

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON FOSTERING STUDENTS' THINKING ABILITIES IN ENGLISH WRITING INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: *The lack of thinking abilities in English teaching in China has become a serious problem to be solved/urgently and the detriment of students' writing proficiency. Therefore it is necessary and important to attach great importance to students' thinking ability at the different stages of English writing teaching. English writing can most fully reflect the students' master of the comprehensiveness and grammar structure of English, and also can effectively test the students' thinking abilities. The study investigates the effective approaches for improving thinking ability in English writing instruction with positive critique. The finding revealed that the students' Critical thinking, Logical thinking, Creative thinking, Writing proficiency in EC are improved with the help of teaching strategies of positive critique.*

KEYWORDS: Students' thinking ability, English writing instruction, Positive critique

INTRODUCTION

One problem existing in Chinese Student s' English writing is most of the English teaching is more concerned about language ability, but ignores the central position of English thinking abilities in language learning. As a result; it has weakened the training of English thinking ability. It is believed that English thinking ability can not be trained and improved in a short period of time, so the targeted training of different thinking skills should be conducted, and the effective guidance on writing rules and skills should be stressed.

English writing, as a significant output to express opinions and exchange information, is considered to be one of the most difficult skills in foreign language learning by foreign language learners. However, at present, most of the teachers are still using the traditional cramming method of teaching in English writing classes. They focus more on the indoctrination of grammar and writing skills while they often neglect the cultivation of students' thinking ability. As mentioned above, thinking ability plays a very important role in students' foreign language acquisition. However, current foreign language teaching in china focuses more on students' language skills training instead of the development of their thinking ability. In order to improve the present situation, it is necessary for us to pay more attention to the study of thinking ability. The present study is intended to explore the effectiveness of fostering students' thinking abilities in English writing teaching for English majors. The study aimed to cultivate thinking abilities, with the ultimate goal to improve the English their writing competence. Through this study, the author attempts to provide some useful suggestions for the development of high school students' thinking abilities and English writing proficiency. In practice, it is meaningful to the teachers in higher education in English writing teaching, helping to change the teaching approaches and content in English writing teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical consciousness is put into the field of education by Paulo Freire and he discusses two types of knowledge, unconscious, sometimes practical knowledge and critical, reflective or theory knowledge. Beliefs are shaped into knowledge by discussion and critical reflection. The expert on critical linguistics, Chomsky argues that the skills and knowledge taught in traditional ways are often not worthwhile. According to Noam Chomsky, The goal of education is to produce human beings whose values are not accumulation and domination, but instead are free association on equal terms. The value of education should be placed on students' critical thinking skills and the process of gaining useful and applicable knowledge.

Writing is closely related to thinking. First of all, the thinking is the communication intermediary of writing subject and object. Writing system is an organic unity composed of writing subject (writer) and object (all the objective things). Thinking activity is the only communication bridge of writing subject and object. In the writing activity, Firstly, the author must accumulate writing information through his own experience gathered from the objective world. In the process of getting writing information, the author's observation, detection, memory will lead him to discover out that is not to be noticed by ordinary people but contains some kind of the essential information of life. Then the author stores this information in his mind from the outside world. At the same time, the brain processes all the information (thinking), then cognition and judgment are formed. He tests this cognition or judgment again in practice. In practice, the new information are feeding back to the brain, after comparing and correction, it will influence the next thinking and practice activities. The author deepens the understanding of objectives, extracts the essence of object, then gets insights in such a cycle thinking process. Second, Thinking is the mainstay of the writing ability. A person wants to write articles. He will find out: no thinking, no language; no language, no words; no words, no writing.

At present, there are many kinds of definitions of critical thinking which are defined from different perspectives; however, these definitions are mainly concentrated in two aspects: critical thinking disposition and critical thinking skill. Relate the above research with the present study, we believe that many domestic studies, which point out that Chinese students are lack of critical thinking ability, mainly refers to Chinese students are lack of critical thinking skills. In view of this, this study will lock in the definition of critical thinking ability in its skill level. Therefore, the author adopted Goodwin Watson and Edward Glaser's definition. Critical thinking is the comprehensive embodiment that can develop skills, knowledge and attitudes of its practitioners. They listed critical thinking skills as follows: inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation and evaluation of arguments. According to their definition of critical thinking and critical thinking skills, they formulated WGCTA (Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal) with high reliability, which is employed in the present study.

Watson and Glaser were much influenced by John Dewey, who took scientific thinking as a model of "reflective thinking". Based on Watson and Glaser's definition, they divided critical thinking skills into five aspects: inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation and evaluation of arguments.

METHODOLOGY

The current research was an experimental study on the effectiveness of fostering students' thinking abilities in English writing teaching for English majors. The study aimed to cultivate thinking abilities, with the ultimate goal to improve the English their writing competence.

Subject

In this experiment, 120 students of English majors come from four classes in Baoding University. The students of Class 1 and Class 2 and were chosen as the experimental class and the students in Class 3 and Class 4 were chosen as the control class. Class 1 and Class 2 have 58 students and Class 3 and Class 4 have 62 students and they had two periods of writing each week with the same teacher.

Instruments

There was no ready-to-use instrument for the aim of the present study, the questionnaire was designed relied upon the survey research suggested in the literature. cover four aspects in terms of competence factors, which include Critical thinking, Logical thinking, Imagery thinking, Creative thinking Writing skill. It is a 24-item questionnaire using a Likert scale with responses ranging from A=Very poor B=Poor C=Fair D=Good E=Excellent. Because the questionnaire was developed by the researchers for this particular study, the reliability analysis was first conducted to check the internal consistency. For questionnaires, the Cronbach's coefficient alpha is 0.864. It is high enough to assure the reliability. The scale of factor analysis was employed to measure their construct validity. Through KMO and Bartlett test, the KMO index is 0.872 (well above the acceptable level of 0.6) and $\text{sig}=0.000<0.05$. It indicates factor analysis is appropriate.

TEACHING PRINCIPALS

The philosophical concept of positive critique was proposed by Shen Baoguo through studying the ideology of Deng Xiaoping, the former top leader of China. Its characteristics include justice, scientific value, creative thinking, and prospectivity.

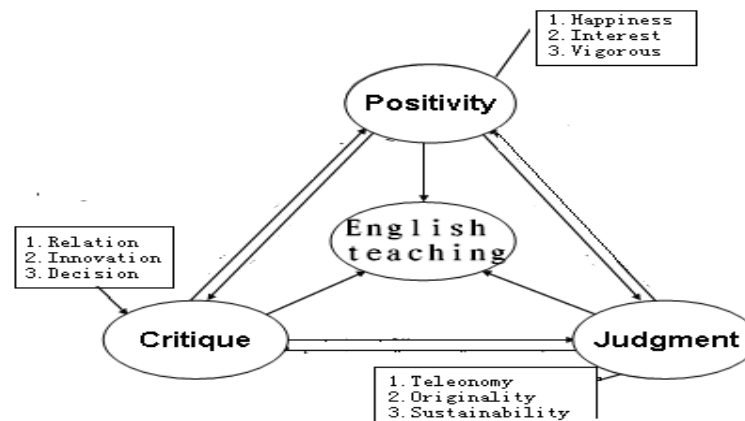
Positive education is defined as education for both traditional skills and for happiness. There is substantial evidence from well controlled studies that skills that increase resilience, positive emotion, engagement and meaning can be taught to students through writing. Critical thinking is connected with the teaching practical writing. Critical thinking ability is trained as the core target of personal growth and education. In teaching writing, students learn to identify, analyze and evaluate arguments of others as a preliminary to criticizing their own positions and arguments.

Judgment refers to the components of the entire process of choosing a course of action, which are concerned with assessing, estimating, and inferring what events will occur and what the decision-maker's evaluative reactions to those outcomes will be. In teaching, the researcher constructs theoretical model of English teaching according to the framework of positive critique.

Table 1. Framework of positive critique

	Individual	Society	Nature
Positivity	Happiness Strengths Flow	Justice Equality Virtues	Development Law Value
Critique	Meta-cognition Creativity Critical thinking	Morality Covenant Belief	Relation Explication Decision
Judgment	Practice Responsibility Sublimation	Competition Honesty Teamwork	Teleonomy Originality Sustainability

Figure 1 Theoretical Model of English Teaching



RESULTS

Since this study was focused on the effectiveness of fostering thinking abilities, we could see whether this teaching method was effective in improving students’ Critical thinking, Logical thinking, Imagery thinking, Creative thinking, Writing proficiency by comparing the students’ scores in pre-test and post-test,

Table 2 The Comparison about Details of CG and EG in Pre-test

		Mean	Std Deviation	t	P
Critical thinking	C G	3.2136	.7388	1.183	.257
	E G	3.1290	.6511		
Imagery thinking	C G	3.3482	.3894	.284	.354
	E G	3.4235	.4235		
Logical thinking	C G	3.4137	.4504	.372	.714
	E G	3.3962	.3770		
Creative thinking	C G	2.7314	.2713	.643	.530
	E G	2.7558	.5477		
Writing proficiency	C G	2.7858	.2492	-.964	.349
	E G	2.8160	.2768		

Table 2 shows clearly that most of the students in EC and in CC classes are in the same rank. The mean scores between on EC and CC on thinking, Imagery thinking, and Creative thinking are close. The thinking abilities and Writing proficiency are $P(1=.257, 2=.354, 3=.714, 4=.530, 4=349) > 0.05$. So we can see clearly that before the experiment,

Table 3 The Comparison about Details of CG and EG in Post-test

		Mean	Std Deviation	t	P
Critical thinking	C G	3.1029	.6443	-5.749	.000
	E G	3.4958	.7668		
Imagery thinking	C G	3.4231	.3245	.542	.2389
	E G	3.7325	.4327		
Logical thinking	C G	3.2788	.3663	-6.245	.000
	E G	3.5328	.3934		
Creative thinking	C G	2.6993	.4556	-3.489	.004
	E G	3.0664	.3388		
Writing proficiency	C G	2.6382	.3752	-8.367	.000
	E G	3.0436	.2882		

Table 3 shows that the mean score of EC and CC on Critical thinking are 3.1029 and 3.4958, on Imagery thinking are 3.4231 and 3.7325, on Logical thinking are 3.2788 and 3.5328, on Creative thinking are 2.6993 and 3.0664 and on Writing proficiency are 2.6382 and 3.0436. It is obvious that all the scores of EC are higher than that of CC. what's more, on Critical thinking is $P1=.000 < 0.05$, on Logical thinking is $P3=.000 < 0.05$, on Creative thinking is $P4=.004 < 0.05$, on Writing proficiency is $P5=.000 < 0.05$. According to statistical analysis, if $P > 0.05$, we could say that the difference between two subjects is insignificant, while, if $P < 0.05$, the difference is significant. The above data for the aspects of Critical thinking, Logical thinking, Creative thinking, Writing proficiency are all lower than 0.05, which means that the difference between EC and CC is significant. It is apparent that difference emerges after the experiment. That is to say, the students' Critical thinking, Logical thinking, Creative thinking, Writing proficiency in EC are improved with the help of teaching strategies of positive critique. For Imagery thinking, the mean score is higher but $P2=.2389 > 0.05$. The reason is maybe that Imagery thinking is not easy to improve strikingly in a short time.

DISCUSSION

Data from the tests showed that the students' thinking abilities and writing competence improved after training, but some students complain that they have no enough opportunities to practice writing. They lack the motivation to use English words to express their ideas, and have difficulty in analyzing the incident from various aspects and organize their composition. And they believed imagery thinking ability is difficult to cultivate when they become university students. Facing such situation, both the teacher and the students should work out ways to settle the problem.

One of positive element in education is interest or happiness the students achieve in teaching. Stimulating the students' interest is key strategy for improving students' thinking abilities. Interest is the best teacher. Strong interest in learning is the important condition to cultivate

students' imagery thinking ability. Teachers should make full use of visual AIDS in teaching and create English situation, to make dead knowledge into lively language.

CULTIVATION ON STUDENTS' LOGICAL THINKING

Thinking as an English native may be the only way to write an essay fluently without faults. That needs students avoiding Chinese thinking style. To improve students' logical thinking ability, it is important to differentiate between observations and inferences. Observation means using your senses such as hearing, seeing, smelling, touching to collect the required data or information. Inference is the conclusion we draw from that observation. Observation is more factual, whereas, inference is one's opinion based on the observation. Similarly, try to differentiate between established facts and conjectures. Facts are things that are proved or believed to be true based on real occurrences, whereas, a conjecture is a calculated guess which is based on some prior knowledge or incomplete information. So, once have a clear understanding about facts, observations, inferences, your will be able to derive at good logic and take better decisions. Making a conscious effort to notice seemingly irrelevant things can be a huge tool to being more logical. Do you notice the new paper cut on your friend's hand? Do you count the steps in your school or college? Do you look for spelling mistakes in text? If the answer's no, now would be a great time to start; The more you practice the healthier your mind you have and you'll become a more critical thinker.

CULTIVATION ON STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING

To cultivate the students' critical thinking, the establishment of a democratic and harmonious relationship between teachers and students is the key. In addition, teachers should also abandon the cramming education in teaching "centralized teaching mode and change the teacher centered teaching mode. Teacher is not only a importer of knowledge, but a classroom organizer, leader, student learning guides, collaborator; students also is not only the audience, but from a passive recipients of knowledge into an active participant and thinker in teaching activities. In this way, the teaching activities become a kind of bilateral interaction between teachers and students. In this activity, students can debate with the teacher and communicate with the teachers and say what they want to say .Then the activities strengthen the affection between teachers and students, realize the teaching goals but also cultivate the students' critical thinking. Learning without thought is dead; thought without learning is perilous. Students should dare to question the others' and teachers' points of view, and put forward own views.

CONCLUSION

Writing occupies an important position in English expression. English writing can most fully reflect the students' thinking abilities, and also can effectively test the students' English basic skill. It is believed that English thinking ability can not be trained and improved in a short period of time, so the targeted training of different thinking skills should be conducted, and the effective guidance on writing rules and skills should be stressed. But it is always the emphasis and difficulty in English teaching. In this paper, on the basis of theoretical research, investigation and study for auxiliary, the author explores the relationship between thinking and language. This paper points out that teaching process should be organized in accordance with

the principle of positive critique. The teachers trigger the students' thinking consciousness. The students thinking motivation should be stimulated constantly. The students can obtain the desire of writing under the leading of thinking. Then students can use a variety of ways of thinking ability to improve the English writing. Moreover thinking abilities in the process of writing can be improved effectively.

Three are some limitations in this text. Firstly, owing to certain restrains of the conditions, only 120 students of English major were chosen as subjects in the present study. Secondly, the students are still inactive in class and reluctant to join in the discussion and of course there is difficulty in overall improvement in their thinking abilities. Facing so many problems, the researcher expects that more and more researches could be made on applying the strategies of positive critique to EFL writing.

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