

Research on the Cultivation Model of Critical Thinking Skills for English Majors in the Context of New Liberal Arts Education

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ABSTRACT

Traditional foreign language education has not placed sufficient emphasis on enhancing students' critical thinking skills. Language classroom instruction centered around repetition and memorization does not effectively integrate the development of language proficiency with the cultivation of critical thinking abilities. With the comprehensive promotion of the "New Liberal Arts" education initiated in 2019, foreign language education in China has entered a stage of quality development aligned with the new era. This study is based on the goals of the "New Liberal Arts" education and in response to China's development strategies and market demands. It discusses the cultivation model of critical thinking skills for English majors in the context of the "New Liberal Arts" education, aiming to provide references and insights for English teaching in the era of the "New Liberal Arts" education.

Keywords: *Critical thinking skills, English majors, New Liberal Arts education, Cultivation model, Teaching and learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As early as 2017, Hiram College in the United States proposed the educational concept of integrating technology into a broad range of liberal arts courses, aiming to provide students with comprehensive interdisciplinary learning. Similarly, the construction of the New Liberal Arts in China emphasizes the integration of new technologies and the digital revolution, breaking through traditional modes of thinking in the humanities, and innovating on the basis of inheritance. It highlights the cross-disciplinary integration, collaboration, and sharing (W.Mingyu, 2020), ultimately achieving the in-depth development of multidisciplinary integration. With the release of the "Declaration on the Construction of New Liberal Arts" and the establishment of the National Center for New Liberal Arts Education in 2020, the construction of the New Liberal Arts is rapidly advancing the reform and development of higher education across China.

In order to embrace the wave of a new round of technological revolution and industrial

transformation, the New Liberal Arts represents a counterbalance to the refinement, specialization of modern higher education knowledge (H.Kaibao, 2020). It is also a stage-based self-adjustment and renewal made by humanities and social sciences to adapt and respond to the development of the times. The construction of the New Liberal Arts is a brand-new exploration of the reform of the disciplinary system in Chinese higher education in the context of the new era, and it will undoubtedly have a profound impact on foreign language teaching and talent cultivation. In the new era, foreign language education and teaching reforms should further explore the connotation of the New Liberal Arts, integrate the teaching concept of cultivating critical thinking skills into foreign language teaching, explore new paths, models, and standards for cultivating critical thinking skills in foreign language talents under the new situation, and cultivate students' discourse practices and critical thinking skills in different contexts.

2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS

In recent years, the cultivation of critical thinking skills has been recognized as a task in foreign language courses due to its importance. Therefore, it is necessary for us to understand its underlying principles within the curriculum context, analyze its relationship with foreign language courses, and consider the principles of fostering critical thinking skills in foreign language education. In the process of knowledge transmission, the role of the teacher is crucial. Firstly, English teachers are constructors of knowledge. Secondly, by integrating ideological and political education into English classrooms, English teachers also serve as leaders in shaping student values. Furthermore, through in-depth exploration and analysis of texts, English teachers also cultivate students' critical thinking abilities. Lastly, English teachers should guide students to actively engage in classroom learning using advanced technology and facilitate the improvement of language skills. (Q. Weiguo, C. Liufang)

With the deepening of foreign language teaching reforms, foreign language teachers should not only possess specialized knowledge in their field, but also have interdisciplinary knowledge in areas such as history, politics, and culture. They should understand the international situation and the Chinese national conditions, be familiar with basic theories and research methods, and have a foundation in social sciences and natural sciences. Only in this way can teachers play a role in cultivating students' subjectivity in specific teaching contexts while promoting the comprehensive construction of students' knowledge. Only when teachers become versatile individuals with comprehensive knowledge can they cultivate students with well-rounded development and high-quality qualities.

Therefore, as English teachers in the new era of universities, it is necessary to actively transform our mindset, strive to innovate teaching methods, and organically integrate professional knowledge with disciplinary education. With the enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength and its elevated international status, the relationship between China and the world has undergone fundamental changes, shifting from passive acceptance to active construction. Currently, there

is still a common issue in English education in China, which emphasizes knowledge transmission while neglecting critical thinking and cultural discernment. Teachers primarily focus on delivering knowledge and do not place enough emphasis on cultivating cross-cultural critical thinking skills.

Therefore, teachers should deepen students' thinking on global issues, enhance their understanding of the significance of China's stories in the world, broaden their awareness of Chinese culture, and achieve the integration of theory and practice through reflective teaching. Through reflective teaching, students can gain a clearer understanding of their own relationship with the world, the interaction between China and the world, and the differences between the Chinese discourse system and the Western discourse system. Therefore, in the face of the new situation, it is imperative to cultivate college students' cross-cultural critical thinking abilities.

In the process of teaching speculative English, it is important to pay attention to distinguishing the characteristics of different discourse systems between the West and China and understanding the advanced culture and concepts in Western civilization. It is essential to always remember that China's discourse system should be rooted in the social reality of China. The analysis of Western ideas should be interpreted from the perspective of original Chinese theories, using Chinese methodology, explaining with Chinese fundamental concepts, and combining with Chinese experiences, in order to focus on solving China's social problems, and guide students to adhere to the Chinese standpoint, adopt a Chinese perspective, and integrate with Chinese practices.

Critical thinking is the core ability of rationality and creativity, and it is an important foundation for students' comprehensive development. Critical thinking is a habit and skill that can be improved to different degrees through training. Teachers need to develop talent cultivation programs that are conducive to the development of students' critical thinking abilities, taking into account the characteristics of the foreign language major. They should also transform their teaching concepts, adopt effective teaching methods, integrate the cultivation of critical thinking into the curriculum, and in the process of imparting language and humanities knowledge, cultivate students' critical thinking abilities, and promote their comprehensive development.

3. ESTABLISHING A CLEAR PERSPECTIVE ON SPECULATIVE LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW LIBERAL ARTS

How foreign language education can promote the development of students' speculative abilities has become a key issue in deepening the reform of foreign language education and teaching (S. Youzhong). In order to achieve the connotative development of disciplinary construction, it is necessary to cultivate students' innovative spirit and practical abilities while continuously enhancing their speculative abilities.

The cultivation of speculative abilities holds profound significance for the deepening reform of higher education foreign language education in China. However, our traditional foreign language education has not given sufficient attention to the cultivation of speculative abilities. In addition to the subjective reason that there is insufficient emphasis on the cultivation of speculative abilities in foreign language teaching, there are also objective reasons that cannot be ignored. Namely, domestic foreign language education has long focused on training students' language skills. Influenced by this goal, classroom activities in foreign language teaching mainly involve imitation of sentence structures and the summarization of practical experience in the process of bilingual conversion. This has led to a separation between language acquisition and the integration that should exist with humanities and general education in instructional design, resulting in insufficient investment of time in disciplinary training and humanities education.

In English teaching, the cultivation of speculative abilities focuses on enhancing students' thinking skills. For example, in the writing of argumentative essays, speeches, or debates, the aim is to make students' arguments clearer, more focused, more accurate, more coherent, more logical, and more in-depth and comprehensive. Completing an argumentative essay involves multiple stages, such as gathering relevant information, analyzing and integrating information, questioning certain viewpoints, comparing different perspectives, making inferences based on facts, and so on. Any of these stages that require students to independently discern and make judgments are related to speculative thinking.

At the level of thinking qualities, the cultivation of speculative abilities emphasizes the development

of students' tendency for independent thinking. For example, it involves having an open and inclusive attitude towards different things, being willing to step out of one's own perspective and think from other viewpoints, being willing to question and challenge entrenched beliefs, being curious and eager to explore the essence of things, being willing to increase the depth and breadth of one's thinking, and being willing to think independently rather than blindly conforming to others, and so on. Although none of these qualities alone can represent a person's actual level of speculative thinking, they are prerequisites for applying speculative thinking skills and form the foundation for the continuous development of speculative abilities. The cultivation of these thinking qualities is often not carried out as independent teaching activities but primarily stems from the guidance of teachers in their attitudes and beliefs.

4. CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS OF ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

Critical thinking ability is key to innovation and an important component of talent development. However, due to the long-term influence of traditional English teaching methods, some English major courses have shown insufficient awareness and ability of teachers in cultivating critical thinking skills, as well as issues with the evaluation methods used in course instruction. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to actively explore an implementation path suitable for cultivating critical thinking ability in English courses.

4.1 Clarifying the Purpose of Critical Thinking

Conventional English major courses primarily focus on intensive reading, extensive reading, listening, speaking, writing, and translation (G.Yingjian). The establishment of these courses involves the development of fundamental language skills, but there is less emphasis on fostering professional competence and humanistic cultivation. Regarding the cultivation of versatile and applied talents, most universities simply offer a few practical courses or include courses related to foreign trade and finance, believing that this meets the requirements for nurturing international and versatile talents. However, according to the interpretation of the new humanities concept, it can discover that innovative foreign language professionals need to possess interdisciplinary

knowledge and communicative abilities. For example, an understanding of the basic overview of English-speaking countries, knowledge in foreign trade, finance, diplomacy, international affairs, and so on, all require further learning and enhancement on the foundation of solid language proficiency.

Although the primary purpose of foreign language courses is to help students learn a foreign language, and few students attend such courses with the intention of improving their critical thinking skills, it seems that the cultivation of critical thinking is not an essential component of foreign language curricula. However, at the same time, language serves as a vehicle for human thinking, and learning a foreign language implies the potential for expanding one's thinking. The learning process itself involves engaging with language elements and engaging in cognitive processes based on those elements, which can encompass various forms of thinking, including critical thinking. Regarding critical thinking, when individuals are faced with a real situation that requires independent judgment, especially when that judgment will have practical implications for themselves, there is typically a natural demand for critical thinking. In real-life situations, people face choices of varying significance and need to make judgments and decisions through reflection. In foreign language courses, the understanding and use of language can provide many opportunities for students to make independent judgments and to repeatedly deliberate and revise their judgments. It does not depend on specific forms of teaching activities but rather on how teachers guide the process. The key and also the challenge of guidance lies in whether teachers can approach it from the students' perspective, based on their current cognitive needs, and choose appropriate topic contexts within the disciplinary knowledge system that allow students to see the opportunities and necessity of independent thinking. When students develop a desire to think and engage their minds, the teacher's task is to help them examine their own thinking process, recognize its strengths and weaknesses, and provide relevant disciplinary expertise to the students.

4.2 Integration of Speculative Objects and Content

In the context of the new humanities background, the English teaching model should adhere to the development and characteristics of foreign language literature itself as the basis,

bridging the talent training systems of various departments such as philosophy, economics, management, law, literature, history, education, and arts. Measures such as shared courses, mutual recognition of credits, and sharing of faculty should be implemented. In terms of ideology, it is important to adhere to and practice humanistic quality education with a focus on people, cultural cultivation, and nurturing individuals through culture (Z. Yi, L. Zhuozhuo, 2019). The model should also emphasize the importance of both virtue and talent, as well as national and patriotic sentiments, serving the socialist construction, and aligning with national development strategies to respond to market demands.

In foreign language courses, the object of speculation is language, but language is always presented in the context of topics. Students are not learning abstract symbols without content. To highlight the speculative nature of foreign language courses, a common practice is to increase the difficulty of the topic content, allowing students to express their opinions and engage in speeches and debates. While such activities themselves are not problematic, the topic content should not exceed the students' knowledge reserve too much. Otherwise, it can easily shift the attention of both teachers and students from language itself to the topic content, deviating from the original intention of learning language in foreign language courses. Engaging in speculation on any topic requires a certain knowledge base. Speculation largely involves reflection, establishing connections between existing knowledge, and drawing inferences based on that knowledge. If the knowledge base is too scarce, speculative activities cannot be fully developed. While foreign language courses can appropriately increase students' social knowledge, it is not the fundamental task of foreign language courses. If topics are chosen where students have relatively abundant knowledge, they can easily utilize their existing knowledge as resources for thinking, generating the desire to express themselves. This is beneficial for foreign language courses in guiding students to focus on language and learn to express themselves more accurately and richly. At this point, cultivating speculative abilities actually helps students examine the content they express, making their thinking clearer and broader. To achieve this goal, teachers can help students clarify the relationships between different concepts, identify the importance and logic of different points, understand different perspectives, and form more well-founded

viewpoints. If students have a lack of knowledge about the topic content, they may overly focus on acquiring new knowledge instead of using their existing knowledge to think and form viewpoints.

4.3 Improving the Evaluation Mechanism

The current foreign language proficiency assessment and testing system in China exhibit a clear trend towards exam-oriented approaches. The assessment focuses primarily on language expression and overlooks the complexity and accuracy of verbal communication. Exams mainly test students' knowledge of language, while assessments of their language application abilities are relatively scarce. This standardized examination format solidifies a "language-centered" teaching model, ultimately resulting in a situation where teachers teach what will be tested, and students learn only what will be examined. As a result, some students may have fluent oral expression but lack substantial ideas and logical rigor. Their writing may focus solely on correct language forms without emphasizing critical thinking. This evaluation mechanism not only hinders students' comprehensive development but also hampers the development of their critical thinking skills.

The traditional evaluation model is no longer able to comprehensively assess students' overall competencies. Teachers should adopt a diversified evaluation model, transforming standardized and knowledge-based assessments into open-ended and competency-based assessments. In teaching, teachers can implement ongoing evaluation throughout the instructional process, incorporating students' pre-class preparation, in-class learning, group discussion participation, post-class assignments, and teamwork performance into the evaluation. This can be done through a combination of peer assessment among group members and teacher assessment. Teachers can also assess students through written tests, essay writing, or oral defense to examine their abilities in logical analysis, independent thinking, and expression of innovative ideas.

In addition, student-centered self-assessment and peer assessment can promote interaction and communication among students, enhance the influence and supervision between students, and provide teachers with timely feedback information. This allows teachers to understand students' thinking processes, identify their problems and weaknesses, and effectively promote the development of students' critical thinking abilities.

5. CONCLUSION

In the context of the new liberal arts, foreign language education should integrate the cultivation of students' critical thinking throughout the entire curriculum. With professional courses as the foundation, effective teaching methods and assessment strategies should be employed to organically combine humanistic education, language learning, and the development of critical thinking, in order to meet the demands of cultivating innovative talents in the new era.

The original intention of cultivating critical thinking is to make the mind more clear and become a better person through rational thinking. Cultivating critical thinking means seeing students as holistic individuals, rather than a collection of objective criteria or products on an assembly line. Students are the ultimate goal of education, not a means to obtain any external benefits. Likewise, critical thinking is not merely a function or instrumental skill of the human brain; it is an aspect of human existence and a reflection of the human mind. Developing critical thinking is a process of forming and nurturing one's self. In daily life, people often need to make choices and decisions and naturally apply critical thinking to discern and judge different ideas. The task of schools is to create contexts where critical thinking takes place in the classroom and then provide support and nourishment to help students become themselves, to become human, through the process of thinking.

Foreign language courses, with language as the content of instruction, can contribute to human development through language learning. However, this course has its limitations; it cannot teach students an extensive amount of social knowledge or profound philosophical truths. Its purpose is to teach a language. Nonetheless, language is an important characteristic of being human; it is a part of human existence and an important medium for establishing relationships with oneself, others, and society. If foreign language courses can focus on language itself and allow students to perceive the inherent interest of language, they can understand certain aspects of human psychological cognition and social life. If they can guide individuals to reflect on their native language world through learning a foreign language, it can add different dimensions to their self. Undeniably, for many people, foreign language is merely a tool; even so, the process of learning a foreign language remains a humanistic process. It does not mean that an individual has mastered universal learning methods.

Language learning mainly occurs through the discernment of specific words and phrases and the comprehension of sentence patterns and discourse. However, it is precisely through this detailed learning that individuals can accurately grasp the general rules and subtleties of language and create opportunities for the application and development of critical thinking. Foreign language courses need to return to the language itself, increase students' awareness of language, focus on the quality of students' language expression, and encourage students to form their own language and language learning perspectives. If students can accurately discern the speaker's intention when receiving language information and make more accurate judgments on which language forms are suitable for expressing their viewpoints, it would enhance their language competence.

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