

On Critical Thinking Skill Cultivation in EFL Teaching*

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Critical thinking has been recognized internationally as an essential skill for high-quality talents. This article analyzes what the experimental researches on cultivating critical thinking skills in EFL teaching have achieved and identifies the three weaknesses to be addressed in the future. Firstly, there are divergences among scholars on the concept and subskills of critical thinking. Secondly, the teaching modes and methods explored by the experimental researches are more personalized than systematic, which reduces their application and guidance value. Thirdly, the reliability and validity of the experiments need to be improved, and the cultivation practices tend to improve the critical thinking skills of some students, without considering the differences among students, especially the students with relatively poor language proficiency.

Keywords: EFL, critical thinking skill cultivation, teaching experiment, achievements, weaknesses

Introduction

Critical thinking is recognized internationally as an essential skill for high-quality talents and is crucial in developing and organizing educational activities. Ennis (1996) proposed that critical thinking skill was a fundamental goal of learning, especially in higher education. Since the 1980s, the education community has begun to pay attention to cultivating students' critical thinking skills, and language teaching has also focused on it. Scholars from various countries have actively explored how to cultivate students' critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms through teaching experiments. This article first uncovers the three teaching models found to be effective for cultivating critical thinking skills by those teaching experiments, and then investigates what needs to be done in further researches on the cultivation of critical thinking skills in EFL teaching.

Three Effective Teaching Models for Cultivating Critical Thinking Skills

To keep up with the latest developments in the relevant field, we searched for important journal articles, conference papers, and doctoral dissertations published in the China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI) database and the Web of Science database from 2011 to 2023. To ensure the comprehensiveness of relevant English literature, we also searched in the Google Scholar database. In the CNKI database, we entered the Chinese keywords "si bian" (critical thinking) and "ying yu jiao xue" (English teaching) and obtained 156 articles. In the Web of Science database, we entered "critical thinking" and "EFL" as keywords and obtained 271 articles. After

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sorting and classifying, we found that there were three main teaching models for cultivating students' critical thinking skills in EFL teaching, namely flipped classroom, task-based teaching, and cooperative learning, and these three models were often combined.

The flipped classroom model, a form of blended learning (Wanner & Palmer, 2015), reverses traditional teaching roles (J. L. Zhang, Wang, Y., & B. H. Zhang, 2012). Students prepare by watching online lectures, engaging in discussions or research, and then participating in guided in-class discussions. In language teaching, the flipped classroom features language preparation through vocabulary preview or text reading before class and language difficulty discussion and practice during class. This approach, shown through experiments, enhances critical thinking and language skills. For example, Ebadi, Rahimi, and Harati (2017) found that Web Quest-based flipped classrooms improve critical thinking and writing skills better than non-flipped classes. Zou and Xie (2019) used just-in-time teaching and peer instruction in their flipped classroom experiments, showing more effectiveness in promoting writing and critical thinking skills than traditional models. Chen and Hwang (2020) discovered that concept map-based flipped learning improves English-speaking performance, and critical thinking, and reduces speaking anxiety. However, what often happens is that flipped classroom teaching cannot offer all students positive experiences and get positive evaluations from all students (Hu, 2017). The challenge lies in varying student attitudes and self-directed learning abilities. Teachers must ensure students understand the basic concepts before class to engage effectively in discussions. To address this, teachers should monitor students' pre-class tasks, video progress, and discussion participation on the online platform. This approach allows teachers to understand students' attitudes, facilitate learning, and adjust in-class discussions accordingly. In summary, the flipped classroom model enhances critical thinking and language skills. However, addressing diverse student learning attitudes and self-directed learning abilities is essential for its success. Teachers play a vital role in monitoring and adapting to these differences, ensuring that all students benefit from this approach.

Task-based teaching uses specific learning tasks to motivate students to master language skills. Tasks in the classroom refer to organized plans and activities, in which students refine their knowledge and develop their abilities through communicative language activities (Breen, 1989). Scholars have proven through task-based teaching experiments in EFL teaching that this model could improve students' critical thinking skills and language abilities. For example, Halim (2011) improved students' critical reading abilities, translation skills, and political awareness by assigning political translation project tasks in EFL teaching. Xu (2021) incorporated reading circles into task-based reading classes to help students complete challenging academic learning tasks and found that this approach effectively improved students' reading and critical thinking abilities. Moreover, task-based teaching can stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm and enable them to actively and effectively participate in the learning process. For example, Chiu and Cowan (2012) found that task-based teaching provided emotional support for foreign language learners participating in reasoning tasks and effectively developed their critical thinking skills. However, it should be noted that in most situations not all students can accurately and quickly complete classroom tasks. Teachers should not only consider students' overall abilities in designing reasonable tasks but also pay attention to individual differences in abilities. How to guide and assist students whose abilities are insufficient to complete tasks is a problem that needs to be studied.

Cooperative learning is also frequently used to cultivate critical thinking in EFL classrooms. It is a structured and systematic learning strategy that requires students to engage in learning activities in groups and to complete them without direct supervision from the teacher (Cohen & Lotan, 1997). Pan and Song (2016) proposed that cooperative learning in foreign language classrooms could enhance students' various thinking skills. In

cultivating advanced thinking abilities, cooperative learning can encourage students' positive dependence, meaning that students with relatively weaker abilities can obtain help from their peers in peer questioning and peer evaluation. Yang and Hsieh (2015) used online peer questioning to develop students' reading comprehension ability, and underachieving students can learn how to engage in critical thinking from high-achieving students, to understand texts through meaning negotiations. Yang and Jeffrey (2013) designed classroom activities by incorporating debate and peer evaluation and found the experimental group learners' English proficiency and critical thinking skills improved significantly. Lin (2018) found that peer feedback could trigger evaluators' reflection and learning, which is beneficial for the development of evaluators' critical thinking skills. Gao and Gu (2022) found that Chinese students' critical thinking tendencies had strong explanatory power in peer evaluations and text revisions. However, not all cooperative learning can achieve the expected results. Geng, Yu, and Wang (2021) found that peer feedbacks could not fully identify deep critical thinking problems in argumentative writing, and feedbacks on more demanding critical thinking practices were much fewer. This indicates that the "scaffolding effect" in cooperative learning is influenced by various factors, for example, the activity design should match students' cognitive levels, and groups should be arranged wisely enough to stimulate the members' enthusiasm for cooperation and learning. Therefore, teachers need to fully consider the academic level of group members when organizing cooperative learning, be observant and alert to the members' interactions and cooperation and the effectiveness of group discussions, intervene in and guide the group discussions when necessary, and choose groups to present their discussion results to optimize the effect of cooperative learning.

Besides the critical thinking cultivation practices under the three teaching modes, scholars suggest various methods to enhance EFL learners' critical thinking. In reading classes, critical discourse analysis (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012) and reading global expository texts (Kim, 2022) are effective. Content-language integrated learning (Y. S. Wang, D. Wang, & Wu, 2022) and promoting knowledge internalization outside the classroom (Ren, 2015) support critical thinking. In writing classes, frameworks like the International Critical Thinking Reading and Writing Test improve critical thinking and element evaluation (Lu & Xie, 2019). Oral English classes benefit from impromptu speeches for objective assessment (Sun, 2018), while parliamentary English debate classes enhance language expression and critical thinking (Huai, Wang, & Yuan, 2013). Integrating Paul-Elder's critical thinking model and the production-oriented approach model can boost overall thinking ability (Wang, 2019). These strategies, when integrated systematically, offer diversified approaches to cultivating EFL students' critical thinking skills.

Future Researches on Cultivating Critical Thinking Skills in EFL Education

Through analyzing current experimental researches on cultivating critical thinking skills in EFL, we saw clearly that the cultivation practices were generally student-centered and aimed at enabling students to figure out strategies and methods of perceiving, analyzing, and solving problems, rather than simply receiving knowledge imparted to them. These teaching models were proved by the above-mentioned experiments to be useful for improving students' critical thinking skills and language proficiency.

However, we also found three insufficiencies that need to be addressed in future researches.

Firstly, the subskills of critical thinking skills vary among scholars. Bloom et al. (1956) established a six-level model of critical thinking skills, which included memory, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Paul and Elder (2001) proposed a three-element structure model of critical thinking ability,

consisting of logical elements, intellectual characteristics, and intellectual standards. Wen et al. (2009) divided critical thinking skills into meta-critical thinking skills and critical thinking skills. These thinking models and scales are used to measure students' critical thinking skills. However, if there is no consensus on the definition of critical thinking ability and no unified framework of its subskills, it will be difficult to put these research findings into teaching practices on a large scale.

Secondly, despite the effectiveness of diverse teaching methods, the scattered and personalized nature of these approaches has led to a lack of cohesion, continuous testing, and a systematic paradigm for fostering critical thinking in EFL education. As a result, research lacks practical value, and critical thinking in EFL education remains deficient. In free writing, Gilquin and Laporte (2021) noted students favored single-word searches over critical analysis. Ma (2018) and Gao (2020) found the absence of critical thinking in English reading among foreign language learners. We believe that diverse teaching experiments offer choices for fostering critical thinking skills, but they require testing by multiple teachers and integration into a broadly applicable EFL teaching framework to avoid becoming overly personalized and losing their guiding value.

Thirdly, in the aforementioned empirical studies, the reliability and validity of the teaching experiments themselves need to be further tested, due to the short duration of the teaching experiments, generally small sample sizes, and the small number of reading or writing materials and their limited lengths, among other factors. For example, in one of the teaching experiments mentioned above, the sample size was only 25 and the cultivation period of another experiment was only five weeks. Due to these limitations, the results of the experiments can be accidental and subjective, requiring further verification.

Furthermore, the results of those classroom experiments have shown that their overall teaching effects are good, with students' critical thinking skills and language proficiency improving as a whole, but those studies have overlooked the negative experiences of some students, primarily the underachieving students, and have not discussed specific improvement measures for them, which is to some extent not in line with the student-centered teaching principle. As students have individual differences in EFL learning, and many factors affect the development process, such as age, talent, cognition, motivation, and personality (Ellis, 1989), designing a more targeted teaching model is necessary when cultivating students of different thinking levels.

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