

Critical Thinking in the Teaching of University English

Shuyang Qu*

College of Foreign Languages, Northeastern University, Shenyang 110004, Liaoning Province, China

*Corresponding author: Shuyang Qu, shuyangqu@163.com

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Abstract: Critical thinking is a fundamental skill for today's college students, since it aids in the acquisition of knowledge, correct judgements, and self-adjustment. However, traditional English teaching in China only focuses on the development of students' language skills and the inculcation of language knowledge, rather than the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills. This study addresses the aforementioned problem and discusses the definition and significance of critical thinking. Subsequently, it analyzes the causes of L2 students' ineffective critical thinking and proposes several procedures for the training of students in English reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

Keywords: Critical thinking; University English teaching; Teaching methods; Teaching procedures

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1. Introduction

The increasing number of Asian students visiting western countries to undertake postgraduate courses has resulted in a large proportion of international students taking their master's degree in English-speaking universities^[1]. Regarding the influences of this phenomenon, it is important to determine the challenges faced by international students when studying in these universities, in order to propose better solutions. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges and expectations that L2 students perceive in western universities in regard to critical thinking as well as to determine the most effective way for students to develop their critical thinking skills during their studies.

This paper will define critical thinking and observe the significance of it in higher education. Since more and more people have been attaching importance to exploring the factors that will impede effective critical thinking^[2], it is crucial to analyze the causes of L2 students' ineffective thinking, aiming to help learners find the most suitable approach to develop their critical thinking skills, such as the "middle way" approach^[3]. More importantly, with regard to the essential characters of critical thinking, how to learn and develop this skill has become a concern among L2 university students^[4]. Several steps are discussed in this paper, hoping that students would develop critical thinking when reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

2. Importance of critical thinking

Critical thinking improves the accuracy and rigor in people^[5]. Some people, however, hold an opinion that critical thinking is not necessary, because it is a complex and time-consuming process^[6]. For instance, there are some who think that it is the writer's responsibility to conduct research and then to provide precise results. Rather than scrutinizing the precision of the article, they are more inclined to read and accept the information given. However, it is not uncommon to find many vague arguments without strong evidence

to support them in one's work. Moreover, writers often fail to make justified inferences, provide sufficient relevant information, recognize important implications, and use appropriate concepts ^[7]. According to the analysis above, the messages from the texts are likely to encourage readers to adopt, act on, or think with a false belief, and then make a wrong conclusion without any critical thinking involved. Therefore, it is important to develop this habitual intention to think critically and logically alongside the development of knowledge conceptions, because good critical thinking skills can be considered as the cornerstone for making sound judgements ^[8]. Furthermore, once people have acquired this skill, they will be able to search for important information or specific details more accurately and quickly ^[9].

Although critical thinking is an important skill in every field, it is considered more significant in the academic field because it enables students, especially the upper-intermediate students studying in professional fields, to analyze, evaluate, and restructure their thinking. These students will probably need the skill to deal with difficult challenges that may arise during their academic careers, as well as the confidence to attain a decent result ^[10]. However, it is not unusual that L2 university students overestimate their critical thinking skills and assume themselves reasonable and logical enough to display flexibility in critical writing or thinking ^[11]. They are often unable to recognize their own biases, distortions, and prejudices. Poor academic performance is closely linked to a lack of self-awareness. Many university tutors and lecturers have stated that their students are unable to achieve higher grades because their assignments lack evidence of critical thinking.

A good critical thinking skill brings many benefits to students' language acquisition, especially when reading. Primarily, it enables learners to pay attention to observe and focus on reading ^[12]. Instead of losing interest, students will read more carefully with the intent to identify the reasons and supportive evidence when evaluating arguments in one's work. Moreover, students with strong critical thinking skills can improve their capabilities in searching for key points in the text and then respond to them ^[13]. The aforementioned benefits allow L2 university students to think more independently, construct their own knowledge in different settings and contexts, and readily explain their own views.

3. Learning critical thinking

It is believed that the key to understanding the significance of critical thinking in academics is in recognizing the importance of critical thinking in learning. It can enrich the general conception of critical thinking because of various approaches of learning it. Many approaches, for example, that focus on logic, on skills, or on pedagogy, seem to contribute to the confusion about the nature of critical thinking ^[14]. In the past, some intellectuals believed that logic was the main approach to critical thinking. There are many forms of logic dealing with the quality of the argument and the reasoning in one's work. Good teachers, therefore, should cultivate critical thinking skills in different situations at every stage, including the initial learning stage, to reduce misunderstandings. Furthermore, teachers should emphasize the importance of intellectual engagement in order to help students learn to be more critical ^[15]. As emphasized above, all students should think independently and construct knowledge by themselves. It is worth noting that discussions are not the best way to develop critical thinking because students are expected to share ideas rather than thinking on their own. Qualified teachers, therefore, should focus on tasks that require students to complete them without receiving any help during classes, such as listening, reading, and writing activities. It will probably stimulate the mind to take key principles and concepts of critical thinking into consideration when carrying out these kinds of activities.

Whenever an individual identifies, analyzes, judges, or solves a problem, he or she is engaging in critical thinking. In other words, critical thinking plays an important role to make people act in a reflective, logical, and reasonable way, regardless of what they believe in or what they do. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing can all be done critically or uncritically. Critical thinking is essential to becoming a substantive

writer, a sensitive listener, a convincing speaker, or a close reader. For students, simply identifying the factors that promote critical thinking is not sufficient. They should take several steps to improve their critical thinking skills. In regard to different situations, L2 university students need to act differently when learning, which means that they should not only use various criteria to make reasonable judgements in different contexts, but also follow different procedures when thinking critically.

3.1. Critical thinking when reading

It is effective to achieve academic success if students have critical thinking skills when reading academic articles, journals, or books. Instead of analyzing their own work, it lays emphasis on reviewing another person's argument, which makes it difficult for students to evaluate the work until they have completed the reading. In order to think critically, students need to have an appropriate conception of the nature of knowledge and the willingness to question as well as examine their own biases^[16]. They also need to gain the ability to use formal logic and focus on the argument. There are several steps for L2 university students to read critically.

First, it is important to identify the line of reasoning in the text. Reasoning refers to using reasons to solve a certain problem. Normally, it requires people to be aware of the reasons for what they believe in, to evaluate their own beliefs objectively and then to present the reasons to others^[17]. This step, however, requires students to identify another person's reasoning. Critically analyzing certain texts can be difficult if students do not possess the skills to grasp the overall picture. Students will probably need to identify with the author. Good readers need to think through the text as a whole and ask themselves questions, such as what the author's main idea is and what reasons the author uses to persuade the readers^[18].

Second, students should critically evaluate how the writer selects and combines reasons to construct his or her line of reasoning. It is crucial for students to examine whether the reasons given are relevant or supportive to the overall argument. In this step, students should also check whether there are logical connections between sentences and paragraphs. For instance, it is essential for students to consider whether or not there are logical stages in the text or clear lexical cohesion in the sentences. Furthermore, in a well-organized text, the conclusion should follow directly from the analysis and empirical evidence presented.

Third, when it comes to developing critical thinking skills while reading, questioning surface appearances and checking for hidden assumptions are of great importance. The main problem to be anticipated here is that many uncertainties will probably relate to a single argument. For example, there is no evidence to support a surface appearance although it has been approved by many people. It is also possible that other explanations apart from the obvious ones are available or some other important details and hidden assumptions may lead to a different conclusion. The role of students here is to be aware of these possibilities, because these are the key factors in critical analysis.

Fourth, identifying evidence in the text is a good way to determine if the argument is based on strong foundations. This can be achieved by looking at statistics, examples, surveys, research studies, questionnaires, or experimental findings. Comparing with the research results of other people is a good way to examine if the evidence used in the text is reliable and accurate. In this step, it is also important for students to determine if the evidence is out of date or not derived from a reliable source.

Fifth, students should identify the writer's conclusion. The conclusion may be simply indicated at the end of an article following the term "therefore," "thus," or "so." However, in some cases, students may find it difficult to locate the conclusion because it might be implied by the arguments and evidence in the text or there may be more than one conclusion. Students, therefore, should try their best to deduce the implicit conclusion between the lines.

Finally, deciding whether the given evidence supports the conclusion will be the last step. The evidence used by the writer may be reliable and based on authentic sources, yet it may or may not be related to the

conclusion. For example, the writer believes that both “This dog is a girl” and “My sister is a girl” are facts, and therefore draws a conclusion that “My sister is a dog.” This may be caused by the writer’s false assumption that if a girl is a dog, then all girls should be dogs. In this case, students have to be objective in deciding which information is considered as supportive evidence and which assumptions are false when reading another person’s work.

3.2. Critical thinking when writing

In many academic writings, universities in the UK or US regard western style deductive and critical debate as the principal and norm ^[19]. It is, therefore, important for students to be critical during writing with a view to achieve the expectations of their universities. However, compared with critical thinking when reading, it is more difficult for students to evaluate their own work critically. For example, when writing an assignment, many students do not realize that their own opinions and beliefs are presented without any evidence. It is likely that they fail to think and plan properly before they begin writing or they do not spend enough time on reading books to have a better understanding of the topic.

Most procedures in learning to be more critical when writing are similar with those of reading. Firstly, students should think about their conclusion beforehand, and then the arguments will lead to this clear conclusion in the light of adequate reading. While the conclusion can be revised while writing, it should be considered before one begins to write, in order to keep the work focused. Secondly, showing a clear line of reasoning and taking evidence into account in making judgements are important, as they enable others to read and accept the arguments in the text more easily. In this step, students should use strong evidence to support their ideas and provide convincing reasons. Thirdly, students should examine their own writing critically, along with the sources they use. All the work they have completed will be evaluated and marked by their examiners, so it is important for students to be critical while standing on the reader’s point of view. It is similar with critical thinking when reading. Fourthly, it is necessary to view arguments from various perspectives in order to be critical ^[20]. There are advantages and disadvantages in many things, and evidence exists to support both sides. The role of students is to evaluate arguments from different aspects and find balance between them to form their own opinions. Finally, instead of writing in a descriptive style, analytical style is more suitable for critical writing. Descriptive writing involves using background information to explain, making it easier for readers to understand. Critical writing, on the other hand, should analyze both strengths and shortcomings before providing conclusive evidence to back up the writer’s arguments.

Despite the fact that many L2 graduate students follow the steps and procedures, many of them still struggle to change their perspectives and become critical of western cultures. It is extremely difficult and unrealistic for teachers to develop a completely new approach to fulfil the needs of every Asian student. Many universities, therefore, adopt a hybrid approach, which is called the “middle way” approach, integrating traditional Asian approaches with UK or US approaches into writing. The “middle way” approach transforms the western style of critical writing into a style that accepts more conciliatory reasoning when writing. It is claimed that the aim of this approach is to discover a conciliatory approach that is likely to tolerate differing opinions and viewpoints, rather than using a new approach to replace the entire traditional western critical thinking style. This approach is easier for Asian students to accept, because it allows them to act and think in their own ways without being offended or having to guess the thoughts of others. This new ‘middle way’ approach is also able to integrate some particular characters of Asian culture, such as tolerant, caring, and complimentary, into the western logical, critical, and rational style to some extent. This approach is helpful for Asian students to achieve the expectations of their tutors or lecturers without losing their unique cultural identities and beliefs, as well as learn to be critical in a more relaxed manner. This approach will motivate both Asian university students and their teachers to gain

a better understanding of a new style of critical thinking.

3.3. Critical thinking when speaking and listening

There are many similarities in the procedures of critical thinking when listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In order to give a formal, logical, and reasonable speech, students can follow the same steps in critical thinking when writing, because both of them require self-evaluation. Critical thinking when listening, however, has developed its unique features through observation. Students should examine if contradictions occur in the speech as well as discover the direct and indirect reasons. Different from reading and writing, students are able to look at the gestures and facial expressions of the speakers, make eye contact with them, listen to their tones and speed, and even ask questions when listening. In addition, it is less likely to lose concentration when listening to others compared to reading or writing. All these factors will make it easier for L2 university students to evaluate the content of other people's speech. Students are also able to examine if the speaker has confidence to believe and present his or her ideas to the public based on the speaker's intonation and appearance.

4. Conclusion

Critical thinking is an important skill for students to evaluate ideas or theories objectively from various perspectives and then make reasonable and logical judgements based on convinced evidence. It is an extremely useful trait used in many situations, especially in the academic field. The main factors that are likely to influence L2 university students in developing critical thinking skills, including cultural diversity, differences in education systems between the west and the east, the dispositions or personalities of Asian students, and their attitude toward critical thinking, have been analyzed. There are instances when underlying emotional thoughts play a role in ineffective critical thinking. In addition, there are many approaches used by universities to stimulate students' critical thinking. The "middle way" approach, for instance, can particularly help Asian students, because it makes them feel less ambivalent about their culture and self-identity in western universities. Moreover, it increases the awareness of the fact that there are different learning purposes or needs in different situations and contexts. It is unnecessary and impossible to teach critical thinking to all the students in the same way. Both teachers and students should consider the criteria when making judgements in certain situations. For example, the principles and concepts of critical thinking can be conducted differently between mathematical thinking and musical thinking. When evaluating a song, students need to discover the emotions and story behind the melody. Solving mathematical problems, on the other hand, demands absolute logic and direct reasoning.

Another important purpose of this study is to introduce several procedures of learning critical thinking in different contexts and situations in hope that these steps will become a guide in the learning process. In view of the connections in critical thinking when listening, writing, reading, and speaking, the learning procedures seem to share many similarities. Students can follow the general steps when learning critical thinking and pay attention to the unique features of each language skill. In conclusion, L2 university students should distinguish different contexts or situations and then rely on suitable criteria and procedures to gain better understanding about learning and utilizing critical thinking skills in real-life settings.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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