the tool of description, and it is the embodiment of thinking. Critical thinking is an indispensable component of thinking ability as it is involved in English writing in different forms, such as conceiving, outlining, writing drafts, revision and finalization. In my teaching career, 95 percent of my students thought that English writing was a tricky task, even though they had studied English for many years and had reached specific language levels. In their essays, they focused on expressing the knowledge they knew, and were not capable of having an insight into the phenomena and problems or providing reasonable analysis and judgment. All these phenomena point to insufficient critical thinking during the process of English writing practice.

As a core skill course in English teaching, writing is a high-intensity thinking activity. From conception to modification, the whole course needs to apply critical thinking, in order that it can be one of the most effective courses to help develop critical thinking. Likewise, English writing is a high-level language output, which requires more utilization of critical thinking. Repeated writing training not only enables students to master the basic knowledge of language and strengthens their ability to analyze and observe problems, but it also provides chances to inspire critical thinking and allows continued application of the ability. The level of English writing directly reflects the extent of critical thinking ability students have reached. Therefore, the combination of English language writing and critical thinking methods can effectually improve students' writing levels and develop their creative and divergent thinking. The development of critical thinking ability should be a vital target in writing course teaching in higher education institutions.

III. THE STRATEGIES OF IMPROVING CRITICAL THINKING IN ENGLISH WRITING TEACHING

A. *Attaching More Attention to Critical Thinking in Writing Courses*

English teachers should regard the cultivation of students' critical thinking as one of the most important teaching objectives and attach importance to the training of students' thinking abilities [6]. Teachers need to recognize the relationship between thought and practice, because students' thinking is the basic concept to guide their learning and practice. Highlighting students' subjective positions and expanding students' speculative horizons are also required. English teachers should adapt to the new situations and policies for teaching in higher education [7], and instruct students through reasonable scenarios to stimulate their interest in English writing and actively learning. Teachers need to lead to develop the subjectivity of students and create more platforms to show students' talents. Additionally, English teachers should initiatively broaden students' horizons in thinking and allow students to understand the importance of profound cultural knowledge for English writing. Teachers should rationally integrate cultural stories, historical facts and other interesting materials into the course content in order to stimulate the students' interest in studying and expanding the students' mind space. In addition, reading habits of students need additional guidance from teachers, with reading materials not being limited to writing themes. Intensive reading enables students to accumulate a wealth of knowledge and writing material from daily life, thus leading to thinking, analyzing and solving problems from multiple perspectives.

B. *Reforming the Traditional English Writing Teaching Methods*

The traditional English writing teaching curriculum is not fully rational and the hours within the course are limited. Colleges need to value the role of English writing teaching and optimize the writing teaching curriculum. At present, some qualified institutions have set up understanding and debate courses separately for English writing and have designed reasonable class schedules, which successfully improve students' thinking and comprehending abilities. Moreover, teachers should keep pace with the times while choosing the content of writing teaching. The selected writing themes should be consistent with the characteristics of the times. It is necessary to select popular issues that students want to explore so as to intensify their perception of the world and society. At the same time, students should be encouraged to search for relevant materials and to carry out necessary communication about hot topics, which can promote interpersonal skills. In comparison, the traditional method of English writing teaching is less complex. Teachers present an analysis of the topics and structure of the essays, resulting in students writing essays with empty content and rigid construction, because the structure and format of the essays are based on given examples. This model of teaching does not drive students to deeply think about the topics or what to write; it is only an easy way for students to finish the task the teachers have arranged, which is an ineffective model for the improvement of writing. Therefore, there is a need to insist on reforming English writing teaching, which requires that English teachers must first have the ability of critical thinking [8]. As the leading advocates for English writing teaching, teachers should fully seize the content of the class before starting the teaching, do the preparatory work well before class, continue learning new knowledge and add this into the course content at the appropriate time. Intensifying the ability of cross-disciplinary knowledge and strengthening the cultivation of critical thinking ability should be long-term goals for writing teachers, so as to meet the requirements of training students' critical thinking in language writing teaching.

C. *Building a New Exam Evaluation System for Writing Courses*

The exam is a baton that adjusts and conducts the study schedules of students, which can be a tool for teachers to give direction. In order to unite speculative thinking and linguistic abilities, the evaluation of these two abilities must be reflected in the daily quizzes and final exams [9]. The traditional evaluation method has a single form and vague standards. Reforming this

scale of marks will create an obvious effect on writing courses. First, we must speed up the construction of a formative evaluation mechanism, and intersperse group discussion, debate, group displays and other detailed scales in daily courses. Second, we must enhance the comprehensive examination of the critical thinking ability and language ability on the final exam. The final exam should be carried out in terms of the type of examination questions and evaluation criteria. There should be more writing tasks of conclusion, summarization or giving opinions on exams. We can also learn from the Western exams, such as IELTS and TOEFL [10]. In their writing evaluation systems, logical analysis marks are a high percentage of the total score. We need questions that combine the assessment of speculative thinking with linguistic abilities. When marking students' essays, evaluating the linguistic expression ability on wording, phrasing and cohesiveness of text is a basic requirement; likewise, examining the relevance, clarity and logic of thinking is a normal standard. In addition, teachers should guide the students to conduct self-tests, in order that students can easily know whether their critical thinking abilities and language abilities are developing at the same pace. There are many forms of self-examination, such as comparing the first draft with the final draft of the composition, students' personal reflection logs, questionnaires and interviews set by teachers, and foreign evaluation tests.

IV. CONCLUSION

Critical thinking is an ability that must be emphasized in the process of cultivating high-quality talents. Using certain strategies to cultivate this method of thinking in English writing courses will continuously improve a student's academic quality and personal potential. It will also bring forward higher requirements of teachers, so that teachers will develop more completely in their teaching careers and guide more students to solve the tough problems involved in essay writing. In addition, speculative skills are also essential for future challenges within social development. The traits of the speculative ability itself will lead people to logical and rational thinking, so that people are better able to make reasonable choices when facing difficulties in study or life.

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