

Strategies for the Improvement of College Oral English Based on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking

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Abstract

Critical thinking is the key to cultivate high-quality talents. This paper discusses the problems existing in the current college oral English instruction through an empirical research and proposes to adopt targeted strategies under the guidance of critical thinking. This paper explores how oral English teachers can change their own ideas and teaching methods by focusing on cultural speculation and presenting compelling China stories in order to help students establish cultural self-confidence and strengthen the cultivation of oral critical thinking ability.

Key words: Critical thinking; Oral English; College English teaching

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INTRODUCTION

With the continuous improvement of social and economic conditions, the demand for high-level and high-quality talents with critical thinking ability from all walks of life is increasing. The spoken English proficiency of college students in oral English class is still weak. Some of them are poor at expressing the topics clearly, which leads to the obvious lack of novelty in their expressions. As a result, few innovative ideas are put forward or little

information is provided due to the insufficient logical thinking. Therefore, it is particularly important to cultivate the critical thinking ability of college students.

1. DEFINITION OF CRITICAL THINKING

John Dewey (1933), an American pragmatist philosopher, is a representative of modern critical thinking. He put forward “reflective thinking” in 1933. Critical thinking refers to “finding the problem of a certain thing, phenomenon and claim, and making a claim according to its own logic”. The so-called critical thinking means that students should be able to look at problems dialectically and think about them in a multi-angle, objective and in-depth way even when facing the problems that have been confirmed to be correct. Cultivating students’ critical thinking refers to the improvement of students’ core abilities in the six critical thinking cognitive aspects of elaboration, analysis, evaluation, inference, interpretation and metacognition.

In recent years, the research on critical thinking in China has been on the rise year by year. Critical thinking can be described as the ability to reflect and think independently. The cultivation of critical thinking requires not only the self-reflection of the students, but also the correct guidance of teachers. It’s suggested that students should be told what to think and how to think, so as to cultivate students’ learning autonomy. Based on the theory of critical thinking, this paper will focus on how to improve students’ critical awareness and thinking ability through college oral English teaching on the basis of the current situation of students’ critical thinking cultivation in college oral English practice.

2. CURRENT SITUATION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS’ ORAL OUTPUT ABILITY

Fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy as well as pronunciation are important

indicators to test learners' oral output ability. Learners are required to instantly activate pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary knowledge in order to conceive and produce words that meet the target language requirement and express in a clear and logical way.

2.1 Thinking Pattern Problem, Single Expression Mode and Logic Confusion

When college students answer questions in oral English class, they often encounter the phenomenon of language jam. They cannot express their views completely and fluently, and repeat the single sentence structure constantly. There will be great problems in fluency and coherence. In many cases, students and teachers will attribute the reason for poor oral expression to insufficient English vocabulary or practice. However, even if students are asked to explain in Chinese, some students will still be speechless, illogical, disorganized, and even unable to express their views at all. The real reason is that oral teaching has long focused on the standard of pronunciation and the fluency of spoken language, but lacks the training of the logic of language expression, which ultimately leads to the problems that learners often have when discussing a certain point of view in oral expression, such as the lack of thorough argumentation and analysis, the lack of persuasiveness, the unclear organization of language, and the confusion of logic. Students lack the ability to accurately capture and interpret information, and can only point out one aspect of the question. Therefore, when answering the question, they can only give the answer from one or two angles, and it is difficult to analyze the question from multiple perspectives with divergent thinking. However, students with strong critical thinking ability can make specific analysis and comprehensive comparison according to the problem, so as to get the solution to the problem.

Specifically, when discussing a topic, students have narrow knowledge and limited vocabulary. For example, when talking about the costume of Han Dynasty, or Hanfu, students can only mention that Hanfu represents traditional culture, beauty, etc. It is difficult to extend to cultural self-confidence, Hanfu economy, entrepreneurship and other aspects. The students' logical thinking ability of analysis, synthesis and argumentation is poor, and the innovative ability of independently putting forward new ideas and new opinions is far from satisfaction. The teaching of critical thinking can encourage students to reflect and correct their answers, so that they can discuss logically. "Do you think western festivals like Christmas are replacing traditional festivals in China?" For this topic, teachers can guide students from multiple angles, encourage students to adhere to their own views, boldly express divergent thinking, and improve logic profundity.

2.2 Lack of Critical Consciousness and the Courage to Speak English

China has always paid attention to accuracy in traditional English teaching. Firstly, teachers often pay too much

attention to the accuracy of grammar and vocabulary use, resulting in students afraid to speak English for fear of making mistakes. Secondly, teachers require more accuracy than complexity. Even if students have the awareness of using complex words and sentences, they will choose to give up for fear of making mistakes.

College English teaching is still a kind of passive English knowledge infusion. Students will only accept the knowledge imparted by teachers mechanically in the oral class and dare not to put forward their own views. Memorization, imitation, recitation and other learning methods occupy most of the learning process. It's noted that students overemphasize the accuracy of grammar and the fluency of expression, and despise the cultivation of speculative ability. Some students only take passing CET-4 and CET-6 as their learning goal and they are unwilling to engage in high-level thinking activities. Gradually, they are used to accepting knowledge passively in class. In addition, the rigorous cultural atmosphere in the Chinese cultural tradition, the blind conformity mentality and the worship of authority will undoubtedly limit the development of students' critical thinking ability, so their thinking ability has been suppressed.

3. A CASE STUDY

The study uses empirical research methods, questionnaires, tests and interviews to explore the relationship between critical thinking and oral English proficiency, and to investigate the tendency and training mode of the students' critical thinking ability. Three oral English teaching classes of Qingdao University of Science and Technology of Grade 2020 were taken as subjects. They were 203 sophomores from three different majors who had similar English proficiency. The experiment lasted one semester.

3.1 Purpose of the Study

This research tries to solve the following problems through the experiment. To begin with, the role and relationship between teachers and students under the teaching mode of critical thinking in college English teaching, that is, how teachers assume the responsibility of teaching and educating students, and how students become the main body of learning activities. In addition, classroom design and teaching activity planning in the teaching mode of critical thinking, that is, how teachers organize and arrange the classroom, and what teaching methods should be adopted to improve students' critical thinking ability. Thirdly, it also aims to find out the evaluation methods and the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability.

3.2 Design of the Study

The study tested the critical thinking tendency of the students from the three majors. In the beginning of the

semester, online questionnaires were conducted to learn about the critical thinking tendencies of the subjects. In the following weeks, students are trained in critical thinking strategies, and classroom teaching is arranged according to the teaching mode of critical thinking. The teaching mode of critical thinking includes: creating a relaxed, equal and free classroom environment, encouraging students to actively participate in classroom learning; class group discussion, class report and other activities are organized to attract students' interest, and students are trained to continuously improve their personal thinking ability through discussion, comments and other ways; it also focuses on strengthening case teaching and guiding students to think, discuss and express their opinions with real life cases. At the end of the semester, the change of students' critical thinking ability was investigated through questionnaires and oral tests. Through the comprehensive evaluation system and interviews, students' subjective evaluation of classroom teaching is also analyzed.

3.3 The Findings of the Study

This study explores the application and effect of critical thinking teaching mode in college oral English class. During the research of one semester, the students' oral English scores and critical thinking ability has been significantly improved, which are shown as follows: the students' interest in oral English learning has been greatly improved. Besides, the ability to think and express in English has been obviously enhanced, and students have greater interest in communicating in English. Students admit that whether in oral or written expressions, they tend to pay more attention to the enrichment of content, and the phenomenon of "empty content" and "empty words" is significantly reduced. Most importantly, the average score of oral English test are improved by about 15%, as can be seen clearly from their final oral test, which is presented in the form of an oral English video.

The results show that critical thinking ability is an important aspect of students' English ability. Teachers are expected to actively change their roles in order to create a relaxing and free learning environment for students by adopting heuristic teaching, deliberative teaching, and reflective teaching, MOOC teaching, flipped classroom teaching and other forms. The result shows that it is helpful for teachers to make full use of network resources, reform the evaluation method and constantly improve students' critical thinking ability.

4. STRATEGIES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF ORAL ENGLISH BASED ON THE CULTIVATION OF CRITICAL THINKING

When preparing lessons, teachers should carefully design classroom teaching content and teaching activities so

as to constantly create more opportunities for students' critical thinking training. The purpose is to help students understand the potential thinking logic in western language and culture in a better way, it is necessary to recognize the differences in language, culture and thinking pattern between China and the West, so students can enhance their critical thinking awareness and oral English proficiency continuously.

4.1 Redesign the Questioning Method and Improve the Thinking Ability

Language and thinking are inseparable. Only when the thinking ability is developed and improved, can students express more fluently, accurately and complex when being output new language information. The instantaneous and communicative characteristics of spoken language present big challenges for learners' thinking ability. For example, by doing classroom reports, group discussions and other activities to exercise thinking ability, students can give full play to their initiative in learning and fully develop their logical and dialectical thinking ability as well as innovative thinking ability.

Oral topics should be close to campus life or hot topics, which can arouse students' interest and help students conduct critical analysis. Specifically, teachers can design some transfer questions (such as: *What would you do if you were...?*) in teaching to let students think in a different way. Through this way of thinking from one to the other, teachers can guide and encourage students to speculate and imagine boldly and stimulate their enthusiasm for independent thinking. Sometimes, it's helpful to design some comparative questions (such as: *Compared with..., What do you think of...?*) to let students compare vertically and horizontally, including both the same and something different. Therefore, it is beneficial to cultivate students' ability to analyze and solve problems comprehensively, and improve the depth and breadth of critical thinking. In addition, it is advisable for teachers to ask thoughtful questions in class. Generally, the answers to speculative questions are open instead of the simple yes or no questions, nor can the answers be found in the teaching contents or textbooks. Instead, students should infer the complex relationship between things according to their acquired knowledge, common sense, experience of predecessors, and other logical methods, and eventually form their own logical views. In the process of thinking about such questions, students no longer simply accept knowledge passively or search for knowledge from existing textbooks, but learn to draw their own reasonable answers through critical thinking.

4.2 Rebuild the Classroom Relationship Between Teachers and Students

In the classroom setting, it is believed that teachers should change the traditional teacher-centered teaching mode by transferring the power of teachers to students. Teachers are expected to become the guides and

cooperators of students' learning and help students get rid of the dependence on teachers and notes. Students are encouraged to look at problems from different perspectives, dare to raise questions and express their own ideas, and assume the responsibility of independent learning. For instance, teachers can reasonably divide students into various groups in advance. Students' classroom report, classroom performance, group discussion, etc. are included in the evaluation system, the process of teamwork and critical thinking can also be reflected clearly in the evaluation system.

For example, to meet the demand of the class report, team members are supposed to work together, search, read, analyze and summarize materials related to the topic before class, and then they will make courseware class presentation, followed by the teacher comments, summary and reflection. Scene performance (classroom performance and students' self-made video) enables students to actively participate in class and encourages students to have their own views. It's advisable to strengthen case teaching, generally English scene and English corpus are taken as the teaching content, so that students can realize what they learn is consistent with what they use. As for the group discussion, it aims to ask students to carry out group discussion around a topic, an article or a research question. Teachers may select topics related to the content of study or social hot topics as well as relevant multimedia resources, which helps to deepen students' learning and improve their critical thinking ability. Group discussion is beneficial to help students put forward problems, it not only provides opportunities for students to analyze and solve problems together, but also makes it possible for teachers to timely summarize and reflect or assess the whole process. It should be noted that there are various ways to quote topics, including video news, TED speeches, film and television programs, cartoons, etc. After the topic is put forward, students will be given time to prepare. Each group member can ask questions and exchange views with others. For students with strong thinking ability, teachers can encourage them to share ideas with other students in the class, and then the atmosphere of critical thinking may be driven due to peer influence.

4.3 Improve the Ability of Speculative Teaching and Integrate English Culture With Chinese Culture

Teachers are supposed to improve their teaching quality of critical thinking actively by integrating critical thinking into daily teaching and strengthening the cultivation of students' high-level thinking ability. There are typical differences in the way of thinking between Chinese and English. For example, English people usually say the result before the reason, while Chinese people usually mention the reason before the result. After cultivating a certain awareness of English culture, students will learn

to think critically when speaking English, so that their communication will be more in line with the situation and communication habits, as a result, the effectiveness of oral communication can be improved.

In the process of oral English teaching, teachers should be concerned about the current important discourse on cultural self-confidence in China by focusing on the three aspects of "cultural self-consciousness, cultural self-confidence, and cultural self-improvement". It is imperative for teachers to pay attention to cultivating students' critical thinking, carry out Chinese and Western cultural speculation, and build cultural self-confidence around "presenting compelling China stories". The topics include the differences between Chinese and Western social customs, wedding customs, catering culture, festival culture, architectural style and economic and social aspects and so on. It's believed that the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese culture can be realized gradually in the process of cultural conflict and integration.

CONCLUSION

In summary, critical thinking is necessary for cultivating innovative talents. College oral English courses provide an important channel for the cultivation of students' critical thinking. It is necessary for college English teachers to fully realize the importance of critical thinking, critical thinking can be applied to teaching in a targeted way according to the actual situation of classroom teaching. The purpose is too effectively make up for the lack of talent innovation brought about by exam-oriented education and improve the effectiveness of English classroom teaching. Hence, critical thinking plays an essential role in promoting the overall improvement of students' English core literacy, and enables students to have a better ability of independent learning and lifelong learning.

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