

USING THE BLENDED CLASSROOM TO CULTIVATE CRITICAL THINKING FOR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is considered to be the foundation of creative and innovative capability, therefore modern education attaches great importance and emphasis to the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability. However, the cultivation of college students' critical thinking ability in China is a complicated issue and it involves cultural and cognitive habits of both students and teachers. This article explores how to use the emerging blended learning model to explore disruptive innovation within and outside the English classroom, encouraging and organizing students to engage in critical knowledge acquisition, peer discussion, and thinking activities, and ultimately achieving the cultivation of creative and innovative capability. This study also suggests solutions in some concrete problems in a blended English classroom, and emphasizes that blended classrooms should break away from the idea of technology supremacy and introduce substantive elements of critical thinking.

Keywords: critical thinking; blended classroom; English major students; innovative capability.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is considered to be the foundation of creative and innovative capability. The research on critical thinking in China began in the 1980s and is only in its early stages in the theoretical exploration, the development of measurement tools, and the pedagogical research (Luo, 2000). For most of the time in the 20th century, the research did not cause much attention until Huang (1998) pointed out that college students in China were deficient in critical thinking ability. Although modern education has attached much importance on students' ability in critical thinking, there is not enough research in how to encourage English major students to participate in more disruptive innovation, peer discussion and thinking activities in and out of the classroom.

Christensen et al. (2008) proposed to break the standardized educational system with disruptive innovation. They advocate a student-centered educational reform based on the original "disruptive innovation theory" with their research for more than twenty years. They suggest the appropriate use of the digital technology as a learning platform, personalize and integrate contents suitable to each student, allowing them to learn and improve their critical thinking ability in their preferred places, at their preferred pace, and in methods that align with their type of intelligence. This pedagogical reform coincides with the basic concepts of interactive learning in blended classrooms and autonomous learning through in class Q&A discussions. However, there is still a lack of practical research on using blended classrooms to improve English major students' critical thinking ability in China.

2.0 THE EXISTING PROBLEMS AND IMPORTANCE OF CULTIVATING THE CRITICAL THINKING ABILITY FOR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN CHINA

At present, the functions of English courses in most universities in China are still limited to imparting grammar knowledge, expanding vocabulary bank, and preparing for exams. However, civic education, personality education, humanitarian education, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills, which are more important for students' future development, have not been well trained and fostered.

Compared with other liberal arts students, English major students have even weaker training in their critical thinking skills. Wen et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study which explored the development of critical thinking disposition (CTD) of 163 foreign language majors in their three years of undergraduate study by conducting four surveys. Their study reveals that the average scores of CTD are above 4 points, which means the CTD is positive in general. However, the CTD decreased significantly through the study of the first year and kept fairly stable in the second and third years. They suggest that for the successful cultivation of critical thinking ability for English major students, two points need to be considered: the relationship between critical thinking and English learning; how to integrate critical thinking skills into the process of English learning. Sun (2011) points out that instead of training students' analytical, reasoning, and evaluative skills, English teaching do not pay enough attention to cultivating students' humanistic qualities and improving their critical thinking ability, resulting in a lack of humanistic knowledge structure and literacy among English major students.

On the one hand, some teaching contents of college English courses have long been criticized as only repetition of primary and secondary school course contents, lack of the contents to cultivate students' critical thinking ability, and have difficulty in stimulating students' learning initiative and enthusiasm due to repetitive knowledge and basic thinking skills; On the other hand, students with insufficient critical thinking ability mainly exhibit intellectual laziness during the learning process, such as giving up independent thinking, avoiding topic discussions, and being able to list only simple factual information during class discussions. This is not conducive to their future development and puts them at a disadvantage in some exams that emphasize critical thinking skills, such as IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, etc. Introducing critical thinking training will improve this situation. However, there is still a lack of sufficient theoretical and practical research on how to adopt pedagogical methods to organize and guide English major students to develop their critical thinking ability, and promote participatory, heuristic, exploratory, and discussion-based ways of teaching, both inside and outside of the classroom.

People often misunderstand that the poor English communication ability of Chinese students is due to insufficient emphasis on the foreign language practicality, and attribute it to the detachment of English learning from their daily lives. In fact, a deeper reason is that the current college English education lacks the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability. Students with poor critical thinking and humanistic quality often cannot express their thoughts and opinions clearly and independently even in their mother tongue, and can only follow the general trend and express common view points and opinions. According to Qu (2015, 2018), the deficiency of English students' critical thinking ability is caused by a lack of systematic disciplinary training and systematic knowledge. Their fragmentary knowledge and inadequate

training in critical thinking often lead to incoherent reasoning and logical judgment in their lives. Therefore, he suggested to develop English major students' critical thinking ability with the foundation of systematic knowledge and training. Introducing a blended learning model that is conducive to the cultivation of critical thinking into college English classrooms may make positive changes to this situation, providing the society with qualified citizens with language skills and thinking ability.

3.0 USING THE BLENDED CLASSROOM TO CULTIVATE CRITICAL THINKING FOR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

3.1 Overview of the Blended Classroom

Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams began to adopt the teaching model of the blended classroom in chemistry in 2007 and promoted its application in primary and secondary education in the United States. Since then, Professor Robert Talbert has applied the teaching model of the blended classroom in many courses (such as "Using Computer Tools to Solve Problems" and "Linear Algebra") and achieved effective teaching results. He summarized the implementation structure of blended classroom and briefly described the main connections in the implementation process of the blended classroom. However, the application of the blended classroom mainly focuses on operational courses in science and engineering, and the practical research on humanity subjects is still inadequate.

Blended classrooms need to breaking the traditional learning mode of students' passive listening in the classroom and completing exercises after class, and encourage effective utilization of the convenience and availability of the digital technology. Teachers should record or recommend video clips and online resources related to their courses before class, allowing students to browse and learn through digital media such as computers and smart phones. Teachers should try not to spend too much classroom time to impart basic information and facts. The work of basic information collection should be completed by students before class. Students can watch videos, listen to online lectures, browse the internet to gain access to learning materials, and discuss with other classmates through their social media. When students encounter difficulties, they can also watch learning videos again to restudy the knowledge points or consult with their peers. The classroom time should adopt teaching strategies such as discussion groups and interactive learning, allowing students to summarize and display the knowledge and skills they have mastered, and engage in dialogues or other communication activities, emphasizing interaction between teachers and students and among students. In this learning environment, the teacher's role changes to a guide or advisor, encouraging students to engage in the interactive collaboration or independent exploration.

Blended classroom can be regarded as a subversion of the traditional classroom structure and teaching process, allowing for higher utilization of daily fragmented time for learning, and enabling students to adjust their learning progress more flexibly and autonomously. In fact, knowledge impartation is only the most basic level of learning activity, and blended classrooms can transform students from passive information consumers to active learners.

3.2 Mutual benefits between blended classrooms and the cultivation of critical thinking

After being introduced into China in recent years, blended classrooms have become one of the most popular topics in educational reform and innovation. However, most research in this area focuses on the preparation of teaching materials such as videos and other technical tools, emphasizing teaching operation over connotation. It is a misconception to think that blended classrooms are about recording teaching videos for students to watch after class. The essential function of blended classrooms is to encourage and stimulate students' interest and ability to learn independently, delve into problems, and explore innovative solutions. The final goal is to make full use of classroom time to engage in deeper learning activities, enhance students' classroom participation, and improve their critical thinking ability.

Many scholars believe that the cultivation of critical thinking should be combined with specific teaching subject (McPeck 1981, Pithers & Soden 2000), and critical thinking courses should be offered or integrated into general education courses (Halpern 2002). On the one hand, if blended classrooms for English major students aim to enhance students' humanistic quality and innovative ability, it is necessary to introduce the skills of critical thinking; On the other hand, blended classrooms with critical thinking activities can promote classroom discussions and interactions, and help to enhance students' learning engagement and enthusiasm.

The theory of "Learning for Mastery" believes that in traditional classrooms, all students receive the same amount of classroom learning time, and students cannot arrange their learning progress based on their own understanding and absorption ability. In blended classrooms, in the same English teaching unit, students with higher knowledge proficiency can explore deeper connotations and seek new perspectives on problems; Students with lower knowledge proficiency can receive more personal guidance, participate in learning activities within their capabilities, and receive inspiration and assistance from their classmates. Therefore, the learning mode of blended classrooms is most conducive to cultivating critical thinking ability.

In summary, on the one hand, blended classrooms can provide specific and effective implementation methods for cultivating critical thinking ability; On the other hand, the introduction of critical thinking can provide substantive contents for blended classrooms, avoiding the risk of blended classrooms becoming mere formalism or technology supremacy.

3.3 The Problems and Solutions of Using Blended Classrooms to Cultivate English Major Students' Critical Thinking Ability

Compared to primary or secondary level students, blended classrooms are actually more suitable for college level students: on the one hand, primary and secondary level students receive very little training in independent thinking and autonomous learning in China, lacking the foundation of thinking ability for blended classrooms; On the other hand, most primary and secondary level students' extracurricular time is indeed filled up with various exam-oriented assignments and tutoring, leaving little room for independent explorations and peer discussions necessary for blended classrooms. Therefore, only in college campuses can blended learning be effectively implemented to a certain extent.

However, the implementation of blended learning with critical thinking has to face many problems in China: firstly, teachers need to guide students to change their existing learning habits and thinking patterns. After years of exam-oriented education, Chinese students have become accustomed to unilateral and passive reception of information indoctrination. Blended

classrooms encourage students to actively learn and independently adjust their learning progress, and the major function of teachers is to guide students to collect necessary information, delve into thinking after class, and use fragmented time for learning. To some extent, these learning activities will inevitably increase students' academic burden. Blended classrooms also require students to actively interact with others and participate in teaching activities such as discussions and presentations. Many students in China have become accustomed to individual assignments. The implementation of blended learning requires teachers to provide more explanations on teaching design and organization, in order to gain students' support and cooperation, and gradually transform their learning habits. In blended classrooms for English major students, teachers, as organizers and guides, should arrange teaching themes in advance, guide students to acquire the information they need before class, introduce the tools for acquiring knowledge, and teach them how to process various information according to their cognitive needs. In the English classroom, teachers should step back from the position of advisors, encourage students to speak and discuss more actively, express their opinions as much as possible in their own words, and realize the role of students as the main body of learning in the blended classrooms.

Secondly, teachers should make full use of online resources and digital technology to enrich their teaching contents and supplement the knowledge points before and during class. Constructivist theory believes that "scenario", "collaboration", "conversation", and "meaning construction" are the four major elements or attributes of a learning environment, and blended classrooms will reconstruct these elements. In blended English classrooms, teachers need to study some high-quality lesson examples to understand the teaching designs behind them, and design and reflect on efficient classroom activities that can improve students' critical thinking skills through their teaching practices. Before class, the learning materials provided by teachers need to put novelty, diversity, and attractiveness in consideration, and try to stimulate students' independent thinking and exploratory spirit in a progressive, clear, and targeted manner, and ultimately try to achieve the goal of cultivating critical thinking ability.

Thirdly, teachers need to document and reflect on the new teacher-student interaction behaviors that arise in English classrooms after the implementation of the blended learning, and the influence in the development of their critical thinking skills. The communication and discussion among students and between teachers and students in blended classrooms require teachers to carefully observe, analyze, adjust, and scaffold their teaching according to students' capabilities, in order to improve students' thinking, digestion, and absorption of language knowledge and cultural elements. After further recording and analysis of the teaching process, clearer and more effective conclusions can be drawn on how to integrate critical thinking skills into the blended learning.

Fourthly, creating an educational environment conducive to the development of critical thinking requires transforming and developing the role and function of teachers in blended classrooms. One major obstacle to the implementation of the blended learning comes from teachers' teaching habits and traditional ways of thinking. Owing to the current exam-oriented education environment in China, many teachers have formed rigid teaching behavior and thinking patterns. Blended classrooms need to put teachers in a new, dynamic, and changing teaching environment. In the process of blended learning, there may be contents that are not included in the teacher's lesson preparation stage, thus blended classrooms also put forward

higher requirements for teachers, requiring them to have the willingness and ability of life-long learning and continuously improve their digital literacy. Only when English teachers initiatively change their roles and functions in the classroom, can the effectiveness of blended learning be fully realized.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Although educators in China have put much emphasis on students' creative and innovative capability, and have done tremendous research in reforming college classes based on blended learning, how to understand and cultivate the foundation of innovation, which is the critical thinking, is not quite clear in most cases, especially for college English teachers. This study reviews the notions of critical thinking, points out the existing problems and importance of cultivating the critical thinking ability for English major students in China, and suggests the means to use blended classrooms to cultivate critical thinking skills for English lessons. The cultivation of college students' critical thinking ability is a complicated issue in China and it involves cultural and cognitive habits of both students and teachers. From the aspects of philosophy and practices, this study also aims to provide fundamental understanding of blended classrooms, and implies that blended classrooms can be effective in the cultivation of critical thinking for language students in college. The understanding of critical thinking and blended classrooms from different aspects can give English teachers insight in how to cultivate students' creative and innovative capability.

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