Journal of International Education and Development
2026, VOL. 10, NO. 5, 153-156
DOI: 10.47297/wspiedWSP2516-250034.20261005

Practical Approaches and Optimization Strategies for Cultivating Critical Thinking in University English Classrooms

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ABSTRACT
The enhancement of English language proficiency and the development of critical thinking skills are mutually reinforcing. Depth and breadth of thought contribute to more profound expression, while improved language skills enable more fluent and precise articulation of ideas. As the English proficiency of each successive cohort of students continues to rise, fostering critical thinking has become one of the key priorities in college English teaching. Drawing on the author's teaching experience, this paper explores how college English classrooms can emphasize the cultivation of students' critical thinking through instructional activities such as debates and discussions.

KEYWORDS
College English; Classroom activities; Cultivation of critical thinking

In recent years, students entering university have demonstrated increasingly better English proficiency. If university English classroom teaching continues to focus primarily on the explanation of words, phrases, and sentences, it will fail to meet the needs of the majority of students and hinder further improvement in their language skills. Teachers should not only explain language knowledge and train language skills in the classroom but, more importantly, increase the depth of the lessons and spark students' interest in language learning.To achieve this goal effectively, integrating critical thinking into language teaching is indispensable.

In fact, language learning and critical thinking are closely interconnected and inseparable. Language and critical thinking are mutually reinforcing. Language is the carrier of thought. If language skills improve but thinking does not keep pace, expression will become shallow and lack substance. Some students' essays may have no major grammatical or lexical errors, but their arguments are superficial and fail to address the core issues, which is related to weak critical thinking skills. More and more teachers are realizing that English classroom teaching should place equal emphasis on cultivating both language skills and thinking abilities. This educational requirement is well supported by relevant theoretical research.

As stated by Richards & Rodgers (2014, p. 107), "Language should serve as a means of developing higher-order thinking skills, also known as critical and creative thinking." Accordingly, in language classrooms, learning is not an end in itself. Instead, students strive to develop and put their thinking abilities into use beyond class settings. However, in practice, the cultivation of critical thinking has not received sufficient attention. On the one hand, the teaching objectives of university English are still focused on the mastery and application of language skills. As evidenced by my own teaching experience, the syllabus of the course taught by the present author this semester states that the teaching aim is to help students build a solid language foundation, master effective language learning methods, and develop comprehensive English application skills. The teaching requirements emphasize improving comprehensive language usage skills, i.e., the ability to comprehensively apply English knowledge in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation activities. This shows that critical thinking has not yet been explicitly incorporated into the teaching vision of university English. On the other hand, university English class hours have been reduced. To complete teaching tasks and improve test-taking skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, there is little time left for activities such as discussions and debates. Third, most students still aim to achieve tangible good grades. The author observed that students actively take notes when new words and phrases are explained but show little enthusiasm for non-test-oriented questions and guidance on the writing ideas and logic of the text. In fact, university English teaching should not only focus on language but also cultivate abilities. Sun (2011) mentioned that university education should cultivate "transferable skills", which refer to "portable skills that students can take away from their university education. These skills are not limited to their major and can be applied in various environments and jobs." These include critical thinking, effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving-skills that help graduates quickly adapt to new roles and challenges. Unlike specialized knowledge, which can become outdated, these transferable skills remain valuable throughout a career and support lifelong learning and professional growth. Among them, critical thinking is especially important. It helps students analyze information logically, question assumptions, and make sound judgments independently. In a world of rapidly changing information and complex issues, critical thinking allows individuals to handle uncertainty, solve unstructured problems, and adapt flexibly to new demands in both work and daily life.

University English classrooms provide an ideal environment for cultivating critical thinking precisely because language and thought are inherently inseparable. When critical thinking is integrated into the English classroom, students learn not merely to translate ideas from their native language but to think directly in English—questioning assumptions, weighing evidence, and structuring persuasive arguments—hereby transforming language from a set of mechanical rules into a genuine tool for intellectual expression. In the current AI era, numerous language tools can complete translation, writing and content generation within seconds, making superficial language proficiency no longer a competitive advantage. In this context, critical thinking becomes the core competency that helps students use AI as a useful assistant rather than a substitute for their own minds. Moreover, given that university English courses often serve as a bridge between general education and academic or professional discourse, embedding critical thinking within them prepares students to navigate the unstructured challenges of the real world, where the ability to communicate effectively is meaningless without the ability to think clearly first. In an era of information overload and rapid change, a university English classroom that emphasizes critical thinking ultimately equips students not only with language skills but with a lifelong capacity for independent judgment, adaptability, and meaningful engagement with diverse perspectives.

Against this backdrop, fostering critical thinking in sophomore English teaching proves essential and practical. Unlike freshmen who are still adapting to college-level English and laying foundational knowledge, sophomore students have already gained a solid basic command of English vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills. This linguistic competence allows them to shift from simply understanding the language to using English as a tool for deep and independent thinking. They are more willing to participate in reflective and argumentative activities. In practice, sophomore English courses offer rich opportunities to integrate critical thinking. Most English textbooks for this grade already include themes related to social problems, cultural conflicts, and value choices, providing suitable materials for critical thinking tasks. For example, in intensive reading classes such as *Let's Go Veggie!*, the text's author holds a firm, one-sided, persuasive stance in favor of vegetarianism, which offers an ideal platform for students to practice critical analysis. Students can analyze the author's argumentation logic, identify potential biases, and evaluate the persuasiveness of texts. Questions as "To what extent do you agree with the author? Which part is most convincing? Which part is less persuasive or even exaggerated? Why? What counter-arguments can you propose against the author's view?" can be raised for guiding students' independent thinking. In fact, the themes in the textbook used by the present author's college in the second year of instruction are all highly similar in centering on real-world social issues that require reflection. Each unit combines language learning with discussions of different social issues, creating a consistent framework for critical analysis. This consistency allows teachers to reuse and adapt similar thinking tasks across lessons, helping students build deeper analytical skills rather than mastering isolated grammar points. As a result, students gradually learn to apply the same critical lenses—such as identifying bias, evaluating evidence, and questioning assumptions —across a variety of texts and topics.

In short, language foundation, learning motivation, and available teaching resources together make it fully practical to emphasize critical thinking in sophomore English. Such training not only improves students' English proficiency but also equips them with a highly transferable skill crucial for their future academic and career development.

The present author has realized the importance of critical thinking and has begun to consciously cultivate it in teaching. Take another example. In Lesson 3 of the fifth volume, "The Truth about Lying", the text's author categorizes lies into four types. On this topic, teachers can raise many questions for students to discuss, such as what types of lies are acceptable and different perspectives on lying between men and women. When teaching the text, the present author increased the number of questions rather than focusing solely on lecturing. By asking questions, especially about the theme and writing purpose, students are encouraged to go beyond mere memorization and understanding to explore the expression of ideological connotations. This also guides students to appreciate and discern the author's arguments and discussions. For example, teachers can ask students about the text's author's final view on lying: the text's author ends the article by saying she's "willing to lie but just as a last resort--the truth's always better". Then teachers can further guide students to think deeply: "Do you agree that the truth is always better than a lie? Are there any situations where a lie is more moral than the truth?" Or "The author says truth is always better, but we sometimes have to lie. Is this opinion contradictory? Why?" Such questions not only connect the text content closely but also urge students to combine their own life experiences and moral judgments to conduct in-depth thinking, which is conducive to cultivating their critical thinking ability and deepening their understanding of the theme of the article.

The above student-centered questioning and discussion practice is highly consistent with the core concept of inquiry-based teaching. In this regard, Xu and Wang (2023) point out that the inquiry-based teaching model originated from the inquiry theory of American educators such as Richard Suchman and John Dewey, which emphasizes in-depth problem exploration and collaborative inquiry between teachers and students. Considering the actual situation of college English teaching, such an inquiry-oriented design is particularly necessary. Given that most texts used in college English courses are adapted or abridged versions of original works, such question-driven inquiry activities carry particular significance in promoting students' in-depth understanding and critical thinking. They help students sort out the logical thread of the

text and achieve a genuine, in-depth comprehension rather than superficial understanding. Apart from inquiry-based teaching, scholars have also proposed other effective strategies to integrate thinking cultivation into language courses. Li Gang (2014) mentioned "content-based" teaching, which fully utilizes the text to combine language learning with content. Through analysis, discussion, questioning, and other activities, language skills and cognitive levels develop simultaneously. "For original texts, such as selecting a passage, students can orally answer questions like: What issue does this passage illustrate? What role does it play in the entire text? Is the semantics coherent? Such oral tasks help consolidate students' structural schema of the text and master the macro structure and content layout of the passage. Second, extend the topic of the text to maximize its 'topicality, actively promoting the combination of the original language knowledge schema with the cultural and situational context of the students." Therefore, in university English classroom teaching, critical thinking can be cultivated based on text explanation, thereby enriching the content of English teaching.

To lay the groundwork for more advanced critical thinking activities like debate, the present author recommends two transitional activities: oral presentations and group discussions. Oral presentations, a common oral activity in university English classrooms, should move beyond simple self-introductions or hobby shares to focus on campus or social hot topics, requiring students to analyze causes and propose solutions—thus integrating critical thinking into oral expression. Group discussions, meanwhile, maximize student participation within limited class time, particularly benefiting students with insufficient language proficiency who may hesitate to speak in whole-class settings due to fear of switching to Chinese mid-sentence. In small groups, students experience less pressure, participate more actively, and have equal opportunities to express themselves, pooling wisdom and expanding their perspectives. Teachers can support this by allocating sufficient time, grouping weaker students with stronger peers, and allowing students to look up expressions or consult proficient classmates. Typically, after group discussions, one student per group summarizes the group's views—a step that, while necessary for sharing diverse insights, often feels incomplete due to time constraints. Fortunately, modern teaching apps address this by enabling more students to participate in discussions and share their views on assigned topics. For example, after teaching the marriage-related text "Legacy," the discussion topic "Preferred ways to celebrate marriage" elicited diverse responses that reflected students' unique personalities, fostering engagement and motivation. When carrying out these classroom activities, the present author suggests combining group discussion summaries with related writing tasks: this not only consolidates and deepens students' thinking but also enriches their writing materials and arguments, helping them avoid empty essays or rigid template use.

In university English classrooms, the present author holds that debate is a highly appropriate activity for fostering critical thinking—in large part because debate makes thinking visible. When students debate, their reasoning, assumptions, and evidence are laid open for scrutiny. This process directly aligns with what Ritchhart and Church (2020, p. 36) identify as the transformative power of "Making Thinking Visible" (MTV) practices, which foster deep learning, cultivate engaged students, change classroom roles, enhance formative assessment, improve measurable learning outcomes, and develop thinking dispositions. Debate achieves all of these outcomes through its dual value. On one hand, as a team-based activity, it leverages collective wisdom, enabling weaker critical thinkers to draw inspiration from peers and gradually build skills. On the other hand, debate requires students to think independently and critically—listening attentively, understanding opposing views, examining issues from multiple perspectives, evaluating evidence rigorously, and acknowledging complexity. In making these cognitive moves visible, debate transforms both individual thinking and classroom culture. During the preparation phase for debates, students are compelled to adopt a holistic and dialectical approach They must not only develop their own arguments and supporting evidence but also anticipate the opposing team's viewpoints and prepare targeted rebuttals. This process enhances students' initiative, as the unpredictability of the opposing side's arguments adds a layer of challenge that transcends passive learning. Furthermore, debates demand real-time listening, rapid organization of thoughts, and reasoned rebuttal—all of which refine students' logical reasoning and rhetorical propriety. In doing so, they cultivate critical thinking dispositions such as inquiry sensitivity, as well as moral qualities like respect for others' perspectives. Li et al. (2020) demonstrated through empirical research that the implementation of debate instruction in college English teaching significantly improves students' critical thinking skills, particularly across ten dimensions including clarity, precision, logicalness, and fairness. This finding provides strong support for adopting debate as an instructional strategy to cultivate critical thinking.

Beyond its cognitive benefits, debate also strengthens the mutual reinforcement between language and thinking: language without substantive content is hollow, while critical thinking requires precise, appropriate language for effective expression. Through debate, students deepen their thinking depth and enhance their language accuracy, achieving reciprocal improvement. Importantly, integrating debates into the classroom transforms the traditional teacher-centered lecture model into student-centered active learning. In practical teaching, the present author observed that two text-related debate topics— "Should we insist on a vegetarian diet?" and "Can we accept white lies or insist on telling the truth?" — yielded one-sided results: most students advocated for a balanced meat-and-vegetable diet and the acceptance of white lies in specific contexts. This observation led to two key instructional insights: first, teachers can

predict students' dominant positions in advance and provide arguments for both sides to broaden their perspectives and inspire deeper reflection; second, when one-sidedness emerges, teachers can guide students to explore the reasons behind the majority's choice. Alternatively, assigning positions to students in advance can avoid such one-sidedness, support minority viewpoints, and encourage broader thinking. To maximize effectiveness, debate topics must be timely, focusing on real-life issues or social hot topics that resonate with students--ensuring they have genuine opinions, interests, and stakes in the discussion.

While these classroom activities provide platforms for students to showcase their thinking and refine their language, the present author emphasizes that the fundamental way to enhance critical thinking lies in encouraging extensive extracurricular reading. Teachers should leverage online resources, recommend background readings, and grant students greater autonomy in choosing reading materials and forming their own interpretations. Given the weak thematic connections between units in intensive reading textbooks, extended reading materials can be introduced to allow students to independently explore related content, develop personal viewpoints, and then contribute meaningfully to classroom discussions and debates. For instance, when teaching Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" from *New Century College English Integrated Course 5*, the present author refrains from imposing themes, instead guiding students to independently explore the text's feminist critique of marriage and strategies for a successful marital life—empowering them to discern the text's value and form their own judgments.

Integrating critical thinking cultivation into listening, speaking, reading, and writing training in university English classrooms can be achieved through pre-class preview, in-class questioning, discussions, debates, and other activities—along with guiding students to recognize ideological depth as a key evaluation criterion. As noted, "Teaching method reforms should focus on fostering students' innovative spirit and creative abilities, emphasizing their individual development. While imitation and mechanical language skill training are necessary in foreign language teaching, equal attention must be paid to cultivating students' abilities to analyze, synthesize, critique, debate, and solve problems" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 22). To ensure that critical thinking-oriented classroom activities are effective and engaging, the present author stresses the need to reform evaluation criteria. When students engage in oral activities or writing around teacher-assigned topics, evaluation should go beyond conventional linguistic criteria (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) to include higher-level cognitive requirements: the clarity of the main argument, the strength of supporting evidence, and the logic of reasoning. From the present author's experience grading essays, while fluent, elegant language is pleasing, essays with rich, logically consistent discussions are more impressive and memorable. Cultivating critical thinking and prioritizing content over form in writing teaching also lays a solid foundation for advanced academic writing.

This pedagogical shift inevitably imposes higher demands on teachers. They must select text-related topics that are both engaging and thought-provoking, design feasible critical thinking activities at appropriate teaching stages, and adopt heuristic and interactive teaching methods. Most importantly, teachers need to enhance their own critical thinking competence to provide targeted guidance and conduct effective assessment of students' thinking performance. As Paul et al. (1989, p. 19) state, "The critical thinking teacher… learns to raise questions, explore meanings, seek reasons and evidence, foster deep thinking, keep discussions from becoming chaotic, encourage listening, guide effective comparisons and contrasts, point out contradictions and inconsistencies, and explain implications and consequences. The critical thinking teacher recognizes that the primary goal of education is to teach students how to learn." This educational philosophy strongly underpins the question-driven and discussion-oriented teaching strategies elaborated above. Ultimately, effective critical thinking cultivation enables students to improve both language proficiency and cognitive competence, thereby promoting high-quality development of college English teaching.

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