

Action Research on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability in Cross-cultural English Teaching in Chinese Higher Vocational College

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Abstract: *In recent years, the English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges in China has gradually integrated heuristic teaching methods. However, a notable issue has emerged: students' deficiency in critical thinking skills. This study aims to enhance the critical thinking skills of higher vocational students in China through action research. The research includes four cycles of teaching practice to improve students' critical thinking ability in terms of analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and self-adjustment. Through the task design, the researcher promotes students' in-depth thinking and critical analysis in cross-cultural English classes. It was found that vocational students made noticeable progress in the 16-week training process, as reflected by the changes in interpretation and analysis abilities and attitudes towards culture. These results provide valuable experience and enlightenment for English teaching in higher vocational colleges and emphasise the importance of cultivating students' critical thinking ability to promote their development in academic and professional fields.*

Keywords: Critical thinking ability; Cross-Cultural English teaching; Action research; Higher vocational college.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the English teaching reform in higher vocational colleges in China has made remarkable progress, and many higher vocational teachers have begun to pay attention to upgrading their teaching approaches. While heuristic teaching has increasingly supplanted traditional instructional methods, it has brought about a challenge: students often lack independent thinking skills. Despite teachers simplifying course content and providing students with greater autonomy, many vocational students struggle with conducting independent research and lack a profound understanding and flexible application of their learning (Wang, 2023). Passive learning remains prevalent, with students often merely skimming the surface of knowledge rather than engaging in deep thought and application. Therefore, cultivating critical thinking skills within the English classroom is paramount to propel students towards personalised and creative development.

Critical thinking empowers students to take proactive control of their learning process. In cross-cultural English teaching in higher vocational colleges, teachers often play roles as guides and instructors, while students need to have active learning abilities. Cultivating students' critical thinking ability can make them better understand learning objectives, formulate learning strategies, and solve learning problems, thus improving learning efficiency and learning effectiveness (Lei, 2023). Meanwhile, critical thinking ability is an essential basis for cultivating students' lifelong learning ability. In the era of rapid knowledge updating and scientific and technological advancements, students need to have the ability to learn continuously. And critical thinking ability can make students have the ability of critical reading, critical thinking, and critical problem solving so that they can adapt to and cope with future challenges (Wang, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to cultivate students' critical thinking ability for their personalised and creative development. In cross-cultural English teaching in higher vocational colleges, teachers should focus on cultivating students' critical thinking ability and laying a solid foundation for their future study and careers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Critical thinking

Critical thinking is a rich and ever-changing concept (Shaw et al., 2020). This concept is primarily defined as the active process of using various skills in thinking and the location of using these skills (Brown et al., 2014;

Chadwick, 2011; Davis, 2017; Murphy et al., 2014). As an essential skill concept, critical thinking can be traced back to the reflective thinking advocated by Dewey in 1910. This way of thinking emphasises that individuals can actively, continuously and carefully examine any belief or assumed knowledge form and understand the reasons for supporting them and the conclusions they may draw. American scholar Glazer (1941) put forward the concept that critical thinking is a synthesis of attitude, knowledge and skills and pointed out that individuals with critical thinking should have questioning attitude, logical reasoning knowledge and cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In China, Huang (2000) advocated that critical thinking is a personalised way of thinking based on doubt, observation and experiment. People with this thinking quality dare to think reversely in the face of mindset, are not easily hinted at by others, and dare to challenge traditional ideas. Wu (2014) of Beijing Normal University proposed a critical thinking teaching model appropriate for Chinese classes. She proposed that the teaching mode of cultivating critical thinking should be developed through application in students' life-long study, such as reading and writing, so that they can develop critical thinking while applying it. Wang et al. (2024) thought that critical thinking is thinking about finding problems about reality and ideas and making ideas according to one's thinking logic. To sum up, critical thinking is regarded as an essential cognitive ability in different cultural backgrounds. It is not only a skill but also a comprehensive way of thinking and attitude (Wu & Jian, 2010).

In education, cultivating students' critical thinking ability helps them understand and evaluate what they have learned more comprehensively and promotes them to make rational and reasonable decisions when facing complex problems. Therefore, critical thinking is a process of active thinking and questioning, so it is necessary to guide and encourage students to reflect, question, analyse, and deduce things according to their own knowledge structure and evaluation system when cultivating students' critical thinking ability, to achieve the purpose of solving problems, as suggested by Wu (2014).

2.2 Cross-cultural Vocational English Teaching and Critical Thinking

The importance of critical thinking in intercultural English teaching in higher vocational colleges is self-evident. It emphasises the equal exchange of views between teachers and students, encourages students to ask questions, and promotes in-depth thinking by analysing and solving problems. This educational method can stimulate students' strong interest in English knowledge learning and cultivate their innovative spirit and practical ability (Han & Zhang, 2020). Compared with traditional education methods, critical thinking education pays more attention to students' thinking ability, innovation ability, and ability to analyse problems. Hence, it is especially crucial to foster students' capacity to question traditional concepts and encourage them to challenge and explore new ideas boldly.

Currently, cross-cultural English teaching in China emphasises language proficiency and skills training while overlooking the development of students' critical thinking, innovation, and problem-solving abilities. Consequently, students often face challenges in English writing and cultural communication due to this oversight (Wang, 2024). For example, in writing, students are often vulnerable regarding the relevance of articles, clarity of arguments, and thoroughness of reasoning, and they cannot think deeply and express themselves clearly. At the same time, in language learning, it is difficult to understand cultural differences objectively and profoundly, and it is also difficult to improve the comprehensive quality of language use and cross-cultural communication.

Therefore, to effectively enhance students' critical thinking ability in cross-cultural language classrooms, teachers should proactively promote thinking training and encourage inquiry, problem analysis, and collaborative problem-solving through group discussions and independent reflection. At the same time, classroom teaching should also pay more attention to guiding students to think deeply about cross-cultural differences and enhance their cross-cultural communication ability (Lei, 2023). Teachers can cultivate English talents with international competitiveness by comprehensively improving students' thinking ability and cross-cultural awareness.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study selected 32 sophomore tourism majors at L College in Shanxi, China, as the research samples. Through action research, the study addressed students' critical thinking challenges within cross-cultural English learning. The research spanned one semester, from February 2023 to June 2023, encompassing 16 weeks. The primary teaching material is Practical English Course for Higher Vocational Education, a textbook published by foreign language teaching and research in China. Its material selection is rich in connotation, highlighting cultural diversity and especially emphasising the cultivation of students' critical thinking in curriculum design. In addition,

the course also provided students with a broader range of learning materials and knowledge with the help of other cultures, literature, film teaching materials, and cultural resources from online learning platforms.

The research was carried out according to the steps of finding problems, solving problems, and summing up reflections. First, the researcher found problems in students' English learning process through classroom observation and student interaction, such as a lack of critical thinking ability and a passive learning tendency. Secondly, the researcher designed teaching activities and tasks for these problems and adopted teaching methods such as heuristic teaching and inquiry learning to guide students to think actively and learn independently. Finally, at the end of the teaching cycle, the researcher summarised and reflected on the whole teaching process, discussed the effectiveness of teaching methods and students' learning effects, and provided experience and enlightenment for future teaching practice.

This study follows the four paths of action research by Carr and Kemmis (1986), namely plan, act, observe, and reflect. They defined action research as the combination of the wisdom and ability of scientific teachers and practical workers to solve a particular issue. According to the development characteristics of students' thinking ability and the principle of training from easy to difficult, each round of action research is set up with four steps: planning, action, observing, and reflecting. According to the characteristics of each round of research, the teaching methods such as brainstorming, dialogue, question guidance, inquiry, and project methods were infiltrated. This action research aims to promote the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability, improve their initiative and autonomy in English learning, and thus better adapt to future study and career development.

3.1 Investigation on the Current Situation of Critical Thinking Ability of Vocational College Students

First of all, it is an insightful method to interview students about the current situation of cross-cultural English teaching in higher vocational colleges, which can help the researcher better understand the current situation of critical thinking ability of higher vocational students. Through these interviews, the researcher found that students generally have cognitive misunderstandings about critical thinking ability, and this misunderstanding has been suppressed mainly by China's long-standing traditional knowledge infusion teaching method (An, 2019). Students lack critical thinking ability and internal critical logic. Although they understand and accept what they have learned, they lack critical thinking and questioning consciousness.

Therefore, in intercultural English teaching in higher vocational colleges, it is urgent to change the traditional knowledge infusion teaching mode and develop students' innovative and critical thinking. Combined with the characteristics of cross-cultural learning content and students' English learning level, the critical thinking structure reflects its core competence: the ability to analyse, evaluate, reason, and self-adjustment (Wu, 2014). The comprehensive application of these four core competencies represents the overall level of critical thinking. Only when students perform well in these four fundamental abilities can they be considered to have excellent critical thinking abilities (Wu, 2014). Guided by this theoretical model, the researcher devised a progressive teaching approach, transitioning from simple to complex tasks. She tried to adopt task-based, project-based, inquiry-based, dialogue-based, and other teaching methods and constantly reflected and revised them in teaching practice to achieve the goal of student-centered teacher-student interaction and combination of theory and practice.

This teaching mode focuses on cultivating students' critical thinking ability throughout the teaching process. The task setting, from simple to complex, is helpful for students to improve their critical thinking abilities gradually. Various teaching methods can stimulate students' interest in learning and promote their all-round development. The researcher constantly reflected and revised the implementation process to ensure the effectiveness and pertinence of teaching activities. This teaching mode helps cultivate students' autonomous learning ability and critical thinking and lays a solid foundation for future study and career development.

3.2 Cycle 1 in Action Research

The first round of research lasted for four weeks, from February 6 to February 27, 2023. The main goal is to cultivate students' analytical ability by stimulating their interest. Wu (2014) described analytical ability as the skill to comprehend and articulate the significance of various experiences and scenarios. The analytical ability included pinpointing critical statements, identifying problems, recognising concepts, and understanding descriptions in depth. According to the theme of the textbook unit, students are assigned declarative tasks that are easy to complete, such as the theme of freshmen entering the university campus, and they are required to introduce their universities. Students are required to introduce their university, including basic information about the school,

campus environment, academic atmosphere, special activities, and so on. Students need to ensure that the topic is clear, the statement's content is straightforward, and the content introduced is appropriately classified. After students finished their tasks, the researcher guided them in evaluating other students' statements. Evaluation can be made from the perspectives of whether the theme is clear, whether the statement is clear, whether the content is substantial, and whether the language is fluent. This helps students learn to evaluate others objectively, learn from peers, and improve their expressive ability.

Finally, reflect on the completion of their task. While evaluating other students, students also need to reflect on their task completion. They can think about the difficulties and challenges they encounter in the preparation process and how to improve their presentation skills. This kind of reflection helps students understand their shortcomings and actively seek ways to improve them. This teaching task design aims to help students improve their expressive ability and critical thinking abilities through simple declarative tasks. By evaluating others and reflecting on themselves, students can constantly improve their expression skills and prepare for more complicated tasks in the future.

3.3 Cycle 2 in Action Research

The second round of research lasted for four weeks, from March 6 to March 27, 2023, aiming at cultivating students' analytical abilities. The difficulty of this task is increased, and an analytical task is adopted, which requires students to compare important festivals between China and the West and explore their cultural origins. Students carry out tasks in groups, collect and sort out data, and conduct in-depth analysis and exploration. Cycle 2 focuses on the critical thinking process and evaluates the task completion by observing the process of students' discussion and analysis. In carrying out this task, students not only need to master the knowledge of two cultures but also need to make a comparative analysis of festival forms and origins and think deeply about the cultural significance behind their religious and historical origins. Most groups can complete the task, but there are differences in the depth and breadth of cultural origin exploration among different groups, which initially shows the differences in critical analysis ability.

Throughout the task, the researcher motivated students to delve into the cultural significance of various festivals. She facilitated deeper analysis by posing guiding questions and offering additional reference materials. Students were reminded to observe and compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western festivals, encouraging thorough comparison and contrast. Thus, students can clearly understand the characteristics and connotations of festivals from different cultural backgrounds. The researcher provided timely feedback and guidance to students throughout the analysis process, identifying areas for improvement and offering suggestions. This enabled students to adjust their thinking and enhance their analytical skills promptly. By implementing these methods, students' critical thinking and analytical abilities were further developed, promoting their comprehensive growth in cross-cultural learning.

3.4 Cycle 3 in Action Research

The third round of research, from April 10 to May 1, 2023, aims to cultivate students' thinking abilities, especially inference and self-adjustment abilities. Wu (2014) demonstrated the ability to infer by identifying and grasping all the elements needed to draw a reasonable conclusion. Wu's (2014) self-regulation ability is manifested as consciously monitoring a person's cognitive activities, especially applying analysis and evaluation ability to one's inferences and judgments to question, confirm, or correct one's inferences or results.

Cycle 3 adopts the reasoning task, which requires students to evaluate the different views on traditional Chinese medicine at home and abroad from the Chinese movie *Scraping* and creatively propose solutions to the problems. The study evaluates the task completion according to students' feedback. Through this round of research, the researcher found that students' understanding of this phenomenon was not deep enough, but it also showed a new perspective and critical spirit. They did not mindlessly follow or criticise but put forward well-founded views from their perspective. After this round of tasks, the students initially demonstrated their independent thinking ability, showing rational thinking about complex problems and creative thinking about solutions. All they need is a platform and space to develop their potential. Given the above findings, the researcher further encourages students to exert their potential constantly. The researcher affirmed and praised the students' independent thinking and critical spirit in the task, encouraging them to bravely put forward their views and solutions.

Simultaneously, the researcher provided students with additional learning platforms and spaces, encouraging them to showcase their thinking abilities and creative ideas in various settings such as the classroom, group discussions, and paper writing. While evaluating students' task completion, she guided them to delve deeper into the problems, encouraging consideration of more challenging and innovative solutions. Positive feedback and encouragement were offered to students, motivating them to progress and continuously enhance their critical thinking and creative skills.

3.5 Cycle 4 in Action Research

Cycle 4 of action research was from May 8 to June 5, 2023. This teaching cycle was implemented based on the first three rounds of research. The researcher facilitated relatively independent projects for students, allowing them to select cultural themes, gather information, design, execute, and ultimately evaluate their projects. Under the guidance of the researcher, students independently completed all the steps of explanation, analysis, reasoning, evaluation, and reflection. This round of research aims to promote students' independent and dynamic critical thinking ability and comprehensive language application skills through project teaching methods.

Based on completing the third round of tasks, students have mastered the ability of interpretation, analysis, and criticism. In Cycle 4, they choose their favourite cross-cultural themes in groups, such as the influence of globalisation on traditional diet, cultural protection and tourism development, cultural pluralism, and identity, which shows the students' love for culture and broad vision. Building upon collected online and academic resources, students organised their perspectives. Despite some viewpoints being slightly biased, they demonstrated a speculative logic that could be incorporated into a coherent paper.

The finding shows that this project-oriented teaching improves students' critical thinking ability and urges them to look at cultural phenomena dialectically and critically absorb complicated cultural information, which plays a perfect role in promoting. The findings of this study resonate with Biazus et al. (2022), who stated that project-oriented teaching significantly enhances students' critical thinking abilities and encourages them to adopt a dialectical perspective when analysing cultural phenomena. Through this round of research, students learned how to handle a project independently and improved their teamwork and academic writing ability, which laid a solid foundation for their future study and career development.

3.6 Reflection

After four rounds of action research exploration and practice, including interviews and classroom observations, the researcher gained insights into students' attitudes, feelings, self-evaluation, reflections on learning tasks, and changes in their behaviour and abilities. The finding shows that students clearly understand the essence of critical thinking skills. They are capable of consciously enhancing this ability to elevate their learning proficiency. After 16 weeks of training, the vast majority of students reported that their ability in interpretation and analysis has improved. In addition, students have a clearer understanding of the attitude towards Chinese and Western cultures. Higher vocational students realise that they should establish their cultural self-confidence and take a critical attitude towards Western culture instead of unquestioningly worshipping or simply accepting it. This change shows that students gradually cultivate the ability to distinguish and analyse different cultural viewpoints in cross-cultural learning and enhance their understanding and acceptance of cultural differences. The finding of this study bears similarity with Thomas (2011), who suggests that critical thinking is crucial for making informed judgments, explaining reasoning, and solving unknown problems. Through this action research, students have made remarkable progress in critical thinking ability and have made positive changes in interpretation and analysis ability and attitude towards culture. These changes contribute to their academic development and provide a good foundation for them to better adapt to and understand the multicultural society.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to improve students' critical thinking ability in cross-cultural English teaching in higher vocational colleges. In the teaching process, the researcher comprehensively used various teaching methods, such as dialogue, inquiry, task, and project, and paid attention to the integration of theory and practice. The purpose is to test and further improve the teaching theory and apply it to the new teaching practice. After four Cycles of exploration and practice of action research, the researcher found that students have made remarkable progress and improvement in the cultivation of critical thinking ability. Through interviews and classroom observation, it is found that students have a clearer understanding of the connotation of critical thinking and can consciously

strengthen their ability. In terms of interpretation and analysis ability, the vast majority of students report that they have improved significantly and can understand and analyse problems more deeply. In their attitude towards Chinese and Western cultures, students also show clearer thinking, build up confidence in their own culture, and be able to accept Western culture critically. Through 4 Cycles, students improve their critical thinking ability and cultivate comprehensive qualities such as teamwork ability and academic writing ability. They learn to handle a project independently, demonstrating their creative thinking and analytical ability. These advances contribute to their study and growth and lay a solid foundation for their future career development.

The practice of action research improves students' critical thinking ability and provides valuable experience and enlightenment for the improvement and innovation of teaching mode. In the future teaching practice, the researcher will continue to actively explore and practice, constantly improve teaching quality, and promote students' all-round development.

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