

The Significance and Path of Developing Students' Critical Thinking Ability in English Writing Teaching

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[**Abstract**] In today's society, with the rapid development of artificial intelligence, fostering students' critical thinking is especially important for nurturing their innovative capabilities. The "National English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017 edition, revised in 2020)" outlines that the core competencies in English education encompass four dimensions: linguistic competence, cultural awareness, quality of thinking, and learning ability. Among these, the quality of thinking is primarily reflected in the logic, criticality, and creativity of thought. Critical thinking not only enhances students' language skills but also plays a crucial role in mental growth and the cultivation of independent thinking. It encourages students to go beyond the surface meaning of texts, delving into the analysis of the structure, argumentation, author's intent, and implicit meanings of articles. Whether for further education, employment, or personal development, critical thinking is an indispensable skill. This paper emphasizes the importance of cultivating critical thinking within the context of adolescent life themes, providing a new perspective for high school English teaching practices. It holds significant importance for promoting the comprehensive development of students' competencies in a globalized context.

[**Key words**] language teaching; critical thinking; significance; path

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1 Introduction

The "National English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017 edition, revised in 2020)" proposes that among the objectives for cultivating thinking qualities, it is necessary to develop students' ability to analyze and deduce the logical relationships of information and make correct judgments on various viewpoints. For a long time, English teaching has lacked emphasis on fostering students' critical thinking and guiding students to think deeply about issues. Instead, it has emphasized imitation and rote memorization in learning, leading to weak argumentative abilities in foreign language instruction, a lack of independent thinking, and a tendency to rely on teachers or reference answers, preventing students from conducting in-depth analysis and reasoning. How to cultivate students' critical thinking has become a major challenge in English teaching. Writing involves the analysis, judgment, understanding, and reflection on problems as well as the presentation, organization, summarization, and integration of personal viewpoints, which holds positive practical significance for fostering students' critical thinking. In the rapidly evolving era of globalization and information technology, critical thinking skills are widely recognized as one of the core competencies of the 21st century. They are not only related to the individual's innovative consciousness and problem-solving abilities but also directly impact the sustained progress of society and international competitiveness. English is an international language. How to effectively integrate the cultivation of critical thinking into its teaching has become a hot topic in educational reform. This paper aims to

explore how to overcome the limitations of traditional models in English teaching, innovate in teaching strategies, and systematically foster students' critical thinking abilities by taking writing teaching as the starting point.

2 Literature review

2.1 The meaning of critical thinking

The famous Greek philosopher Socrates proposed “the Socratic method”, which involves continuous questioning based on the content of the conversation, thereby stimulating thought and summarizing meaning. The method has been groundbreaking for the cultivation of critical spirit. The modern concept of critical thinking originates from American philosopher John Dewey's idea of “reflective thinking”. Facione pointed out that “critical thinking is a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment process that includes interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation of evidence, concepts, methods, and criteria, or consideration of all circumstances upon which the judgment is based”. Domestic scholars have also reflected on critical thinking. Luo Qingxu (2000) believed that critical thinking is an individual quality that enables criticism of background knowledge, methods, evidence, reasoning, and conclusions during the learning process. Critical thinking embodied in writing requires students to engage in deep thinking regarding a particular issue, thereby making independent judgments and providing strong arguments to support their viewpoints, ultimately organizing and expressing their ideas effectively.

2.2 Theoretical basis

Vygotsky believed that “sociality” is a fundamental characteristic of humans and that only through interaction with society can individuals acquire higher psychological functions and achieve maturity and development. Constructivist views on teaching differ from traditional ones, believing that learning is not a passive acceptance of knowledge imparted by the teachers, but a process where students perceive new knowledge and connect it with their existing knowledge, thus expanding and constructing new knowledge. Constructivism posits that knowledge is not acquired through mere transmission but through the active construction by the students. The students are the subjects of learning, and teachers' emphasis should be placed on how to help students construct knowledge actively rather than merely transmit knowledge. Teachers facilitate this by creating real-life situations, enhancing discussions and exchanges, and helping and promoting students to construct new knowledge based on their existing knowledge, thus better completing the construction of knowledge. This learning approach is no longer about students passively accepting knowledge, but building a more complete knowledge structure through the active and positive construction of knowledge based on their existing knowledge.

3 The significance of developing students' critical thinking in English writing teaching

3.1 Improving students' analytical ability

English writing is closely intertwined with the development of students' critical thinking. Yan Junling (2019) believed that writing is a form of mental labor that uses linguistic symbols to reflect objective realities, express thoughts and emotions, and transmit knowledge and information, possessing a high degree of creativity. Requiring considerable effort and perseverance, writing is a process of mental labor that combines thinking and cognitive activities, resulting from the integration of creative thinking and interactive processes. Critical thinking helps students gain a deeper understanding of topics, ensuring they do more than just recount existing knowledge. Instead, they can explore subjects comprehensively and deeply from multiple perspectives. Critical thinking encourages students to actively gather information, analyze it, state facts, and strive for accuracy and credibility in their writing, which contributes to creating more rigorous and scientific structures in their essays. For example, when discussing the impact of social media on teenagers, students will attempt to explore the topic from multiple angles. They not only describe the positive and negative effects of social media but also incorporate neutral viewpoints, thus exploring the topic comprehensively from various perspectives, and enhancing their ability to

analyze problems.

3.2 Enhancing students' argumentation skill

Argumentation is an important skill in English writing. After students obtain more accurate information through independent analysis and judgment, they need to organize evidence effectively to support their viewpoints. They also need to anticipate possible counterarguments and respond to them, demonstrating the accuracy of their viewpoints from both affirmative and opposing perspectives, thereby making their essays more persuasive. This requires students to have clear viewpoints first, collect evidence that supports their viewpoints, use logical reasoning to connect the evidence with their viewpoints, and at the same time, anticipate opposing opinions and provide a strong rebuttal. Such a writing process not only enhances students' argumentation skill but also cultivates their critical thinking, enabling them to think independently and propose insightful viewpoints when faced with complex issues.

3.3 Promoting students' independent thinking ability

In today's era of information explosion, people are exposed to a large amount of information every day, but not all of the transmitted information is fully confirmed. Often, this information is disseminated without in-depth analysis. Obviously, students' independent thinking ability is crucial and directly related to their judgment ability and values. Promoting independent thinking is one of the core goals of education. English writing can present students' viewpoints and judgments, which is an effective way to cultivate their independent thinking ability. Independent thinking means that students should not blindly accept any viewpoints or information, but should learn to question and verify them. In the writing process, this means that students need to conduct in-depth research on the selected topic, not only focusing on mainstream viewpoints, but also searching for different voices and unnoticed facts. Independent thinking also requires students to be able to examine problems from multiple perspectives. When forming a viewpoint, students need to consider different aspects of the problem, including positive impact, negative impact, and middle ground. This not only makes the viewpoint more comprehensive, but also demonstrates students' profound understanding of the problem. Encouraging students to question information, examine problems from multiple perspectives, apply logical reasoning, and go beyond surface information to cultivate independent judgment skill is crucial for forming original viewpoints. This not only helps them express unique insights in writing, but also enhances their critical thinking skill in daily life.

4 The path of cultivating students' critical thinking ability in English writing teaching

4.1 Mind map

As an efficient visual thinking tool, mind map is diversified in its types, including circle diagrams, tree diagrams, bubble diagrams, double bubble diagrams and flowcharts. Each type has its unique application scenarios and advantages, and especially plays an inestimable role in writing teaching. Reasonable selection and application of different categories of mind map can effectively promote students' divergent thinking, logical construction, information organization and creative expression, thus enhancing the effect of writing teaching.

The original text of Unit 1 Teenage Life in high school English compulsory textbook No. 1 published by People's Education Press is in the form of letters. Based on this text, pre-writing activities are designed. Activity 1: based on their previous learning of the text, students summarize the characteristics of letter writing and the structure of the article. The teacher asks two questions for students to think about (Q1: this letter is from ____ to ____; Q2: the letter can be divided into ____ parts). Students find that the letter consists of the following five parts: date, greeting, body, close, and signature. Students will create a tree diagram of the writing content of the five parts of the letter to strengthen their understanding and comprehension of the structure of the letter. Activity 2: the teacher leads students to sort out the main writing steps for providing advice to others in the letter. By extracting the text, there occur four corresponding steps: (1) I know what the problem is; (2) I understand how you feel;

(3) this is my advice and reasons; (4) I think my advice will help. Students need to supplement these four steps to the body section of the tree diagram. By analyzing the letter text through a pre-writing mind map, students are encouraged to think, diverge their thinking, and stimulate their logical thinking ability. This enables students to have a clear understanding of writing suggestion letters and lays a solid foundation for subsequent writing.

4.2 Debate

To enhance students' critical thinking, real-life situations are essential. Critical thinking is not just about theoretical fantasies, but about conducting in-depth thinking and generating profound resonance. Debate activities often focus on one theme, adopting a face-to-face debate approach with real people to elaborate on both positive and negative aspects of a certain topic, in order to persuade the other party. In this process, both sides of the debate establish a real situation, actively explore the differences in viewpoints, constantly think about problems, introduce and solve problems, and view problems with a critical perspective. Debating is timely and tests students' judgment and thinking, logic and reasoning, and the ability to organize and express arguments and evidence. Both sides use a critical approach to discover the shortcomings and deficiencies of the other's viewpoint, thereby demonstrating the feasibility of their own viewpoint and providing arguments and evidence support for writing. It is a good way to transit from oral expression to written expression.

In the writing section of Unit 1 Teenage Life, it is necessary to choose one of the three students who have encountered difficulties in writing a suggestion letter. According to the debate-based teaching method, debate is divided into three stages. (1) Students can independently set questions and analyze the problems encountered by three students under the guidance of the teacher, in order to set debate topics, such as "David's parents won't listen to him, and he thinks they are adults who can't understand him. Do you agree or disagree? Please give your opinion". (2) Create real situations to give students a sense of immersion and allow them to think more deeply. In this lesson, we will give students the identity of "psychological ambassadors" and make them more concerned about the feasibility of the suggestions they make. At the same time, students in the class are divided into "positive" and "negative" groups, and are divided into small groups to serve as debaters numbered 1-6 to conduct debates. (3) After the competition, students' performance is evaluated based on their arguments and the ability of their suggestions, ultimately finding a consensus solution and providing rich language materials for students' writing. Debate-based writing teaching enables students to actively explore and discover problems. Debates are conducted in a "real context", where students take on roles, have distinct positions, and present arguments rooted in reality, allowing their viewpoints to be fully discussed. This enriches the corpus and evidence in writing, thereby enhancing students' critical thinking skills in writing.

4.3 Diversified question

Teachers' patient guidance and thought-provoking questions have always been the common ways to cultivate students' critical thinking. The guidance of teachers' questions can stimulate students to think deeply about problems, thereby inspiring them to continuously deepen their knowledge and explore the unknown. Students should also use their brains, divert thinking, learn to ask questions to peers and teachers, and think critically in this process. Critical thinking is not just about criticizing and blaming, but about constantly improving one's thinking quality in the process of discovering and solving problems. In the writing of Unit 1 Teenage Life, teachers can guide students with the following questions: (1) what is the problem of Eric? (2) do you have the same problem as Eric? (3) why don't your parents listen to you? (4) do you agree with Eric's opinion? (5) what's your advice to Eric? (6) do you think your advice is helpful? why? Taking these as an example, the teacher organizes groups to conduct mutual Q&A based on the questions from Xu Ting and Min Ho, in order to enable students to provide suggestions to students who encounter different problems, thus enriching their corpus, and stimulating their critical thinking at a new level.

4.4 Self-evaluation

The design of this activity is deeply rooted in the constructivist concept, emphasizing the active role of students in the journey of knowledge exploration. In this process, by integrating self-evaluation mechanisms, students not only take on the role of content creators, but also become the primary judges of their own works. This dual identity practice not only catalyzes the growth of their meta-cognitive skills, but also promotes their deepening understanding of critical thinking and the improvement of their practical application abilities. Activity 1 Theme Introduction and Brainstorming: take “Teenage Life” as the theme, organize students to have group discussions to explore the challenges faced by teenagers in life, learning, social relationships, family relationships, etc., and stimulate students’ interest and preliminary thinking. Students provide each other with suggestions regarding potential issues and present them in the form of a mind map. Activity 2: the teacher lists the challenges encountered by the three students in the book, and students brainstorm again to provide suggestions. Activity 3 presents students with the evaluation criteria for English writing in the college entrance examination, enabling them to complete their writing with a targeted approach. The evaluation criteria for English writing mainly involve the following aspects (as shown in Table 1), aiming to comprehensively evaluate students’ English writing ability.

Table 1. Evaluation criteria for English writing

Dimension	Description	Evaluation (1-3 points)
Writing Conventions (Approximately 20%)	The overall appearance of the article is neat, and punctuation marks are used accurately.	
Content Points (Approximately 20%)	Examine whether the article comprehensively covers all the requirements of the topic, whether the content is substantial and relevant, whether it can clearly express the author’s position and views, and whether it can effectively combine personal experience and insights.	
Vocabulary (Approximately 20%)	Evaluate the accuracy and richness of students’ vocabulary usage. Specifically, whether the choice of vocabulary is appropriate and rich.	
Syntactic Structure (Approximately 20%)	Whether the syntactic structure is correct and varied, whether various sentence types can be used effectively, and whether spelling and punctuation marks are accurate.	
Organization & Coherence (Approximately 20%)	Examine whether the organization of the article is logically clear, whether the arrangement of paragraphs is reasonable, whether the transition between sentences is natural, and whether connecting words and transitional sentences are used effectively to enhance the coherence of the article.	

After completing the initial draft, students should conduct self-evaluation based on the above criteria and record evaluation and improvement suggestions. Through peer evaluation, students can obtain feedback from multiple perspectives, and then conduct self-evaluation again to compare the similarities and differences between the initial evaluation and peer feedback, and make secondary corrections. Students submit their final draft and attach their self-evaluation report. Teachers comprehensively consider students’ writing achievements and self-evaluation process, provide final feedback, and emphasize the manifestation of critical thinking in writing and future improvement directions. Through this type of self-evaluation writing activity, students not only gain language

skills, but also take substantial steps in cultivating critical thinking. They can learn how to examine problems from multiple dimensions and how to integrate personal deep thinking and critical analysis into the writing, which has a long-term positive impact on their future academic research and decision-making abilities in daily life. This activity design provides an innovative model for English teaching, emphasizing the organic combination of students' subjectivity and critical thinking cultivation. It is an important practice to respond to the requirements of the new curriculum standards and promote students' comprehensive development.

5 Conclusion

In short, critical thinking is crucial for cultivating students' core competencies, and influencing the development of their innovation and logical thinking abilities. Good critical thinking can promote the development of students' language and learning abilities, and cultivate them into high-quality talents with core competencies in the English subject. The sorting, summarizing, analyzing, and elaborating of problems in writing teaching are effective ways to help students cultivate critical thinking. Choosing effective teaching methods is crucial. Effective teaching methods can fully stimulate the development of students' critical thinking, thereby promoting the development of students' thinking qualities and achieving the improvement of students' core elements in the English subject. Teachers can design activities from multiple perspectives and modalities, with students as the main body of teaching activities, stimulating students' curiosity to explore problems, enhancing their interest in learning, enabling them to continuously participate in the classroom, improving their writing skills, and continuously cultivating their critical thinking.

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