

# A Study on the Cultivation Mode of Students' Critical Thinking Ability Based on College English Curriculum

**Zhangling Wu**

*School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Minzu College, Luding, Sichuan, China*

**Abstract:** Critical thinking ability is a higher-order thinking ability that college students should master. As the future pillars of the country, the cultivation of critical thinking ability is particularly significant for college students. How to improve college students' critical thinking ability has become a focus of attention in the education sector in recent years. English, as an internationally recognized language, has become the important tool for international communication. College English teaching is not only about imparting language knowledge, but also an important way to cultivate students' critical thinking and cross-cultural communication skills. This article takes college English teaching as the research object, guided by the concept of critical thinking ability, analyzes the current situation and reveals the problems of college English teaching in China. In order to improve the students' English application ability and comprehensive quality, teachers should combine theory and practice to propose a practical and feasible mode for cultivating college students' critical thinking ability.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking Ability; Mode; College English Curriculum; Comprehensive Quality

## 1. Introduction

"What is critical thinking ability? In short, at the level of emotional attitude, critical thinking ability refers to being diligent in learning and questioning, believing in reason, respecting facts, making cautious judgments, conducting fair evaluations, being quick to explore, and persistently pursuing truth. At the level of cognitive skills, critical thinking ability refers to being able to elaborate, analyze, evaluate, reason, and explain elements such as evidence, concepts, methods, standards, and backgrounds."<sup>[1]</sup> With the rapid development

of technology and social progress, the cultivation of critical thinking ability for college students is increasingly valued. College English curriculum is one of the courses that students are most exposed to during their university years. How to use English course to cultivate college students' critical thinking ability has become an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. With the changing demand for talents in society, the goal of college English teaching has shifted from simply imparting language knowledge to cultivating language application and critical thinking abilities. Firstly, critical thinking ability is an important component of the English proficiency of college students, which is related to their language application and communication abilities. Secondly, critical thinking ability is an important component of the comprehensive quality of college students, which is related to their logical thinking and innovation ability. Finally, critical thinking ability is also an important foundation for the future development of college students, which is related to their career development and international competitiveness. Therefore, the cultivation of critical thinking ability based on college English curriculum is of great significance for improving the English proficiency and comprehensive quality of college students.

## 2. Relevant Theories on Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to think rationally, analyze, reason, evaluate, and solve problems. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates once said "The unexamined life is not worth living." Aristotle advocated that "Education should focus on cultivating students' logical and critical thinking." Harvard University regarded cultivating students' willingness to "rejoice in discovery and in critical thought" as one of its highest educational missions. The University of Cambridge also incorporates "the

encouragement of a questioning spirit".<sup>[2]</sup> The American educator John Dewey pointed out that "Any belief or so-called form of knowledge should be approached with a positive, enduring, and cautious attitude towards its basis and conclusions." He also proposed a student-centered educational philosophy, emphasizing practice and reflection in the educational process. Sarah Bebesch believes that "In critical thinking, thinkers optimize their thinking process by analyzing, evaluating, and reshaping their thinking when considering any topic, content, or problem.... critical thinking requires the ability to effectively communicate and solve problems, as well as the determination to overcome innate selfishness and group centrism." John McPeck believes that "Critical thinking requires careful use of skepticism, combined with empirical mediation, in order to arrive at satisfactory solutions or insights into the essence of the problem."<sup>[3]</sup> The American scholar Peter Facione summed it up in one sentence: "Education is all about learning to think."<sup>[4]</sup> In The Book of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it proposed: "In order to pursue true knowledge, one must study and explore thoroughly and in-depth. One must peruse the object of his study profoundly and scrutinize it critically so that he is able to effectively put his knowledge into practice." The intellectual elites of ancient China have always regarded "critical thinking" as their motto in life. The Higher Education Law of contemporary China stipulates that "The task of higher education is to cultivate high-level specialized talents with innovative spirit and practical ability." The fundamental basis of innovative spirit and practical ability is the ability to think critically. Obviously, the cultivation of critical thinking ability is an eternal proposition in higher education. Based on the implicit development of current Chinese higher education, domestic and foreign scholars have achieved fruitful research results on the cultivation of critical thinking ability for college students. Many studies have focused on the connotation, constituent elements, and evaluation methods of critical thinking ability, providing a theoretical basis for subsequent research. Some researchers have focused on specific ways and methods to cultivate the critical thinking ability of college students, such as improving their thinking

ability through extracurricular reading, classroom discussions, writing training, and other means. Therefore, the cultivation of critical thinking ability should be integrated throughout the entire educational process. In order to cultivate students' critical thinking ability, teachers need to guide them to question, think, analyze, and evaluate in the process of English learning.

### 3. The Current Situation and Problems in Cultivating Critical Thinking of College Students

In the process of College English learning, the cultivation of critical thinking ability is an easily overlooked aspect. With the development of society and the strengthening of international communication, critical thinking ability has become one of the important standards for measuring the personal abilities of college students. Therefore, how to cultivate the critical thinking ability of college students has become one of the current concerns in the field of English education. "Critical thinking helps us see things from a new perspective."<sup>[5]</sup> Some college English teachers do not have high cognitive level and critical thinking ability. They think things just like ordinary people. They are influenced by other people's opinions easily and do not have correct and independent views on some problems. They become entangled in education without thinking, and force students and children to learn blindly. Some of them, apart from their own professional knowledge, have little knowledge in other fields. They do not have active thinking and global perspectives. The construction of college English teachers needs to be strengthened, and the professional quality and educational level of teachers need to be improved. In the process of teaching, there is a lack of emphasis on individual differences among students, which fails to achieve personalized teaching. The current situation and problems in cultivating students' critical thinking ability in college English curriculum are as follows:

#### 3.1 No Systematical and Targeted Curriculum Design

Curriculum design plays a crucial role in the education system. The current college English curriculum lacks systematization and pertinence, mainly due to the limitation of

in-depth understanding and objective evaluation of college English and critical thinking ability by course designers. The lack of targeted and systematic curriculum design easily leads to students developing resistance towards the cultivation of critical thinking abilities. In the existing English curriculum of some universities, the cultivation of critical thinking skills only accounts for a small part, and the content is outdated and cannot meet the development needs of students. In addition, the college English curriculum mainly focuses on imparting basic English knowledge and cultivating listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation skills, while neglecting the cultivation of students' critical thinking. Therefore, many students do not have the necessary cognition and understanding in terms of critical thinking.

### 3.2 Unrich Teaching Content

The teaching content of college English has been constantly changing with the development of the times. However, no matter how the times change, the problem of singularity in teaching content always accompanies it. Throughout the years, the teaching content of college English curriculum has placed too much emphasis on imparting language knowledge, with less emphasis on cultivating students' critical thinking abilities. In modern education, the singularity of college English teaching content is mainly manifested in the excessive emphasis on theory, but not the practicality in teaching content. The teaching content focuses too much on professional knowledge and neglects general education. In this situation, students often can only passively acquire knowledge and cannot truly understand and apply the knowledge they have learned, resulting in a narrow scope of knowledge, low cognitive level and low overall quality, seriously affecting the cultivation of students' comprehension and critical thinking abilities.

### 3.3 Rigid Teaching Methods

The rigid teaching methods cannot stimulate the enthusiasm of students for English learning during the class. The teaching methods of college English course place too much emphasis on lectures, resulting in less interaction between teachers and students as well as between students and students. In the

teaching process, teachers still impart a lot of knowledge to students. They explain English grammars, sentence structures and cultural knowledge to the students, and the students do not participate and explore unknown knowledge actively. The students do not have enough discussion, thinking and practice in class. The traditional teaching methods of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation without innovation are difficult to stimulate students' interest in learning, let alone encourage them to think actively.

### 3.4 Backward Teaching Modes

Although teaching reform has been advocating for changing traditional teaching methods, due to the large amount of knowledge and heavy tasks in college English classes, many English teachers are still knowledge transmitters and students are passive receivers. The new education mode emphasizes the subjectivity of students, encourages interactive teaching between teachers and students, and focuses on cultivating students' innovative and practical abilities. However, in practical operation, because of various reasons, modern teaching modes have not been fully popularized and effectively implemented. At present, the cultivation of critical thinking ability for college students mainly relies on classroom teaching, neglecting the combination of extracurricular practical activities and self-directed learning. In addition, due to the lack of interaction and discussion between teachers and students during the teaching process, students have lower abilities to digest and apply knowledge, making it difficult to achieve the goal of cultivating their critical thinking.

## 4. Exploration of the Cultivation Mode of College Students' Critical Thinking Ability

"There are three dimensions of critical thinking: analysis, evaluation, and creativity."<sup>[6]</sup> College English teaching should focus on cultivating students' critical thinking ability. Teachers should transform from traditional knowledge transmitters to guides and tutors for students, encouraging students to ask questions frequently and think independently, establishing a student-centered teaching mode. Teachers should transform from knowledge transmitters to guides, guiding students to engage in independent thinking and active

learning. Students are the main body of learning. Teachers should fully respect and play the role of students as the main body, stimulate their interest and enthusiasm in English learning, and provide students with more opportunities for independent and cooperative learning. In addition, teachers should also pay attention to individual differences among students, provide personalized guidance and support, to ensure that every student can benefit from the cultivation of critical thinking. That is to say, teachers should innovate teaching methods and means based on the characteristics and needs of students, create diverse teaching situations, adopt task-based teaching methods, establish a proper evaluation system and contribute to cultivating talents with international competitiveness. The cultivation of critical thinking ability for college students should establish student-centered teaching modes and adopt diversified strategies, which can be called S-DCMM. In S-DCMM, S represents student-centered, D represents the curriculum design, C represents teaching content, the first M represents teaching methods and the second M represents teaching modes. The implementation of these strategies can enhance the critical thinking ability of college students and contribute to the cultivation of internationally competitive talents.

#### 4.1 Systematizing Curriculum Design

The curriculum plays an important role in critical thinking ability. Improving the college English curriculum to make it more systematic and targeted will help students enhance their critical thinking ability and promote their comprehensive development. First, college English curriculum designers should have a deep understanding of the development dynamics of critical thinking skills to ensure the timeliness and relevance of course content. In addition, college English curriculum designers should fully understand the needs and interests of students to meet the personalized needs of different students. Second, the curriculum should focus on cultivating critical thinking skills. This can be achieved by adding practical courses, such as laboratory classes, internship classes, etc. Third, the curriculum should also focus on interdisciplinary integration. Critical thinking ability is a diverse field that involves multiple

disciplines. Therefore, curriculum designers should encourage students to learn across disciplines to broaden their horizons and ways of thinking. Integrate the cultivation of critical thinking ability into college English curriculum and cultivate students' critical thinking ability through language practice through reading, writing, and oral classes. In reading classes, teachers select some classic inspiring and controversial articles to guide students to engage in in-depth thinking and discussion. Students compare their own views with the comments of some experts and scholars to broaden their knowledge and perspectives. In writing classes, students are encouraged to express their own opinions, analyze and comment on social phenomena and problems. In oral classes, simulated debate and discussion sessions are set up to enable students to learn to listen and respect the opinions of others while expressing their own ideas. By deeply understanding the development trends of critical thinking ability, emphasizing the cultivation of critical thinking ability and integrating across disciplines, a curriculum of college English that better meets the needs of critical thinking ability cultivation should be created, thereby improving students' academic literacy and comprehensive quality.

#### 4.2 Enriching Teaching Content

Through the analysis of this article, we can see that the singularity of teaching content has had many negative impacts on critical thinking ability and human activities. Therefore, teachers must attach importance to this issue and take effective measures to solve it. Enriching the teaching content is very important. Some outdated teaching content should be renewed. Content closely related to the development of recent times, integrated interdisciplinary knowledge, broaden students' horizons of thinking should be selected, so that students can cultivate their critical thinking ability while learning the language. By enriching teaching content, strengthening the combination of theory and practice in teaching to improve students' critical thinking ability. Pay attention to the integration of general education content and professional knowledge and improve the comprehensive quality of students. Only in this way can teachers truly achieve the comprehensive development of education and make contributions to human

progress.

### 4.3 Reforming Teaching Methods

In order to reform teaching methods, diversified teaching methods such as task-based teaching and project-based teaching should be adopted. The task-based teaching method emphasizes that students naturally obtain language knowledge and skills during the process of completing specific tasks, and focuses on cultivating their practical abilities and comprehensive qualities. Teachers can design challenging and practical tasks based on the interests and professional backgrounds of students, guide them to think and discuss during the process of completing tasks or projects, and cultivate their thinking ability. Using heuristic teaching, discussion based teaching and other methods, according to the teaching content, inspire students to think and discuss more, adopt interdisciplinary cooperation method, and through the cross integration with students' own professional disciplines, stimulate their thinking vitality and cultivate their thinking ability. In addition, establish a reasonable evaluation system. The evaluation system should focus on the process performance of students, not only on their language knowledge and skills, but also on their ability to think, analyze, and solve problems during the learning process. Students' critical thinking ability can be comprehensively evaluated through the school performance, assignments, group discussions, papers and other methods. At the same time, teachers should make full use of modern educational technologies such as the Internet and multimedia to provide students with rich and diverse learning resources, broaden their knowledge horizons and improve their cross-cultural communication abilities.

### 4.4 Improving Teaching Modes

The current college English teaching focuses on cultivating students' English critical thinking ability, which is conducive to improving their comprehensive quality, and its importance cannot be ignored.<sup>[7]</sup> In order to effectively enhance the critical thinking ability of college students, teachers need to combine English classroom teaching, extracurricular practical activities, and self-directed learning to construct appropriate training modes. Teaching activities in class: Teachers should

integrate the cultivation of critical thinking ability into classroom teaching through teaching activities, such as discussion, debate, and problem-solving, allowing students to exercise their critical thinking ability in practical applications. Meanwhile, teachers should utilize information technology, such as online courses, multimedia resources, etc., to provide students with rich learning materials and interactive platforms to stimulate their thinking and discussion. Extracurricular practical activities after class: Teachers organize students to participate in English related practical activities, such as English seminars, debate competitions, Model United Nations, etc., so that students can exercise their thinking ability in practical scenarios, improve their critical thinking ability and cross-cultural communication ability. Experts from both inside and outside the college can be invited to exchange ideas, and extracurricular academic lectures are organized to broaden the students' knowledge horizons. Students' self-directed learning: Teachers encourage students reading original English books, articles and papers, participate in online courses to improve their thinking ability and improve the quality of English teaching.

### 5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the current situation and problems of cultivating the critical thinking ability of college students, proposes a mode for cultivating their thinking ability based on college English curriculum, and explores the importance of improving the quality of English course teaching. Cultivating the critical thinking ability of college students is a long-term and complex project that requires us to reform and innovate from multiple aspects. This study only provides a preliminary framework for exploring the cultivation mode of critical thinking ability, hoping to provide certain reference value for the reform of English education in China. Future research can further explore the application effects of different training modes in practical teaching, in order to provide more scientific and effective ways to improve the thinking ability of college students. Although this study explores the cultivation of critical thinking ability for college students, there are still some shortcomings, for example, this study does not have comparative research on the critical

thinking ability of college students from different disciplines and grades, thus unable to comprehensively understand the development of their critical thinking ability. In addition, the evaluation method for the critical thinking ability of college students in this study is not yet perfect, and further research is needed to develop more scientific and effective evaluation methods. In future research, we will continue to delve into these issues in order to better promote the cultivation and development of critical thinking ability for college students.

### Acknowledgments

This article is the key project of "The Construction of the Path to Improve the Teaching Academic Ability of English Teachers in College for Nationalities" of the program of "2021-2023 Higher Education Talent Training Quality and Teaching Reform Project" (project number: JG202146), and it is also the key project of "College English Teaching Community Guided by Moral Education and Talent Cultivation in Local Ethnic Colleges"(project number: X-JG202347).

### References

- [1] Sun Youzhong. Foreign Language Education and the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability. *Academic Review*, 2015 (03):22-23.
- [2] Paul, Richard & Elder, Linda. *Thinker's Guides Series*. Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press, 2007:2.
- [3] Louise Katz. *Critical Thinking and Persuasive Writing*. Xinhua Publishing House, 2021:3.
- [4] Facione, Peter & Gittens, Carol Ann. *THINK Critically*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2015:43.
- [5] Richard Paul/Linda Elder. *CRITICAL THINKING Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life*. China Renmin University Press, 2019:17.
- [6] Richard Paul/Linda Elder. *CRITICAL THINKING Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*. China Machine Press, 2023:9.
- [7] Lin Hong. A Study on the Construction of a Model for Cultivating Critical Thinking Ability in College English Teaching. *Journal of Heilongjiang Teachers Development College* 2022, (09): 151-153.