Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 6, No. 3, 2023

Application of Critical Thinking in Improving Oral Proficiency of Chinese Universities English Majors

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Abstract: As critical thinking has been gradually valued and applied in various fields, people begin to attach importance to the cultivation and improvement of critical thinking. In education field, many educators and experts have begun to focus their research in critical thinking's theories. How to improve students' ability of critical thinking has always been a concern of educators who have been trying to combine critical thinking with curriculums. Based on the concept and definition of critical thinking, this study focuses on the application of critical thinking in improving oral proficiency of English majors. To investigate the relationship between critical thinking and oral English, we designed a questionnaire with the related information and collected a total of 62 college English majors' views and feedbacks of it. The result shows that most students have awareness of thinking and analyzing from different perspectives. They also believe that the improvement of critical thinking skills influence and promote the clarity and logic in their oral expression. In addition, this essay had interviews with some teachers who are teaching in the university in online or offline form to know how they apply critical thinking into their class. In this essay, we will explore the concept of critical thinking, examine its importance in various contexts such as oral English in education field and shed light on effective strategies for enhancing and developing the skills of thinking and speaking.

Keywords: Critical Thinking; Oral English Proficiency; Universities/Colleges English Majors.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Definition and History of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze objectively and independently, and evaluate information or arguments in a logical and systematic manner. It involves skills such as questioning, observing, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and so on, which can let the information to reach well-reasoned conclusions and make wise decisions. It enables individuals to think critically about the complex issue and solve the problem creatively by considering from different perspectives. It is an essential skill in education and in various aspect of life or area as if helps people navigate through a large amount of information and make intelligent decision.

Critical thinking has a long and rich history. It can date back to ancient civilizations and has evolved over centuries. The roots of critical thinking emerge with the teachings of Socrates who emphasized questioning, reasoning and examining assumptions to discover the truth and clarity deeper and deeper. Plato and Aristotle further developed critical thinking by emphasizing logic and rational analysis.

During the Renaissance, critical thinking experienced a revival as scholars like Francis Bacon, who emphasized the need for empirical evidence and logical reasoning in the pursuit of truth.

In the 20th century educational reformers such as John Dewey indicated it as an essential skill and a habit of active, persistent and careful consideration with a scientific attitude of mind, which emphasized the importance of reflective thinking problem – solving and evaluating information from multiple perspectives. Since the 40s of the 20th century, critical thinking has received more and more academic attention in education field[1]. In 1987, a statement of critical thinking by Michael Scriven & Richard Paul was presented at the 8th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform[2].

Today Critical thinking is a vital skill that plays a fundamental part in different areas, especially in education field[3], which is widely recognized as a crucial skill in education and others professional fields. In educational field, critical thinking and its application have gained significant recognition and importance, not only for educators but also for learners or students. The emphasis is shifting towards encouraging students to ask questions, think deeply and challenge assumptions instead of accepting what they have learned without any reflective thinking.

Overall, critical thinking and its development have been highly valued in academic and professional setting as it can evolve and shape people's understandings of effective thinking and decision - making processes.

1.2. The Necessity of Improving Oral English

Oral English also known as spoken English is the ability to communicate effectively and fluently in the English language. Nowadays, with the development of the globalization of world economy and culture, various languages are circulating throughout the nation. As the second language with the widest range of learning, English is the official language or one of the official languages of nearly 60 sovereign counties, therefore speaking plays a crucial role in various aspects of life, including education occasion and other social interactions. It is widely shared that to speak a language fluently allows people to express their thoughts, ideas, emotions, etc., which can facilitate effective interaction with others. Oral English skills are essential for academic especially for the students those studying in English-speaking countries as well as taking English courses or examinations. To speak in English fluently is of great importance in

presentations and discussions. The capability of spoken English enables individuals to participate in cultural exchange by communication with people from all over the world with diverse linguistic and various cultural backgrounds, for mastering oral English can greatly enhance the experience when travelling to English-speaking countries.

In conclude, to improve oral English skills is key. As long as a person master these skills, it will be benefit throughout his or her lifetime.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, critical thinking is widely used in education. In educational field, educators focus on cultivating students' critical thinking skills and how to integrate critical thinking skills with the curriculum they are about to teach. It has become the key points in their career. In addition, through the guidance of educators how do students adapt to their teaching approaches and employ what they have learned.

For critical thinking, John Dewey – an influential American philosopher contributed the concept of "reflective thinking" and encourage people to have a continuous and rigorous mindset to think and reflect. Some scholars defined that the application of critical thinking is wide including self – disciplined, self – directed, etc.[4], thus a critical thinker is a person who has the skills of critical thinking or has been educated in those disciplines[5]. Previous studies have emphasized that critical thinking is a tool for people to think and approach challenges with a rational and reflective mindset.

For current status of oral English teaching in universities, studies over the past two decades have provided important information and problems on it that the oral English teaching curriculum in Chinese universities still need to be strengthen. Liu J. H. mentioned that the phenomenon of critical thinking loss of learner' oral expression, he proposed the following training strategies: using mind maps, teaching with critical thinking tasks, etc. [6]. Wang L. indicated that a number of lessons just staying at some simple conversations in a state of "mindlessness" that they won't approach and analyze problems in a critical and independent way [7]. In Xu J.'s study he found that most of the content learned in the intensive English reading class in college is witty and interesting stories which are not difficult to think and student's thinking level is easy to stay on the surface understanding of problems, lack of deep thinking, criticism of other people's views and self – innovation [8]. It can be seemed that the situation in oral English curriculum need to be changed. The students are required to learn not only how to speak in English but also how to analyze questions in critical mind while the educators are required to develop useful and suitable education methods for learners. What Liu had indicated was that in universities how to teach in an effective way and how to learn in an effective way have been an important question for both educators and learners[6].

In this essay, we will pay more attention on Chinese universities' teachers and the students who majors in English. This study is aimed at a couple of further questions on the relation between critical thinking and oral expression. The first is the main aspects of the improvement in oral proficiency in Chinese universities English majors by using critical thinking teaching method; the second is the integration on these skills and how the educators employ critical thinking in their class; and the third is how the English major students improve their ability of speaking and self – confidence under the environment of critical thinking.

3. Methods

In this research, we took the students in English major in Chinese universities as the research subject. We searched for a great deal of studies and designed a questionnaire with 16 questions related to their learning and critical thinking, and 62 students in total completed the questionnaire. In order to make this study more professional and persuasive, we designed some questions and had interviews with some professors and teachers who are teaching some courses which is relevant with English reading, English public speaking, English writing and other courses in the university in the form of online or offline. After collecting a series of data we conducted research on the relation between critical thinking skills and oral expression abilities.

4. Findinds & Discussion

4.1. The Main Aspects of Critical Thinking for the Improvement of Oral Proficiency of Chinese University English Majors

Critical thinking focuses on developing the ability to think independently and analytically to make well – reasoned decisions and judgements, which underlines that students should thinking from different aspects, while oral proficiency focuses on the ability to communicate effectively and fluently.

How the ability of critical thinking influences the ability of speaking in Chinese colleges English majors is that students should express their viewpoints in spoken communication or speech. In order to find in what specific ways critical thinking affects oral English, there is a multiple - choice question for the students majoring in English who have taken courses that apply critical thinking or used to think critically that what aspects do they think critical thinking is effective in improving their speaking skills in this questionnaire. See Figure 1, The result of this question found clear support for the development of expressive skills whose rate arrived at 90%, which means that almost 54 people chose this option. Besides, the application of critical thinking and the expansion of vocabulary in oral occasion are inferior to the former one.

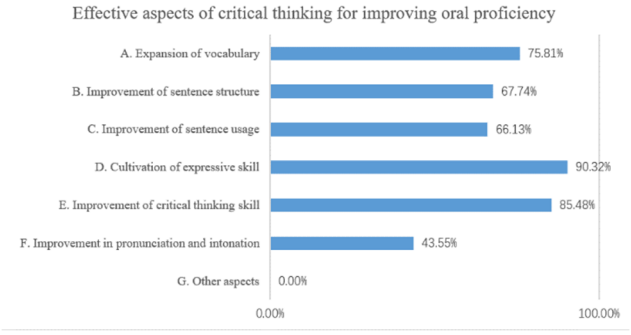


Figure 1. The result of effective aspects of critical thinking for improving oral proficiency

There is another question – how do you think critical thinking has had an impact on the improvement of speaking skills, beside the option of enhance the critical thinking skill, improving the ability of oral English is second to it.

According to the results, it shows that under the influence of critical thinking, there was a significant increase of students' speaking skills. Critical thinking enhances language proficiency. As English majors, speaking is one of the vital

parts in English learning, and there are lots of chances for them to have oral presentations or debates. Critical thinking helps college English majors think about logical reasoning from various aspects and enables them to structure their thoughts. It provides ideas and evidences for them, which allowing them to articulate their thoughts and opinions more effectively during oral communication or others.

4.2. The Combination of Critical Thinking Skills and Oral Expression Skills

Combining critical thinking skills and oral expression skills can enhance students' ability to effectively articulate their thoughts and ideas. Oral English might be one of the most important courses for the students who majors in English such as normal English, translation, business English and so on. Nowadays, with the popularization of critical thinking in the education field, domestic universities and colleges have been advocating the cultivation of students' critical thinking abilities. In order to cultivate students' critical thinking skills educators have gradually infused critical thinking – related theories into their English teaching class or other lessons, providing students with an environment to apply critical thinking in their thinking processes, which quietly promotes their critical thinking abilities.

Most of the students in English major indicate that critical thinking skills have been frequently used in the curriculums like Integrated English course, Advanced English course, English Writing course and English Public Speaking course hence we had some interviews with some teachers who are teaching these courses in the university in online or offline form.

Based on the questions of the combination of critical thinking skills and oral expression skills, a teacher – Miss Chao teaching in English Public Speaking course shared her teaching method in her class. She gave us an example of persuasive speech, which is a type of speech that aims to convince the audience to adopt a particular viewpoint or take a specific action. The goal is to sway the audience's opinions, beliefs or behaviors through effective communication techniques. She mentioned how to finish a persuasive speech:

(1) Students are asked to search for a large amount of information related to their topics; according to their supporting point, they will have their own arguments as such the materials of affirmative side and negative side.
(2) Then they are required to evaluate the materials of affirmative side and negative side they had found so that they can get the supporting evidence.
(3) After analyzing the supporting evidence, the students can draw a conclusion. It is the key part before they convert their supporting evidence into supporting arguments.
(4) At last, the students have had sufficient arguments and their minds have already outlined the structure of their speeches so they can create they speeches to persuade others. A persuasive speech is completed.

Overall the steps of making a persuasive speech it can be summarized with 4 words: researching, analyzing, describing and establishing. The first three parts focus the application of critical thinking while the last part focus on oral expression. Researching, analyzing and describing applies critical thinking skills, helping to collect more information and think about if from different perspective, which provides sufficient and logical evidences for creating and establishing. It prepares the condition for the speech that it makes the content of the speech more logical and adequate and the speaker can complete their speech more fluent. This has a certain effect on improving speaking proficiency. This is also an effective combination of critical thinking and oral expression.

Meanwhile, Miss Chao also mentioned 6 stages of Bloom's Taxonomy of learning [9] [10], including remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating. Rooted in Bloom's Taxonomy, she applies it to her teaching methods. For remembering and understanding, the students need to know clearly about what they are going to learn; in applying and analyzing, they should apply the knowledge into practical problems; evaluating and creating are to evaluate the arguments from different aspects or degrees, then work can be created. About creation, there can be many ways to generate presentation. For instance, in English speaking class the focus is on presenting in spoke form, in writing class the main focus is primarily on presenting in written form.

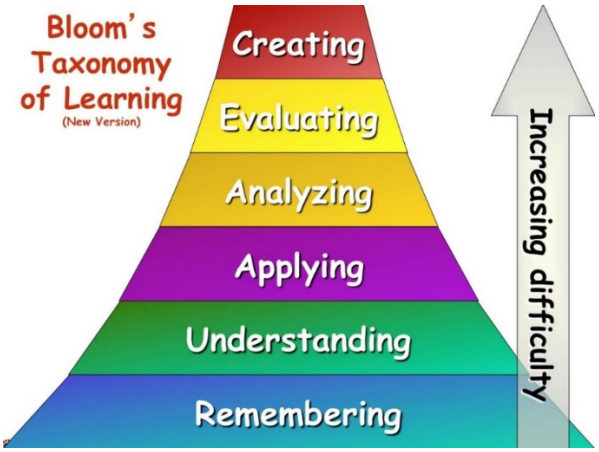


Figure 2. The Bloom' s Taxonomy of learning

4.3. How do Chinese Universities English Majors Improve Their Oral Self – Confidence and Communication in Critical Thinking Environment

In such an environment to learn, based on this condition, some relevant questions have been added in this questionnaire. For example, accounted for more than 96% students said that they will first gather diverse information and analyze it when they are making decisions. The answer to similar is the same – over 90% students held the idea that they were analyzing when they meet some problems. What's more, many of them had an idea that critical thinking includes questioning and evaluating things, examining an issue from multiple viewpoints or approaches, and integrating both factual evidence and logical reasoning. A possible explanation of this might be that most of the students have an awareness of thinking from a critical thinking perspective when they encounter problems or make decisions.

In addition, the data indicated the problem needed to be overcome in the real – life oral communication practice most. It revealed that over 90% and 76% students had the problem in confidence and vocabulary, while most of them have the demand to improve their communication skills.

In order to solve this question, we also ask the students how to enhance their oral expression ability while they can improve their critical thinking ability. In this multiple choice, it is evident from the result that 55 people chose to participate in the activities like debate and public speaking contest, in other words, the proportion of this option had risen to 91.67%.

There is no doubt that participating in a debate or public speaking contest has several advantages. Engaging in debates or public speaking contest requires strong oral skills. Students will learn how to articulate their thoughts clearly, structure their arguments effectively and express themselves confidently. Also, critical thinking skills will be improved by developing a deeper understand of complex issues. Though these activities, these skills can benefit Chinese universities English majors in various aspects of life such as presentations, interviews and interpersonal communication. All of these can help them develop their self – confidence and communication skills.

The Second option was taking part in analyzing real – life case and expressing one's own viewpoints in the guidance of teachers and the third was participating in a group discussion. Both the options offer several advantages in education settings. Analyzing real - life cases often involve group discussion collaborative work and shared decision - making. Furthermore, it requires students to think critically assume multiple viewpoints, which cultivates their ability to consider evidence and different alternatives. It's a great chance for English majors to learn from each other and express what they had thought. Moreover, this promotes teamwork communication and cooperation among them, preparing them for their future professional environments. Meanwhile students can have a process in improving their confidence and communication.

To sum up, in terms of the students' oral self - confidence and communication, it is vital to create a chance or a supportive and engaging atmosphere that encourages students to experiment take risks and grow their abilities over time.

5. Conclusion

Critical thinking is recognized as a vital skill in education and various disciplines. It influences people's decision-making processes and shaping their different points of views in everyday lives. In today's information – saturated world, the ability to think critically has become increasingly necessary.

The application of critical thinking plays a significant role in enhancing the oral proficiency of Chinese university English majors. By encouraging students to analyze, evaluate and synthesize information critical thinking fosters the development of effective communication skills. It empowers students to express their thoughts and ideas with clarity and coherence while also enabling them to critically assess and respond to various perspectives.

In order to nurture critical thinking skills among the students, educators also spare no efforts to enhance their teaching methods to combine these skills. They usually instruct the students to develop it and give some feedback for students. The persuasive speech in the English public speaking is a typical example by using critical thinking. Students organize their thoughts, structures and arguments when they using the skills of critical thinking; on the contrary, expressing ideas orally and frequently relies in the ability to think critically tant can provides adequate points and respond appropriately and persuasively. It also offers a sense of confidence for students to preform themselves. Furthermore, educators teach the students how to develop their problem – solving abilities and use the abilities to overcome linguistic challenges and adapt to different communicative contexts. Through the cultivation of critical thinking, English majors gain the ability to participate in meaningful discussions and other group activities actively and articulate their opinions confidently.

Overall, the integration of critical thinking methodologies into English language education can lead to improvements in the oral proficiency of English majors. Critical thinking and oral expression are interwined. Developing these skills in tandem can lead to more effective communication as critical thinking promotes clarity logical coherence and persuasive arguments in oral expression. Similarly oral expression provides chances for critical thinking by demanding individuals to analyze plenty of information, consider a variety of dimensions and join in evaluative discussions. As English becomes a crucial medium of global communication, nurturing critical thinking skills among the English majors in universities will not only allow them to excel academically but also empower them to thrive in an interconnected and rapidly changing future.

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