

Cultivate Critical Thinking Ability via Students' Presentations in College English Classes

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In the new era when demands for flexible intellectual skills are increasing, strengthening the cultivation of critical thinking ability of students has become one of the key purposes of higher education. This paper intends to discuss how to cultivate students' critical thinking ability through English classroom presentations. It points out that during the whole process, teachers' guidance plays an indispensable role. Only when both teachers and students are aware that classroom presentations are a golden opportunity for the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability and carry this awareness into their English classes, can English presentations be brought into full play.

Keywords: critical thinking ability, English presentations, reflection

Introduction

Thompson, an expert of British history pedagogy, once said, "History teaching in schools is not about what happened in history itself, but on how we have an understanding of history. The most important thing is the process of contact, response, and inquiry, and the way of acquiring knowledge". This applies not only to the teaching of history, but also the teaching of English.

Richards and Rodgers (2014, p. 105) have pointed out that apart from being a tool for communication, language is also a tool for understanding the world, exploring knowledge, and solving problems. In today's world, with the economic globalization and the deepening of scientific, technological, and cultural exchanges and cooperation among countries, English teaching at the university level needs to enrich students' knowledge reserves and improve their relevant abilities from three aspects—language, culture, and thinking. Among them, thinking ability greatly affects language expression ability and cross-cultural communication ability. Thinking ability reflects the rigor, flexibility, and comprehensiveness of individual thinking, and is the basis for higher education to cultivate innovative spirit and practical ability. Good critical thinking ability promotes such thinking skills as the ability to analyse information and integrate diverse sources of knowledge in solving problems.

However, due to the long-term influence of traditional educational concepts, students have generally perceived foreign languages (especially, English) as a communicative tool, but they have ignored the vital role of English in helping them acquire knowledge, explore the world, analyze problems, and solve problems. In other words, they do not realize that learning English can greatly contribute to the development of critical thinking skills.

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Critical Thinking Ability

Introduction to Critical Thinking Ability

The root of “critical” is “critic”, which originates from the Greek verb “krínein” (a relative of Latin cernere “decide”), meaning “of or for judging, able to discern”¹. Webster’s *Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines “critical” as “involving skillful judgement as to truth, merit, etc.; judicial” as in the expression “a critical analysis” while according to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, “critical thinking” refers to the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or conclusion.

Experts and scholars have given various explanations to critical thinking. For instance, Paul and Elder (2006) mention that critical thinking is essentially a kind of thinking activity that makes a profound and comprehensive reflection and comment on things. So, people equipped with good critical thinking ability have the ability to combine the learning content on the basis of basic knowledge learning, thinking independently, conducting in-depth research, and at the same time, being able to flexibly use what they have learned in solving problems. They are more inclined to have the attitude of reflecting. When looking at things and dealing with problems, they will be more rational and objective, discerning, and judgmental.

The Importance of Critical Thinking Ability in College English Classes

As pointed out in Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan formulated by the Ministry of Education of China (2010-2020), Higher Education should create a favorable environment for independent thinking, free exploration and innovation. Cultivating students’ critical thinking ability has become one of the important tasks of Higher Education in China. The 2021 edition of “A Guide to College English Teaching” clearly indicates that College English courses have practical significance and long-term impact on the future development of college students, and that learning English can help students establish a global perspective, cultivate their international awareness, improve humanistic literacy, and provide a basic tool for knowledge innovation, potential development, and all-round development, so as to prepare students for the challenges and opportunities in the era of globalization.

Presentations in College English Classes

As a student-centered classroom activity, students’ classroom presentation can show and exercise their oral expression skills on the one hand, and motivate students to participate in positive thinking and cultivate students’ self-confidence on the other hand. At the same time, because it includes deciding on topics, collecting information, expressing opinions, PPT design, on-site display, etc., it greatly helps to cultivate students’ critical thinking ability. However, many students and even teachers have not recognized the help of presentations in the cultivation of critical thinking ability, so that students even think giving presentations in classes is only a routine assignment, which may influence their final performance in English courses and even worse, a waste of time. To accomplish their tasks, some students simply pile up the collected data without analyzing; some jump to their own opinions without testifying; and some only read according to the prepared manuscript during the presentation. The students in the audience often listen to speakers casually without concentration. Even when the topics occasionally arouse their interest, they do not have the time or intention to have enough thoughts or give timely feedback. Besides,

¹ See <https://www.quword.com/etym/s/critic>.

teachers usually focus on the fluency of the presentation, the intonation of the students' speech, the accuracy of the language, etc., and simply score and comment on the students' presentations without giving feedback on their critical thinking skills, such as the rigor of their opinions and thinking, so as to induce more reflection on the students. As a result, neither the speakers nor the audience has much to gain from the presentation and presentations cannot effectively stimulate students' positive thinking.

Actually, giving presentations is an invaluable opportunity for students to exercise their critical thinking ability so long as both teachers and students can perceive it with the right attitude. Teachers' guidance and the interaction with students play a critical role in the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability.

Assignment of the Presentation Tasks

Although students' classroom presentation is a student-centered classroom activity, teachers' purposeful and directional guidance should run through the whole process, from preparation before presentations to reflection after presentations. The presentation task can be assigned to students at the beginning of a new semester so that students have enough time to think over and prepare for it while teachers have time to communicate and discuss with students. At the same time, teachers put forward certain requirements and give guidance as to topic selection, content, PPT production, and presentation itself. Teachers can give the ranges and direction of topic selection according to the curriculum requirements, and encourage students to choose specific topics and select unique perspectives.

Preparation for the Presentation

After students have selected their topics according to the requirements, they have to collect relevant materials, verify the authenticity and reliability of the materials according to the self-defined topics, analyze their effectiveness, and then decide on the necessary materials. The most crucial point is to draw their own opinions based on the materials they have collected, and then collect more materials based on their own opinions for repeated deliberation.

When students have finished the first step of collecting materials and drafting their presentation script, they start to design PPT according to their own prepared content. A well-organized PPT presentation can often reflect the overall structure of the presentation, and thus reflect the logical thinking of the speaker.

The teacher should conduct a preliminary check of the students' PPT, examine its viewpoint and organization by asking students to explain the reason for their topic selection, and communicate more about the ideas they intend to convey in person. Through some communication, some vague ideas in students' minds can be clarified and their purposes of the presentation and their train of thoughts will be clearer. For example, Student A has chosen art as the theme of her presentation, and she is going to introduce Shaanxi Opera, Terracotta Warriors and Horses, and Chinese Buns to exhibit the beauty of drama, sculpture, and food in her hometown of Shaanxi Province. However, from her PowerPoint presentation, it is found that her presentation is just a general introduction with a lot of facts and data she has collected from the internet and has nothing to do with art. Then, the teacher discusses with the student by asking questions. The questions are as follows:

1. Why do you choose this topic?
2. Who are your audience?
3. How is your topic relevant to art?
4. What are the elements of art in Shaanxi Opera, Terracotta Warriors and Horses, and Chinese Buns?

5. How will you allocate the three-minute presentation if you want to cover the three aspects of drama, sculpture, and food?

6. Your PPT shows a lot of impressive facts about your hometown. What specific idea do you want to convey through these facts?

It is worth noticing that teachers do not need to give suggestions directly. Instead, in the process of looking for the answers to these questions, the student discovers the problems and narrows down her topic to Shaanxi Opera. Finally, in her presentation, she explains to the audience the artistic elements of Shaanxi Opera, how she is connected with it and shares her idea of inheriting traditional art.

Presentation Process

Most students are not good at expressing their ideas in English freely without referring to any script. Therefore, during the presentation, they will only focus on the content of their presentation instead of paying equal attention to the audience's reaction, so as to timely adjust their content, language, and the way of expression to arouse audience's greater interest or to make themselves better understood. In order to develop students' critical thinking skills through making presentations, it is required that students should give the presentation without the script. But they can bring the outline of the presentation. The outline is a refinement of the whole speech which can prompt the ideas but will not distract the speakers' attention from the audience's reaction.

Post-presentation Feedback

Audience's feedback. Classroom presentations are a good opportunity for students to participate, but how to mobilize the audience is a question worth considering. When assigning the task of presentation, the teacher should first assign the task of the audience in the process—to listen and think according to the content or point of view of the speaker, and to put forward their own ideas. These are the questions the audience can ask themselves:

1. What do I think about this view?
2. Do I have some complement?
3. To what extent do I agree with him?
4. What are some of his ideas that I can learn from?
5. What inspiration can I draw from his presentation?
6. If I were to give a presentation of the same topic, how could I organize my ideas? ...

At the end of the presentation, the teacher set aside time for the audience to think about the questions, sort out their own answers, and communicate on the spot. The audience can also ask questions to the speaker about the speaker's detailed point of view. When the audience is also a participant in the presentation, they will have more to think about. At the same time, when hearing the audience share from different perspectives, the speaker is also more inspired. For example, after Student A's speech, some students shared the artistic elements of their hometown, and some students put forward their own views and suggestions on the protection and inheritance of traditional culture.

Finally, students discuss in small groups, and evaluate the speaker's presentation from the aspects of language, oral expression, point of view, and logical organization according to the grading form sent by the teacher in advance, which can exercise their evaluation and judgement skills.

Teachers' feedback. It is necessary for teachers to give timely and objective feedback in class. The teacher provides a comprehensive review of the student's presentation, affirming its highlights and pointing out areas that can be improved.

In class, when students give a speech, the teacher can designate a group member to record the whole process, and let speakers watch and review their speech after class. The teacher communicates with speakers again and help them reflect on their own performances. The teacher asks the speaker what he thinks after the presentation.

1. In what way do you think you did well?
2. In what way do you think there is space for improvement?
3. What feedback from the audience inspired you most?
4. If you had a second chance to do this again, how would you improve?

Speakers can write a summary of their ideas about their presentations. After reflecting on the whole process, they will find their ideas are clearer, their passion for giving presentations is aroused, and their critical thinking ability is strengthened.

Conclusion

As a component of innovation ability, the cultivation of critical thinking ability is one of the main tasks of college English teaching. Teachers should have the awareness of its importance and necessity in the designing of classroom activities and realize that although English presentations are student-centered, teachers' guidance with a specific target will not only create a good communication atmosphere between teachers and students, but also encourage students to develop the habit of thinking critically, so that they will be more willing to discover, analyse, and explore instead of accepting what are taught to them passively.

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