RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Practical Study on Developing Students' Critical Thinking Ability in English Teaching in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: In a globalized and fully digitized society, English has evolved beyond a mere communicative instrument to become a pivotal medium for critical thinking and scholarly articulation. When tertiary English instruction remains confined to linguistic forms, grammatical structures, and test-oriented paradigms, it falls short of nurturing the high-caliber talents demanded by the new era. Cultivating students' critical thinking competence, an indispensable pathway to deepening the cognitive dimension of English education and elevating academic literacy, has therefore drawn increasing attention from university educators. Adopting a practice-based perspective, this paper systematically reviews and evaluates the most effective strategies currently employed in Chinese tertiary EFL classrooms to foster critical thinking, with the aim of advancing English pedagogy from knowledge transmission to the co-construction of disciplinary knowledge and higher order capabilities.
Keywords: higher education institutions, English language teaching, students' critical thinking competence, practice-oriented inquiry

1. Introduction

As global exchanges intensify and the knowledge economy accelerates, tertiary English instruction is expected to perform richer functions than ever before. Beyond imparting linguistic proficiency, it has become a vital platform for cultivating students' critical thinking and academic expression. The traditional grammar and examination-oriented paradigm can no longer satisfy the emerging demand for high-quality, versatile talents, rendering an urgent need for the transformation and upgrading of university English education. Developing students' critical thinking competence not only deepens their multilayered and pluralistic interpretation of texts but also strengthens their capacity for rational articulation and independent reflection in both scholarly and social contexts. Consequently, exploring effective pathways to foster critical thinking within tertiary English classrooms is of immediate practical significance and far-reaching value for enhancing the quality of English instruction and advancing students' comprehensive literacy.

2. The Significance of Cultivating Critical Thinking Competence in Tertiary EFL Instruction
2.1 Deepening cognitive processing of language input and output

Critical thinking competence functions as the cognitive bridge that enables learners to move from comprehension through integration to production. By guiding students to analyse, evaluate and reconstruct English texts, university EFL courses can activate higher-order mental operations. Instead of remaining

At the surface level of understanding, students learn to discern logical relationships, authorial stance and rhetorical strategies embedded in discourse (Huang & Wei, 2023). Such deep cognitive engagement equips learners to produce logically rigorous, structurally coherent and critically informed academic essays and oral presentations, thereby meeting the advanced demands of argumentative and inquiry-based tasks in tertiary English curricula.

2.2 Reinforcing crosscultural understanding and value judgement

Tertiary English programmes not only teach linguistic skills but also serve as vehicles for intercultural communication and international education. Cultivating critical thinking enables students to adopt an analytical yet open-minded stance when encountering values, social norms and expressive modes originating from diverse cultures. Through systematic comparison, learners construct rational, objective and inclusive cultural understanding. Training them to uncover the underlying value logics of cultural differences helps them transcend homogenising assumptions and develop pluralistic frameworks of value judgement—an essential attribute of globally competent graduates. Consequently, critical thinking competence enhances both the effectiveness of intercultural communication and students' ability to articulate independent, rational positions on complex international issues.

2.3 Fostering autonomous learning and critical mind development

The acquisition of critical thinking skills is closely coupled with autonomous learning. In university EFL contexts, students who possess these skills habitually pose questions, verify evidence independently and investigate textual meaning from multiple perspectives (Cai et al., 2022). Rather than passively absorbing textbook content, they interrogate received knowledge and seek more coherent and logically sound interpretations. This shift transforms them from consumers of information into active constructors of knowledge, significantly increasing the depth and breadth of their learning. Moreover, sustained critical mind training stimulates curiosity about the relationships among language, society and self, thereby internalising lifelong learning motivation and personalised intellectual growth.

2.4 Serving high-level talent development and enhancing comprehensive literacy and social responsibility

At the tertiary level, English courses are no longer mere language tool classes; they are integral to holistic education and intellectual enlightenment. Systematic critical thinking training equips students with scientific thinking methods, rigorous argumentation skills and rational judgement dispositions — qualities indispensable for future careers in research, policymaking and corporate leadership. Furthermore, such training empowers students to confront social controversies, ethical dilemmas, and global challenges without being swayed by emotions or misinformation; instead, they make evidence-based, logically coherent and ethically informed decisions. Ultimately, the cultivation of critical thinking competence aligns with the core mission of higher education: to nurture citizens who "think independently, speak responsibly and act accountably." Thereby promoting the comprehensive development of socially responsible, globally-minded professionals.

3. Factors Influencing the Development of Students' Critical Thinking Competence in Tertiary EFL Instruction

3.1 Direct impact of teacher mindset and pedagogical philosophy

The cognitive disposition and educational beliefs of university EFL teachers exert a decisive influence on whether and how students' critical thinking skills are cultivated (Ding, 2021). Teachers who themselves possess well-developed critical thinking abilities and intellectual openness tend to pose cognitively challenging questions, guiding learners to probe the underlying logic and value positions embedded in language. In doing so, they create an inquiry-rich classroom climate conducive to critical reflection. Conversely, when teachers remain

wedded to exam-oriented or purely instrumental views of language, instruction is often confined to grammar, lexis and test-taking strategies, thereby neglecting the intricate nexus among language, thought, culture and cognition. Furthermore, a lack of critical orientation in teachers' questioning techniques, text selection and assessment practices can reduce learners to passive recipients of knowledge, stifling their motivation to question, reason, and articulate original ideas.

3.2 Systemic constraints exerted by curricular design and instructional methods

The architecture of content and the mode of delivery are structural determinants of students' critical thinking growth. First, syllabi that foreground discrete language knowledge while remaining disconnected from real-world problems, intercultural issues or socially contentious topics deprive learners of contextualized opportunities to practise evaluation, argumentation, and reflection, thereby constricting the developmental space for higher-order thinking (Cui, 2024). Second, instructional approaches that perpetuate lecturedominated, transmission-oriented pedagogy—without integrating cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning, or project-based learning—limit students' chances to voice opinions, negotiate meaning, and engage in dialectical reasoning during authentic communicative exchanges. Finally, assessment regimes that privilege linguistic accuracy and numerical outcomes over intellectual depth, logical coherence, and argumentative independence exert a backwash effect, discouraging students from venturing beyond safe, formulaic responses and dampening their willingness to think autonomously.

4. Pedagogical Measures for Fostering Critical Thinking Competence in Tertiary EFL Instruction
4.1 Deploying open-ended questions to spark critical thinking

Posing open-ended questions is a pivotal mechanism for shifting the classroom from knowledge transmission to deep learning. Because such questions have no single, predetermined answer, students must move beyond asking "What is stated?"

to exploring "Why is it so?" and "What other possibilities exist?" (Yang, 2021). This process obliges learners to mobilise prior knowledge, logical reasoning, and emotional insight in order to reprocess and reconstruct the material, thereby disrupting the traditional overreliance on "correct" answers. Furthermore, open-ended questions strengthen students' ability to articulate positions and justify claims, so that language output ceases to be superficial paraphrase and becomes a vehicle for intellectual exchange and value negotiation, raising the cognitive register of EFL learning.

When teaching Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's presentation, 'The Danger of a Single Story,' teachers can deepen and layer the openended questions, for example, from the question, "Have you also formed the 'single story' view?" and 'How can we avoid the influence of a single story in crosscultural interactions?' and 'The role of media in creating and communicating a single story'. and 'What is the role of the media in creating and breaking the "single story"?' Such questions not only stimulate students to look back on their personal experiences, but also lead them to explore from the perspectives of social structure and media ecology. In the process of teaching implementation, teachers can first organise group discussions, encourage students to consult relevant information to expand their horizons, then present their views in small groups, and finally assign writing tasks, so that students can transform their oral expressions into well-structured and logical English short essays. In this process, students move from preliminary reflection to rational analysis and then to critical expression, realising a complete learning chain from language input to multidimensional output, from text comprehension to value reconstruction, and effectively promoting the formation and development of critical thinking skills.

4.2 Guiding multiperspective text interpretation to build polyphonic mindsets

Authentic Anglophone texts embody intricate cultural contexts, ideological subtexts, and value positions. If instruction stops at lexical glossing, grammar parsing, and gist identification, learners

overlook deeper layers of social critique. By prompting students to interrogate a text from multiple angles—authorial stance, historical context, rhetorical structure, stylistic devices, and metaphorical strategies — they discover that comprehension is not passive replication but creative reconstruction (Zhou & Feng, 2020). This pluralistic approach dismantles the myth of "one right reading" and propels learners from understanding content to questioning and reflecting upon it, culminating in an open, multidimensional cognitive framework.

In teaching George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language", the instructor first elicits a political reading of how "fuzzy, hollow and abused" language erodes clear thought. Students then explore an ethical dimension: whether writers bear a moral obligation to pursue linguistic honesty and avoid manipulating readers. Working in expert groups, students locate textual evidence (e.g., stock phrases, passive constructions) and analyse how these features function as instruments of obfuscation or evasion of responsibility. After group reports, the class synthesises competing interpretations, mapping convergences and tensions onto three conceptual axes — language & power, language & cognition, language & morality. This process heightens textual critical acumen and integrates deep reading, reasoned judgement and logical exposition.

4.3 Designing contrastive writing tasks to strengthen logic and position expression

In higher education English teaching, contrastive writing is not only a form of task for exercising language proficiency, but also an important vehicle for guiding students to construct logic and express themselves critically. Unlike descriptive or narrative writing, contrastive writing requires students to weigh and analyse opposing points of view, make structural arrangements and organise language, so as to present a clear positional judgement in a logical progression. This writing style can help students transcend emotional and one-sided presentation habits and gradually develop rational thinking skills based on facts, logic, and evidence (Song, 2024).

In the teaching of the unit 'Technology and Privacy', the teacher can make the writing task step by step, first guide students to list the convenience brought by smart devices (such as intelligent navigation, voice assistants) and possible privacy risks (such as data leakage, user profiling) by brainstorming, and then work in groups on the data and privacy risks (such as data leakage, user profiling). Portrait), and then grouped for data collection and position discussion. Then assign a writing task: 'Please discuss whether smart devices are worth promoting their use in light of privacy risks in the form of comparative writing and make your personal position clear.' Teachers provided writing structure templates, including an introductory paragraph (presenting the topic and argument), a pro and con paragraph (stating and exemplifying each), a comparative and analytical paragraph (logical connections and transitions), a position statement paragraph, and a concluding paragraph. At the same time, students are taught to use logical connectives such as 'in contrast, on the one hand, however, despite this, ultimately' in order to enhance the organisation of the language. After the writing was completed, students were arranged to assess each other's writing, scoring according to three dimensions: depth of content, clarity of logic, and accuracy of language, and selecting the best model essays for presentation and critique. This process helps students to experience the rigour of viewpoint construction and the persuasiveness of expression in writing, and strengthens their ability of rational think rationally and develop critical ideas.

4.4 Organising academic debates to sharpen mental agility and logical responsiveness

Academic debate is a high-stakes, high-yield forum for cultivating critical thinking and linguistic fluency. Unlike monologic presentations, debate demands that students articulate claims, anticipate counterarguments, rebut objections, and adapt strategies in real time (Wang, 2021). This "thinking through speaking" process accelerates information processing, logical organisation, and rhetorical agility under pressure. The adversarial yet

rule-governed setting heightens motivation and authenticity, pushing learners beyond the comfort zone of language practice into the arena where language functions as both a cognitive tool and communicative weapon.

For the motion "Should social media platforms be regulated by governments?", the instructor:

(1) assigns teams one week in advance for evidence gathering.

(2) Coaches affirmative teams to build cases on misinformation control, privacy protection, and public order.

(3) guides negative teams around freedom of speech, governmental overreach, and market self-regulation;

(4) conducts mock cross-examinations to refine line-of-argument matrices.

The formal debate includes opening statements, cross-examination, open-floor clash, and summary speeches. Postdebate "debrief circles" require students to identify strengths and flaws in argument structure, evaluate linguistic effectiveness, and review video excerpts for reflective analysis. This iterative cycle cultivates not only rapid logical response but also intellectual humility and respect for divergent views.

4.5 Constructing interdisciplinary project tasks to integrate critical and problem-solving competences

Interdisciplinary project-based learning situates EFL within authentic, complex problems that cut across disciplinary boundaries. By fusing English with science, ethics, economics, and civic studies, students "think in English" while "constructing knowledge through English". Projects typically address global, contested or ethical issues, demanding that learners investigate, synthesise multifield evidence and present findings in English. Task-centered, collaborative and inquiry-driven, such projects foster the synergistic development of critical, creative, and systemic thinking, key attributes of globally responsible graduates.

In the project "Global Climate Crisis and Individual Responsibility", the instructor:

(1) forms teams around subtopics (carbon footprint calculation, consumer behaviour, corporate ethics, policy incentives, civic duty).

(2) curates English-medium resources UN climate reports, NGO websites, peer-reviewed articles—for preliminary reading.

(3) guides teams to integrate scientific data with ethical reasoning, producing a structured English report (problem definition, causal analysis, policy proposals, personal reflection).

(4) culminates in a public symposium where teams deliver English presentations and field live Q&A.

Throughout, students practise orchestrating logic, structure, and content in real time, while the interdisciplinary lens cultivates nuanced, evidence-based, and ethically grounded solutions to wicked problems, demonstrating how EFL can serve as a conduit from linguistic competence to critical citizenship.

Conclusion

The cultivation of critical thinking competence has emerged as a pivotal benchmark for the high-quality development of tertiary English language education. It's realisation hinges upon a dual transformation: the renewal of pedagogical philosophies and the reinvention of instructional practices. Only by systematically embedding open-ended questioning, multiperspective textual interpretation, comparative writing, and academic debate into everyday classroom routines can we create expansive cognitive laboratories in which students' intellectual potential and expressive energy are fully activated. Looking forward, tertiary EFL programmes must deepen interdisciplinary integration and engineer assessment regimes that foreground the triadic core of "language－thinking－expression." Equally urgent is the continuous upgrading of teachers' own intellectual dispositions, task design expertise, and facilitative skills, so that the educational ideal of "nurturing thinking through language and advancing learning through thinking" can be enacted with rigour and fidelity in every

lesson.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest in this work.

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