

A Study on the Current Situation of English Majors' Critical Thinking Skills in the Context of New Liberal Arts Construction

Yanjuan Zhang^{1,*}, Jinqian Liu²

¹*School of Humanities and Social Sciences, North University of China, Taiyuan, China.*

²*Department of English, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, China*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the context of new liberal arts construction, how foreign language education promotes the development of students' critical thinking ability has become a key proposition to deepen the reform of foreign language education and teaching at present. Traditional English teaching focuses too much on explaining and teaching the language, neglecting the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills. This study takes majors in the college of foreign languages of a university as the survey object and adopts the questionnaire survey method to investigate the current state of critical thinking ability of English majors in the context of new liberal arts construction.

Keywords: New Liberal Arts Construction, English Majors, Critical Thinking Skills

1. Introduction

The construction of "New Liberal Arts" requires colleges to cultivate innovative talents of the new era with international vision and competitiveness, and the cultivation of critical thinking ability is indispensable. In the foreign language field, scholars have been trying to integrate the development of critical thinking ability into the teaching process of foreign language skills^[1]. However, traditional foreign language teaching fails to pay sufficient attention to the improvement of students' critical thinking ability, and foreign language classroom teaching oriented to retelling and memorization fails to realize the organic integration of language proficiency and the cultivation of critical thinking ability^[2]. Based on this, this study conducted a series of empirical research to provide strong support for the specific model of cultivating students' critical thinking skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 New Liberal Arts Construction

The construction of New Liberal Arts is a government-led national project in the context of China's higher education continuing to promote the construction of double first-class^[3], which will surely have a far-reaching impact on China's foreign language education as well as the cultivation of talents for quite a long time to come. The core of the new liberal arts lies in the change of educational concepts and methods. In the seminars on the construction of new liberal arts, experts have pointed out that the construction of new liberal arts needs to realize the transformation of "from discipline-oriented to demand-oriented, from professional segmentation to cross-fertilization, and from service-adaptation to support and leadership". As one of the "four new" new liberal arts, the essence is still liberal arts, but in the process of conforming to the development trend of higher education to highlight the characteristics of "new", which is not to subvert the essential attributes of the liberal arts, but to give the construction of the liberal arts a new connotation of the times^[4].

The cultivation of foreign language talents in the context of the new liberal arts requires whole-person education, emphasizing the combination of competence, knowledge and personality shaping. The new national standard published in 2018 stipulates that students majoring in foreign languages need to have the ability to use a foreign language, the ability to appreciate literature, intercultural competence, critical thinking ability and creative ability^[5]. Critical thinking ability is the basis of various specific abilities. In the context of new liberal arts construction, the cultivation goal of foreign language talents should have a clearer description of the path to improve critical thinking ability.

2.2 Critical Thinking Ability

The English word for discernment is “critical thinking”, where “critical” comes from the Greek words “kriticos” (“keen judgment”) and “kriterion” (standard). from the Greek words “kriticos” (keen judgment) and “kriterion” (standard). Etymologically, critical thinking can be defined as “conscious thought leading to reasoned judgments using appropriate evaluative criteria”^[6]. Facione^[7], the leader of The Delphi Project, proposed that critical thinking ability consists of two dimensions, cognitive ability and affective traits, which mainly refers to people’s ability to interpret, analyze, reason, evaluate, explain, self-regulate, and solve problems, and that people with a tendency toward critical thinking ability are more likely to use these abilities. Wen Qiufang proposed the “Layered Theoretical Model of Critical Thinking Ability”, which divides it into two levels: the first level is meta-critical thinking ability, which refers to the skills of planning, checking, adjusting and evaluating one’s own thinking; and the second level is critical thinking ability, which includes the dimensions of cognition and personality traits^[8]. From a new perspective, Yuhui Li^[9] points out that critical thinking skills include the following three main aspects: formal logic, dialectical analysis and critical thinking, emphasizing that learners are able to view things in a comprehensive, connected and developmental way and make clear discernment about the authenticity of external information.

To sum up, we find that critical thinking ability is the ability that can be monitored and adjusted in real time with self-reflection as the source, evaluative judgment as the core, and deep analysis as the key. In comparison, the author agrees more with the definition of critical thinking ability by Wen Qiufang, whose theory formation not only draws on the excellent domestic and foreign critical thinking theories and research results, but also carries out a wide range of scientific empirical research, which basically conforms to the characteristics of foreign language learners in China.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Problem

- (1) What is the current status of English majors’ critical thinking skills?
- (2) What characterizes the critical thinking

skills of English majors?

3.2 Research Participants

In this study, 120 junior students majoring in English at a university were randomly selected to participate in this survey, with 16.67% of male students and 83.3% of female students.

3.3 Research Tools

In order to inquire into the changes of students’ critical thinking disposition, the author adopts Wen’s questionnaire. It has passed the reliability test, namely 0.87, and is scientific. And it comprises fifty closed questions. Using Likert’s six level scale, the critical thinking dispositions are investigated from the eight dimensions of analysis, curiosity, systematicity, self-confidence, truth-seeking, cognitive maturity, open-mindedness and justice. The options range from “very disagree” to “very agree”, with corresponding scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 respectively. Based on the reading ability and cognition of senior one students, the author changes the option setting from level 6 to level 5 (1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not certain, 4=agree, 5=totally agree) to fit the tested students nicely. These eight dimensions can be grouped into four tiers: intellectualness, emotionality, rationality and morality. Then the first two are classified as academic and the last two are social. The academic is chiefly related to curriculum learning, while the social is bound up with interpersonal activities. Intellectualness is closely interrelated to the knowledge layer; emotionality shows the emotional level; rationality means the degree of rational thinking in human interaction; morality has a bearing on social behavior norms. Classifying the eight dimensions of critical thinking dispositions into distinct levels is not only convenient for educators to clarify the internal relationship between them, but also helpful to identify the troubles existing in students’ critical thinking disposition and provide targeted training.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overall Level of Critical Thinking Ability

The mean value of the scale’s scores in each dimension is 3 or more for positive tendency sentences (representing a strong performance in

a trait), 2 or less for negative tendency, and 2.1-2.9 for wavering. By analogy, those with a total score of 24 or more also show a positive tendency, those with a score of less than 16 a negative tendency, and those with a score of

16-23.9 a wobbly tendency. The total score of this sample is 26.448, which is more than 24, indicating that the overall tendency of English majors in this school is positive in terms of critical thinking ability.

Table 1 Results of Descriptive Analysis of Critical Thinking Skills.

Category	M	SD	Level	M	SD	Order
Academic	3.092	0.45921	Intellectualness	3.7228	0.44248	1
			Emotionality	3.3179	0.3471	2
Social	3.5193	0.3071	Rationality	2.9131	0.55408	4
			Morality	3.2708	0.45037	3

As indicated in Table 1, the mean scores of English majors' critical thinking ability in the academic and social dimensions are 3.092 (>3) and 3.5193 (>3) respectively, which indicates that the students' critical thinking ability tendency is positive in both course work and interpersonal activities. In addition, the English majors of the university showed positive tendencies in the intellectual, emotional and moral dimensions, but negative tendency in the rational dimension, which indicated that the students themselves lacked the sense of discernment and the spirit of exploration of knowledge.

4.2 The Characteristics of Critical Thinking Ability

As shown in Table 2, only the cognitive maturity has a mean score of 2.8167 (2.1-2.9), indicating that students rely mainly on perceptual descriptions rather than rational analysis when arguing their views. Among the seven dimensions with positive tendencies, inquisitiveness (3.7889) has the highest score, followed by analyticity (3.6567) and justice (3.3639). It shows that students are generally enthusiastic about new things and open to acquire new skills. It also shows that students prefer tests that require analytical thinking to those based on memorization alone. In addition, the data on the justice dimension shows that students believe that problems should be

handled objectively and fairly, but they believe that it is customary for people to deal with problems in their own interests.

In terms of systematicity, the students have poor resistance to difficulties, and lack the perseverance and tenacity to persevere with long-term goals. The above data also indicate that although the contemporary college students are independent and confident in their behavior, they still need to develop their confidence and ability as team leaders. The truth-seeking dimension shows that students believe that the nature of most things is elusive and that objective truth often does not exist. But even when they disagree with others, they are willing to listen to others' points of view. The data also suggest that students do not tend to agree with the practice of majority rule. This paradox suggests that students embody a pessimistic ideological tendency in the pursuit of truth, but adopt an objective and open-minded approach in specific life scenarios. In the dimension of students' open-mindedness tendency, students believe that they have the right to express their opinions even if others are wrong in their ideas, and they also think that they do not necessarily need to listen. This suggests that students' willingness to listen to others and to persuade others is not evident in their willingness to share their opinions and ideas with others, and that there is still room for improvement in their openness.

Table 2 Results of Descriptive Analysis of the Dimensions of Critical Thinking Ability

Dimension	N	M	SD	Order
Analyticity	120	3.6567	0.50367	2
Inquisitiveness	120	3.7889	0.48018	1
Systematicity	120	3.2833	0.49853	5
Self-confidence	120	3.3511	0.38197	4
Truth-seeking	120	3.0095	0.55787	7
Cognitive maturity	120	2.8167	0.65032	8
Justice	120	3.3639	0.40185	3

5. Conclusion

This study used the questionnaire to explore the level and characteristics of English majors' critical thinking ability, and it shows that English majors' critical thinking skills are relatively weak, and they think that the process of learning is the process of transferring and receiving knowledge, and they lack the spirit of questioning and criticizing. There are some limitations in this study. The results are limited due to the limited sample size, and more effective teaching strategies should be explored to cultivate students' critical thinking ability in future studies.

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