



Cultivating critical thinking skills among English major students of ethnic minority universities in China

Ya Luo^{1,2}, Prasart Nuangchalerm³

¹PhD Candidate in Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

²Guizhou Minzu University, Guiyang City, Guizhou Province, People's Republic of China

³Faculty of Education, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Corresponding author: prasart.n@msu.ac.th

Abstract

Writing course is one of the core courses of English majors in China, which is a course combining applying educational theories and practice into authentic teaching environment. The writing course focuses on training and cultivating students' effective writing expression ability, comprehensive language usage and critical thinking skills. In view of the current situation of the lack of critical thinking skills, the paper aims to discuss the theoretical and empirical researches on the cultivation of thinking abilities in related majors in order to explore how to train critical thinking skills in the cultivation of writing proficiency among English major students in ethnic minority universities in China.

Keywords : English major students; ethnic minority; critical thinking; writing proficiency

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1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, the Western countries, especially the United States, began to pay more and more attention to the cultivation and researches on critical thinking skills of college students. In the 21st century, critical thinking skills has been widely valued by foreign universities (Luo, 2021; Xhomara, 2022). As a result, critical thinking skills is seen as an important part of higher education. In addition, critical thinking skills refer to the skills of individuals to think consciously with appropriate evaluation criteria and finally make rational judgments in order to decide the true value of the world (Dahl et.al., 2018; Uyar et.al., 2019). Apart from researches on western countries, Chinese scholars gradually pay attention to the cultivation on critical

thinking skills and its application on different aspects of language teaching and learning. Huang (1998) firstly had a research on critical thinking skills to English majors in college and pointed out the "absence of Critical thinking skills" of English major students in China. In the meantime, he argued that the "absence of critical thinking skills" was the commonest language teaching and learning phenomenon.

Consequently, his research had aroused great concern on the current situation of critical thinking skills and its application into language teaching in Chinese colleges. In the following, Wen et.al. (2009) developed a critical thinking skills model based on the research on Chinese college students. In the following period, Chinese scholars, for example, the cultivation



on different aspects of non-English major students and English major students (Li & Ni, 2011; Sun & Henrichsen, 2011). From what has been discussed above, the cultivation on critical thinking skills has been aroused a great attention in both western countries and China. Developing related teaching models and designed curricula can help both teachers and students perform better in language learning and teaching.

In recent years, the cultivation and researches on critical thinking skills among English major students have attracted great attention in China. Critical thinking skills refers to the skills to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, infer, self-regulate, and interpret on learning matters (Ennis 2002), which is an important ability that can improve innovation ability and comprehensive quality of students. The writing skill is commonly believed as the core skill of English major students in the phase of undergraduate, not only does the daily language learning need, but also the fulfillment on test taking (Zhan, 2021).

More importantly, English writing course is closely related to the training and cultivation of students' critical thinking skills from the aspects of preconception, theme elaboration, model essay evaluation and analysis. In addition, taking the English major students in ethnic minority universities into consideration, the overall speculative personality tendency of ethnic minority students majored in English is lack of critical thinking skills. Cultivation on critical thinking skills among ethnic minority students majored in English is an urgent task for English teachers in China by exploring and constructing effective teaching models and designed curricula.

2. Methodology

The traditional college English evaluation system in Chinese universities does not reflect the evaluation of critical thinking skills and innovation ability of college students. Moreover, it is commonly believed that no effective evaluation system or process is designed for ethnic minority students in

college. The main way of testing students is to evaluate the basic language skills, students, therefore, only pay attention to the exam paper results, memorizing grammatical structures and vocabulary, and memorizing the content information in the textbook. It is thought that critical thinking skills cannot be cultivated in this kind of classroom.

English writing class itself is an extremely practical course, and the evaluation of students should be multi-way, multi-angle and all-round. The formative evaluation and the summative evaluation should be combined, and the language knowledge, language skills, thinking ability are as well organically combined in English writing class in order to improve both writing skill and critical thinking skills of college students. For the ethnic minority students majored in English, the methods of teaching students should be taken more consideration as they have different language education background, unique ethnic minority language and living environment.

English language teachers should set different evaluation methods, evaluation content and evaluation objectives in different stages and levels. According to different writing tasks, online and offline writing tasks are used to understand students' thinking dynamic thoughts and grasp their thinking conditions. In English writing practices, the teachers should not only evaluate their language skills, but also examine students' intercultural communication ability. In addition, designed tasks for investigating the logical thinking ability, problems inquiry ability, problem analysis and problem-solving ability should be applied in teaching English writing to ethnic minority students majored in English, and at last, a feedback should be laid out immediately to students in order to analyze their own learning problems on time.

From what has been discussed above, through self-evaluation of students, teachers to student evaluation and students to students evaluation, it could stimulate active participation among ethnic minority students



majored in English, strengthen the intercultural communication and the interaction between teachers and students, and provide students with multi-angle information feedback, so as to provide support and guarantee for self-correction, self-adjustment and self-assessment among ethnic minority students majored in English. From all designed activities in the English writing class to ethnic minority students majored in English, the cultivation on critical thinking skills could be achieved in order to assist students to fulfill high order thinking ability.

The cultivation on critical thinking skills is one of the main goals of college English language teaching, English writing course is as one of the English undergraduate core course among English major students. English writing course

should be taken the cultivation on critical thinking skills as the main purpose, and apply the designed writing tasks to cultivate critical thinking skills in writing course within each teaching and learning steps. On the basis of the teaching and learning factors affected critical thinking skills, the critical thinking atmosphere, teaching design, teaching methods, classroom assessment should be stimulated to cultivate critical thinking skills of students.

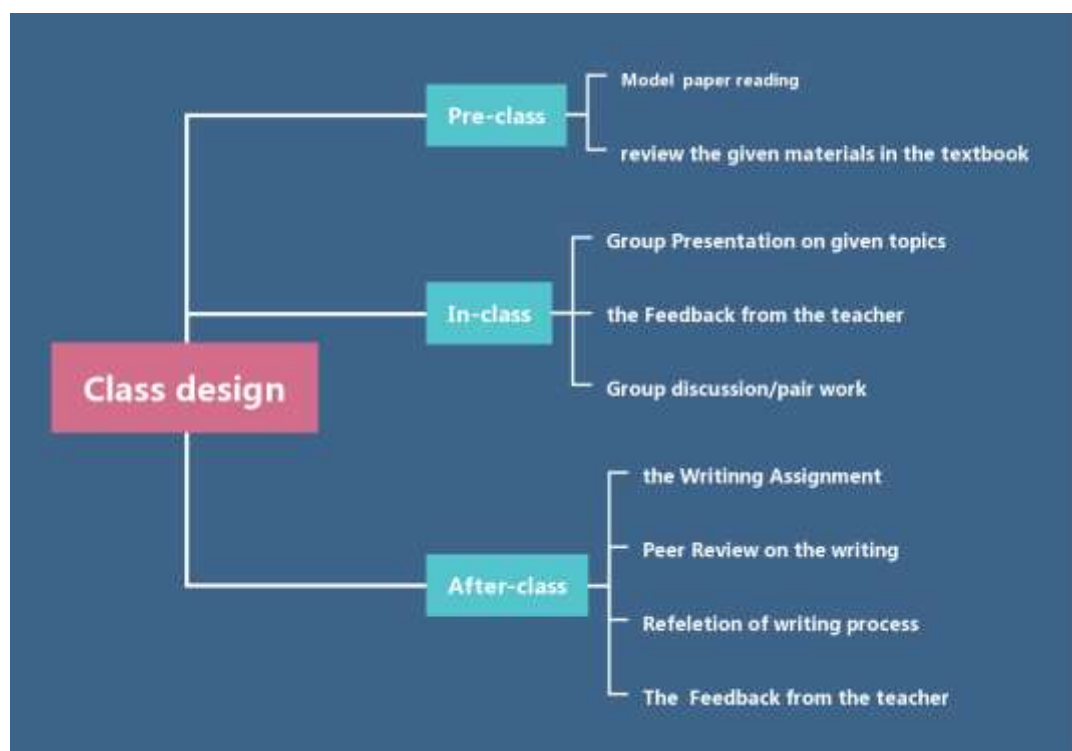
With the consideration on teaching English writing to ethnic minority students majored in English, the textbook (Christopher Green, 2016) *“College English Creative Writing for Academic Purpose”* is used in the teaching process. The aim and the teaching content are displayed in Table 1.

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Table 1. General information of designed writing class

Units	Teaching points
Unit 1: Principles of Academic writing	Structure of academic writing Language of academic writing Cohesion in academic writing
Unit 2: The process of Writing	Analyzing the topic question Planning your writing
Unit 5: Writing Comparison and Contrast Texts	Patterns of comparison and contrast texts Contrast clauses conjunctions
Unit 6: Writing Problems-solution Texts	Organizing a problem-solution text Sequencing ideas Identifying cause-and-effect sequences Cause-and-effect sentences
Unit 7: Writing Argumentative Texts	Writing balanced arguments Synthesizing information Expressing advantages and disadvantages
Unit 11: Academic Vocabulary	Using key words Words surrounding key words





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Figure 1. The arrangement of one class

From the Figure 1, it can be seen that three phases of class design are conducted in the teaching process of teaching English writing to the students. Before the class, students are required to fulfill the pre-class activities, for instance, preview on the selected writing topics or model papers, which provide students more room and opportunities to study independently. In the second phase, it is considered that group discussion and pair work can be the tools to cultivate critical thinking skills with brainstorming, in result of encouraging students to share different opinions on the selected topics. Taking one class activity as an example, students are required to discussed the selected topic: “Are online friends real friends?”. Not only are the personal ideas sharing in class, but also evaluating the points from peers by asking questions, for instance, “Why do you thinking you could make real friends online and give examples.”

In the part of class, critical thinking skills and the ability of synthesizing information are improved by conducting the classroom activities. In the phase of the writing class

design, feedback from the teacher and peer review are considered as the essential methods to train both critical thinking skills and English writing skill of students (Mei & Zhanfang, 2019). It is a teaching step for students to evaluate both their peers and themselves in writing the selected topic with appropriate grammatical structures, academic vocabulary and ideas. In addition, the reflection refers to guide students to reflect on the process of teaching and learning after learning each unit, in particular by summarizing the improvement on their own writing skill and critical thinking skills. In the step of the feedback from the teacher can stimulate the enthusiasm of students to learn the next module, teachers, therefore, should give feedback on the problems which are found in the assignment review to students in time, so as to improve the writing ability of students. It is commonly believed that it is conducive to implement such activities in teaching English writing.

3. Result and Discussion

It is considered that ethnic minority students are group of students with their own ethnic

minority language and living in some developing cities or counties, compared with metropolitan cities. For a long time, English classroom is the main place for students to learn English in universities in ethnic minority areas. Due to the weak foundation of students in learning English, teachers mainly use the traditional teaching method to instruct the target language points with explanation pattern by teachers themselves. Moreover, less interaction is presented between teachers and students in class in result of lack of chances for independent thinking and analyzing.

Within this kind of learning and teaching environment and facts, it is commonly believed that it is difficult to cultivate critical thinking skills for both teachers and students (Tang, 2016; Zhang & Kim, 2018). As a consequence, students lack of ability to appropriately express themselves in English. In addition, the language teaching on English major in ethnic minority universities aims to improve language skills rather than the development of humanistic quality. By analyzing the curriculum in one ethnic minority university, more than 70% of the English courses are skills-based courses, while the humanities courses, such as literature and cross-culture, are very limited.

Since most ethnic minority students majored in English have their own ethnic minority languages, English is actually the third language after Mandarin (Chinese). Without the influence of humanistic general courses, it is difficult for students to experience and make progress in English learning. Moreover, professional knowledge, for example, memorizing both grammatical structures and vocabulary, is considered as the predominate points that will be introduced to students, instead, the cultivation on critical thinking skills hasn't received much attention in English language teaching in ethnic minority universities.

Lastly, testing is the commonest way to examine the language proficiency of students in college, examination-oriented education,

therefore, hinders the development of critical thinking skills of ethnic minority students majored in English. The revolution on the English language teaching is contiguously changing, however, no matter how the revolution develops, language learning is still linked to various English level proficiency tests. The teaching aim of teachers is to improve students' test-taking ability. In class, teachers pay more attention to cultivating students' language skills, explaining language points, and focusing on memorizing vocabulary and grammar. As a result, it is not conducive to the development of students' critical thinking skills.

Taking what has been mentioned into consideration, in the ethnic minority areas, when the English foundation of students majored in English is relatively weak, the language learning problem is more severe. According to the national curriculum of English major in China, the teaching goal of English major is to cultivate the comprehensive English application ability and promote all-round development of students. To achieve these, it is impossible to rely on the improvement of language skills. Only by paying attention to the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation and creation, can we improve the comprehensive English application ability of English major students in ethnic areas and achieve comprehensive development.

English majors in ethnic minority universities should return to the humanities standard and focus on cultivating the capacity of critical thinking skills and communication skills with humanistic literacy knowledge or general talents, in the conditions permit to provide consideration of the cultivation of compound talents. Practice has proved that language, thought and culture are inseparable. Based on the profound heritage of this kind of all-round ability learning and teaching, it can enable students to obtain a sound personality, humanistic quality, free spirit and social responsibility, the development of students will have more potential, become a powerful



driving force to promote social progress in the future (Hu & Sun, 2017).

Moreover, from the perspective of cultivation on critical thinking skills. Through analyzing the factors affecting the critical thinking ability of students, the enlightenment is that in English writing teaching class, the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills should be carried through every link of writing teaching process, and improve students' critical thinking skills from multiple dimensions. For instance, teaching methods and assessment should be adjusted, emphasizing heuristic teaching for discussion and debate rather than cramming teaching. As a consequence, academic performance of learners can also be assessed by participating in classroom discussion and academic writing.

It can be provided suggestion by firstly, changing teaching ideas of English teachers in ethnic minority universities and pay attention to the training of critical thinking skills. Based on the analysis above about the current teaching situation in teaching English writing in ethnic minority universities, compared with other teachers in the universities, English teachers have a broader international perspective, and should concentrate on integrating the improvement of students all round ability, in particularly the cultivation on critical thinking skill into their own teaching practice in the writing class among English major students in the ethnic minority universities.

In addition, the classroom should be a student-centered classroom, under the guidance of teachers, the classroom fully carries out the interaction between teachers and students, and increase the opportunities on student--student interaction in order to motivate students' thinking ability and encourage them to ask questions in class. Taking the authentic teaching environment into account, teachers should encourage students with independent thinking ability and guide them to actively analysis, synthesis and interpret on the giving learning materials. It is commonly believed that peer review,

group discussion and debate are the main classroom activities to cultivate these abilities. For example, the teachers could design the class with teaching online and offline, some Apps in the mobile-phones can be used as the online teaching tools to give more room for students to achieve independent study.

Additionally, teachers need to motivate students to express themselves with creative explanation on the given topics rather than offering them the reference answers. Within the thinking on teachers' role, teachers do not simply give feedback to students, but objectively analyze the statements from students. Furthermore, teachers should fully affirm and actively guide students to analyze the given learning materials, in order to encourage and inspire them with creative thoughts. The role of teachers is to eliminate the authority status, and actively guide students to use critical thinking skills to observe, analyze and solve problems in learning how to write in English.

Secondly, the teaching belief of teachers directly affects the teaching methods in teaching English writing. Advanced teaching conceptions could encourage English language teachers to actively adjust their teaching methods, and adopt flexible and effective teaching methods to cultivate students' critical thinking ability pertinently. Online and offline integrated teaching of English writing cannot only expand and enrich the teaching content in various ways and provide more convenience for students in arranging timing and space, but also enable introverted students to realize how to study independently. Meanwhile, Online and offline integrated teaching of English writing activities can avoid the impact on others and increase their opportunities to think and express their views independently.

Thirdly, the collaboration of independent learning and cooperative learning is conducive to stimulating speculative potential of college students from multiple angles and in all-round abilities. Independent learning itself is an independent learning process, which can



cultivate independent thinking ability, and independent decision-making skill of students. In the process of independent learning, college students can independently decide what they want to learn, and independently determine their learning goals, learning contents and learning methods, and students have more time and opportunities to have independent thoughts (Liu & Stapleton, 2018; Paul & Elder, 2019). For example, taking the classroom activities designing into consideration, the task process is altered by teacher introducing background knowledge to students finding, thinking, editing target information and introducing background knowledge by themselves in the classroom.

In this kind of designed activities, students should develop the skills on analyzing the useful information in the given topics, organize vivid language to express themselves and evaluate the appropriateness of their language and ideas. It is considered that a high order thinking process is cultivated by applying the designed independent learning tasks. As a consequence, it is thought that independent judgment, self-assessment, self-regulation and self-correction are achieved to assist students to improve themselves on learning English writing.

At last, Sun (2012) illustrated, English teaching in colleges and universities should attach great importance to cultivating students' critical thinking skills and realize the synchronous development of language ability and critical thinking skills, which has formed a broader consensus in the foreign language teaching field. The top urgent task is how to effectively cultivate the critical thinking skills in the English classroom teaching.

From the consideration on ethnic minority students in college, in the reform of English writing in ethnic minority areas, the universities or college curriculum designers could add courses which can cultivate critical thinking skills among ethnic minority students majored in English. For example, offering general and professional courses for students could broaden students' professional

knowledge and enhance their critical thinking skills. In daily classroom teaching, teachers cannot only use textbooks, but also use online learning resources to guide students to pay more attention to intercultural communication, social hot spots and classical English literature.

4. Conclusion

From what has been mentioned above, it can be draw a conclusion that critical thinking skills is extremely necessary to cultivate high-quality talents currently. English major students, especially ethnic minority students, are lack of critical thinking skills, as the shortage on the main methods of teaching language. Starting with the transformation of classroom teaching model or methods, supporting classroom target design with abundant teaching materials, conducting specific methods and steps and evaluation system are important methods to solve the "absence of critical thinking skills". It requires teachers to first change their thinking, actively innovate the classroom teaching model, cultivate teamwork and critical discussion, and guide students to actively participate in the classroom activities and even grasp key points of the classroom independently.

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