

Research on the Complementary Model between Critical Thinking and Students' English Writing Optimization in Universities for Nationalities

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Abstract: With efforts in various aspects, the educational level universities for nationalities, especially those in the central and western regions, has achieved remarkable progress in recent years. However, according to the survey, there is still a prominent problem in college English teaching: students lack critical thinking ability, resulting in most of their writing lacking critical and creative elements. In the era of highly developed AI, the English critical thinking ability of students should be optimized and complemented with College English Tests (Band 4 and Band 6), especially English writing in universities for nationalities. Establishing such a complementary model not only conforms to the emphasis on interdisciplinary knowledge requirements in the context of the new liberal arts but also meets the social requirements for cultivating applied talents. However, in universities for nationalities in the central and western regions, due to the poor English foundation of some students, the traditional teaching mode mainly focusing on knowledge transfer still prevails, leaving little time for the cultivation of critical thinking ability. The construction of the complementary model requires the joint efforts of relevant school departments, teachers and students, and can be gradually realized through a large number of classroom practices.

Keywords: College English Teaching; Critical Thinking Ability; Optimization and Complementation; Classroom Practice

1. Introduction

The concept of critical thinking was first put forward by the American educator Dewey in 1910. He described it as a kind of reflective

thinking, emphasizing the process of actively seeking to confirm beliefs in a state of doubt. Critical thinking is an indispensable rational thinking activity for college students. This activity is reflected in students' analytical ability and ability to differentiate in the actual learning process. It directly determines the height of students' thinking, research methods and final learning outcomes. For college students, critical thinking, in particular, is of great significance. Without critical thinking, there can be no innovation or academic breakthroughs. Critical thinkers will explore various factors that may affect the conclusion. They are independent, confident and engage in in - depth thinking [1]. After going through the high - school stage of "learning - doing exercises - taking exams", the vast majority of college students unconsciously cultivate this kind of critical thinking ability in their major studies. However, in English learning, they still rigidly memorize words, learn grammar and remember specific sentence patterns, taking the College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 as their ultimate learning goals. Through multiple computer - based writing tests, it has been found that many students who have successfully passed the College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 cannot clearly express their critical views on a certain topic.

Taking Hubei University for Nationalities which is located in the Wuling Mountainous area of China as an example, this paper combines the relevant curriculum arrangements and teaching feedback of South - Central University for Nationalities and Southwest Minzu University. Starting from an analysis of the current situation of English critical thinking teaching in Minzu universities in central and western China, it reveals the existing problems in current college English critical thinking teaching and college English

writing, analyzes the underlying causes, and explores effective ways to cultivate students' critical thinking ability in college English teaching and enable it to play a full role in writing. The aim is to improve the current situation of college English critical thinking teaching, help teachers better achieve the goal of cultivating college students' critical thinking ability, and enable students to be good at independent analysis and argumentation in English writing, rather than rigidly writing sentences on a topic without discrimination and mechanically piecing together an essay according to some templates.

2. The Importance of Cultivating Critical Thinking Ability

At present, in the context of the "New Liberal Arts" construction, educators have realized the importance and urgency of the reform of the blended education model, Outcome - Based Education (OBE), and curriculum evaluation. Cultivating students' critical thinking ability is one of the important goals of college English teaching and is part of the comprehensive reform of "Through -all-round-ways Education for All ". Professor Sun Youzhong from Beijing Foreign Studies University clearly pointed out that "cultivating students' critical thinking ability is one of the core goals of higher education in China." He proposed that the urgent task of the current college English reform is how to cultivate critical thinking ability in English teaching [2]. Professor Sun Youzhong also emphasized that critical thinking ability includes the abilities of elaboration, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and interpretation. Professor Wen Qiufang attaches importance to the hierarchical model of college students' critical thinking ability. She advocates the "Production - Oriented Approach" and the hierarchical model theory, refining critical thinking ability into meta - critical thinking ability and critical thinking ability. The upper - level critical thinking ability and the lower - level one exist in an upper - lower relationship, aiming to highlight the leading role of the subjectivity of the critical thinker in critical thinking ability [3]. The academic community has been exploring critical thinking and its impact on various aspects of learning for over two decades, with numerous research findings. However, in the specific process of college teaching practice,

the results are not satisfactory. After searching authoritative databases, the author found that scholars mainly focus on the cultivation of college students' critical thinking skills and the impact of critical thinking on English for Academic Purposes (EAP), oral English, and reading in English majors. There is little research on the optimization strategies for non-English majors' critical thinking and English writing. Moreover, no strategies have been specifically proposed for constructing a complementary mechanism between critical thinking skills and college students' English writing. Research on simultaneously improving college students' critical thinking and writing skills still needs to be further strengthened. In particular, there is an urgent need to establish a complementary model for optimizing college students' critical thinking and English writing, so as to improve their comprehensive English application ability.

The purpose of learning English is "learning for application". The goal of writing is to express critical viewpoints in fluent English so as to achieve the purpose of communication or persuading readers. In writing, one shouldn't start writing immediately without thinking, nor should one write in the simplest way possible. Instead, it is necessary to carefully examine the topic repeatedly, make an outline, and then fully utilize basic language knowledge to write an English essay with innovative ideas as required. Starting to write according to a template will only result in stereotyped English writing, lacking the sense of innovation. In the process of optimizing the writing mode, students are encouraged to think from different perspectives and write articles that not only have diverse sentence patterns but also possess logic and persuasiveness. In the era of highly developed AI, the free software like Doubao and ChatGPT, as well as the paid ones such as Deepranslate and Cloud translation can already complete language service tasks more efficiently than ordinary college students. For students in universities for nationalities, such mechanical English learning is of little significance. If critical thinking is absent in college English learning, college English is no longer about learning a language, but rather about learning a tool – a tool that can be manipulated by AI [4].

3. Current Situation of College English in

Universities for Nationalities in Central and Western China and Factors Hindering Its Development

3.1 Current Situation of College English Education in Universities for Nationalities in Central and Western China

Since the release of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform Outline (2010 - 2020) in 2010, China has been regarding "innovative talents" as one of the goals of higher education [5]. In today's highly developed global information era, English is the most frequently used language for both online and offline communication around the world. Therefore, college English has naturally become a course that receives great attention in educational reforms. The College English Curriculum Requirements has also been continuously updated and improved in response to the problems emerging in teaching practice. With the implementation of these reforms, many auxiliary learning platforms have been widely adopted by universities. For example, in the College English reading and writing courses at Hubei University for Nationalities, teachers and students are encouraged to jointly use Unipus software and the iWrite English writing and assessment system. In College English listening and speaking courses, teachers and students are encouraged to make the most of WE Learn to access rich resources, so as to strengthen self-study and self-assessment and improve their comprehensive English application ability. Although many students have a poor foundation in English, after learning in combination with relevant projects and auxiliary platforms, they have made remarkable progress in college English learning. In recent years, and their English application ability and the passing rate of CET-4 have increased significantly.

According to the data provided by the Academic Affairs Office of Hubei University for Nationalities, the passing rate of CET-4 of this university in the spring and autumn of 2022 was slightly lower than the provincial average passing rate (25.83%:27.35%; 25.21%:28.15%). The passing rates of the two exams in 2022 were both lower than the provincial average (27.55% in spring: 30.54% and 15.08% in autumn: 26.93%). However, the passing rate of CET-4 in the most recent exam,

that is, in the spring of 2024, was higher than the provincial average (29.51%:27.67%). Nevertheless, statistics show that due to various reasons, the passing rate of CET-6 in the past three years has still been very unsatisfactory, far lower than the provincial average. And these students who successfully passed CET-4 also have one thing in common: they have achieved good scores in objective questions, but there is much room for improvement in subjective questions, especially in paragraph translation and writing. In other words, students' critical thinking ability has not been substantially improved. Despite their hard work in preparing for the exams, the overall quality of college English teaching still needs to be enhanced.

3.2 Factors Hindering the Improvement of College English Writing in Universities for Nationalities in Central and Western China

The further improvement of college English in universities for nationalities in central and western China is hindered by various reasons. Firstly, it is the students' learning motivation. Many students in these universities come from ethnic minority areas. Influenced by certain concepts, they do not attach enough importance to English. There is a lack of necessary English teaching facilities and concepts. They mistakenly think that English learning is just rote memorization. Many students have a weak foundation in middle - school English and poor flexibility in application. A large proportion of students in universities for nationalities come from mountainous areas in western Hubei, Yunnan, Xinjiang, and some mountainous areas with underdeveloped teaching facilities. Listening, speaking, and writing are their fatal weaknesses. Students learn English passively, lacking interest and confidence in English learning. They wrongly believe that mastering English only requires memorizing a large number of words. In college English teaching, it is advocated to tell Chinese stories well in a foreign language, which can not only improve students' interest in English learning but also cultivate their critical thinking ability. Some scholars have mentioned the practice of digital storytelling, which emphasizes autonomous, interactive, collaborative, and reflective learning [6-7]. According to the analysis of the score reports of students with high and very

low scores in the College English Test Band 4 at Hubei University for Nationalities, students' scores in objective questions are much more satisfactory than those in subjective questions. This reflects that a large proportion of students in college English learning are oriented towards the College English Test Band 4. They only pay attention to the accumulation of language points and vocabulary. Some students try to dig out answering skills to pass Band 4. As a result, the scores of objective questions mainly focusing on vocabulary and reading are much higher than those of subjective questions, especially higher than the writing scores. Secondly, these universities adopt large - class teaching and lack conscious cultivation of students' critical thinking ability. At Hubei University for Nationalities, English is taught in large classes, with the number of students in most classes ranging from 50 to 80. The teaching tasks are burdensome. Teachers and students must complete at least six units of teaching each semester. This leads to the traditional cramming method of teaching, without providing an environment and time for cultivating students' critical thinking ability. Large - class teaching has an obvious negative impact on students' writing. It not only fails to provide students with opportunities to practice critical thinking but also makes students' writing mostly scored through teaching - aid platforms, lacking effective comments. In large - class English reading and writing teaching, students' writing lacks timely and targeted guidance (some students use sentence - bank correction, and most students even neglect writing). The classroom composition comments can only cover the works of a few students. In addition, the college English teaching mode after the reform has drawbacks. The listening - speaking and reading - writing courses are taught by two different teachers. In most cases, the two teachers lack communication, let alone cooperate to cultivate students' critical thinking ability, so that students can speak freely in listening - speaking classes and show their unique and innovative views in writing with idiomatic English.

According to a questionnaire survey of students in the institute of intelligence, the factors hindering the improvement of college English writing in universities for nationalities in the central and western regions are also

related to the excessive reliance on AI by a large number of students. The unsatisfactory writing of students is mainly limited by the lack of thinking space and reading materials, both of which can be effectively supplemented by using AI. For example, students are advised to download "Doubao" to widely obtain news reports on domestic and international events or solve difficult problems in English learning. However, some students rely on it incorrectly to complete various exercises, including daily English writing. This makes students lack critical thinking ability even more. They can't even correctly express their basic views in written English without the help of AI, let alone create high-quality English works.

In Hubei University for Nationalities, the iTest stage assessment system has been adopted for two years, but the functions of this system have far from being fully utilized. In response to the requirements of college English reform, the formative assessment of college English has been implemented in Hubei University for Nationalities since two years ago. It has played a certain role, such as largely supervising students' daily learning. However, the functions of the iTest stage assessment system have not been fully exerted. Students often only pay attention to the final score after the stage test is over and do not carefully analyze the answer sheets. Moreover, the comments of iTest on writing lack refinement. The system mainly comments on the framework and sentences of students' articles and does not provide a standard to comment on and clearly score the critical thinking ability in writing.

4. Construction of an Optimal Complementary Model between College Critical Thinking Ability and College English Writing

To meet the needs of society, contemporary college students must be composite talents with critical thinking awareness and abilities, which are essential in their study and work. Researchers have found that although current college students can show strong personal inclinations in daily communication, they still stick to conventions in formal group discussions and do not know how to systematically prove their viewpoints [8]. According to the hierarchical theoretical model of critical thinking ability proposed by Wen Qiufang in 2009, the second level is critical

thinking ability, which includes cognitive skills and emotional traits and is managed and monitored by the meta-critical thinking ability at the first level. Researchers believe that self-regulation plays a dominant role in critical thinking ability. Only by understanding learning as a mode can students master knowledge and shift from passive to active language learning. [9] Considering the actual situation of English learning in universities for nationalities, this is exactly what students generally lack in English writing. To optimize college English writing, it is necessary to cultivate students' critical thinking ability through long-term influence and construct an optimal complementary model between college critical thinking ability and college English writing from the following four aspects.

First, make teachers and students deeply aware of the application value of critical thinking ability in English learning, especially in English writing. Cultivate an innovative awareness in writing, encourage and guide students to think independently and actively participate in group discussions on various issues before writing. In writing training, require students to think independently and view problems from multiple perspectives, and write two articles with completely different viewpoints on one topic. In the process of optimizing the writing mode, let students think from different angles and flexibly use the abilities of elaboration, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and interpretation emphasized by Professor Sun Youzhong, so as to write articles with not only diverse sentence patterns but also logic and persuasiveness.

Secondly, make full use of teaching-aid platforms to let reading feed back into writing. The various teaching-aid platforms purchased by the school provide students with abundant self-study resources for English reading. A large amount of reading materials can not only help students expand their vocabulary and improve their reading ability, but also enable them to learn many writing techniques from excellent readings. With just appropriate guidance from teachers, students can draft outlines before writing and construct a multimodal writing model with flexible writing techniques. Extensive reading is essential for improving writing skills. American linguist Krashen proposed that for students to improve

their writing ability, they need to receive an input volume higher than their current level so as to integrate their critical thinking ability with their writing ability. I believe that critical thinking ability should also be combined with students' majors, enabling them to master the English language skills required for their future work in combination with their respective majors. Teaching-aid platforms such as U Campus software, WE Learn, and Chaoxing Xuexitong software provided by Hubei Minzu University, if fully utilized by students, can help improve students' comprehensive and critical thinking abilities as a whole.

Thirdly, teachers should optimize the teaching process, attach importance to the teaching model that combines scientific critical thinking with writing, and enhance students' critical thinking ability. It is necessary to provide higher - quality critical thinking training and guidance. Both reading - writing teachers and listening - speaking teachers should strengthen self - learning, keep up with the pace of the times, constantly update teaching methods, and jointly plan the teaching process scientifically. The New Century College English series textbooks adopted by Hubei University for Nationalities are designed with students at the center. The material selection and teaching design are highly operational. The reading - writing textbooks place great emphasis on students' critical thinking ability and writing training. However, based on multiple on - site classroom observations, due to the average foundation of students, the learning progress of most classes lags behind the teaching syllabus. The content of the textbooks has not been deeply expanded. The time for topic discussions at the beginning of each unit, which aims to cultivate students' critical thinking ability, has been compressed. The writing training time has also been severely reduced due to the analysis of long and difficult sentences in the texts. In teaching practice, students have not truly become the protagonists of the classroom. As a result, a large part of the content in the textbooks has not been transformed into students' own knowledge. Students still lack practical and innovative abilities, and their comprehensive qualities do not meet the standards.

College English courses are divided into reading and-writing courses as well as

listening- speaking courses. Two teachers are respectively in charge of the two courses. In most classes, there is a lack of communication between the two teachers. They do not jointly cultivate students' expression based on critical thinking skills. As a result, students cannot express their opinions fluently in listening and speaking classes, nor can they break free from the template constraints in reading and writing. Moreover, they are unable to write high - quality and opinionated compositions in written English. Teachers of reading and writing and those of listening and speaking should negotiate and establish an effective cultivation model for critical thinking skills, with a view to substantially enhancing students' critical thinking abilities and promoting an overall improvement in the quality of college English teaching.

Last but not least, to construct an optimal complementary model of critical thinking ability and English writing, teachers need to create a classroom learning atmosphere conducive to the improvement of critical thinking ability, enabling students to think independently and speak actively. A relaxing learning atmosphere and the "inquiry-based learning" mode can enhance students' learning enthusiasm and cultivate their critical thinking ability. The Socratic Circle has been applied in the writing teaching of English majors in China in recent years, aiming to integrally cultivate English writing and critical thinking abilities. Teachers can improve the activity plan by providing scaffolding, refining activity links, clarifying rules and division of labor, etc., so as to achieve better teaching results [10]. In such classroom practices, a diversified performance evaluation system needs to be established. Teachers' use of various methods to evaluate students' daily performance can greatly encourage students to actively participate in class. Only when students are willing to think independently and actively participate in class can their analytical ability and comprehensive language application ability be rapidly improved, and only then can they become the composite talents expected by society.

5. Conclusion

The critical thinking ability of college students is a rational thinking activity in their learning. In recent years, the research on cultivating

college students' critical thinking ability in China and how to cultivate students' English writing ability in English teaching have been a hot topic. English writing is one of the important output methods in second language acquisition. From students' writing, we can observe their English foundation and the application of critical thinking ability in the writing process. Both at home and abroad, great importance is attached to the strategies for breaking through college students' English writing. Joe Siskin proposed that new teaching methods and ideas for college English writing should be constructed by cultivating students' critical thinking ability. In China, the emphasis on this phenomenon is elaborately reflected in the "College English Curriculum Requirements", which advocates cultivating an innovative consciousness in writing, encouraging students to participate in discussions, and inspiring them to think independently. The complementary mechanism between the critical thinking ability of students in colleges for nationalities and the English writing mode, that is, the coordination and complementarity between students' critical thinking ability and English writing, so as to improve students' critical thinking ability and writing ability simultaneously, still needs further strengthening. It requires the coordination of the school and the joint efforts of teachers and students. Only in this way can we help students benefit from applying English throughout their lives by cultivating their critical thinking ability.

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