

A Study of Senior Students' Critical Reading Competence via Analyzing their Reading Reports

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Abstract. As a necessary step of thesis writing, students are required to read the related literature concerning their chosen topics for writing research papers. In order to understand how the students have reviewed the literature and whether they have understood the conventions of reading and citing literature in their thesis writing, we assigned students to write a reading report of 1500 words. Among the 90 reading reports she has collected, the author has randomly selected 35 copies for analysis. There are 9 pieces on the topic of literary studies and 15 pieces for language teaching, 4 pieces on translation and 7 pieces on culture. In the 35 pieces of reading reports, it was found that only eleven pieces have cited from previous researches and most of the citations appear in reading reports on teaching methodology and translation. It is a pity to notice that there were no indications of citation in reading reports of literary works where many critics have done researches. Although some reports contain some topics, like the use of imagery in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Gothic element in *Wuthering Heights*, humanitarianism in *A Tale of Two Cities*, most students focus on summarizing the main plots of literary works. As for the types of information source, out of the total of 233, only 68 belong to the secondary source, namely the journal articles or collected essays. Thus we may conclude that students' critical reading competence is far from satisfaction and they still need to be guided as to how to read literature and how to evaluate the usefulness of the information they have found.

Keywords: thesis writing, reading reports, critical reading competence, critical thinking competence

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the literate are no longer defined as being able to read and write, rather they are defined as possessing the critical thinking competence and the percentage of people having such competence in the population is regarded as an important criterion of the national comprehensive power. Paul (1992) even regarded critical thinking as "the aim of education" rather than "an aim of education." Ten Dam and Volman (2004) have studied the instructional format for critical thinking from the perspective of "critical democratic citizenship education." As early as 1990s, Luke and Freebody have advanced the Four

Resources Model of cultural education. According to the model, a literate citizen should possess four competences, namely coding competence, semantic competence, pragmatic competence and critical competence. Accordingly, readers will play four different roles in the course of reading, which are code-breaker, meaning-maker, text-user and text-critic. In the United States, critical thinking is seen as the decisive factor of American higher education, the demand of participating in democratic society and the core of cultural education. It is also the goal of reconstructing tertiary curricula and developing learner-centered teaching. Harvard University encourages students to “respect ideas and free expression, to discover and think critically” (Harvard College Mission Statement, at <http://www.harvard.edu/siteguide/faqs/faq110.html>). In Yale University, students are required to provide competence in the “language of thought” because such competence gives the learners the tools to “think critically and analytically and to enlarge their imagination” (Yale Transfer Handbook, 2006-07). Brian Roper, president of North London University points out that higher education should cultivate students’ abstract thinking ability, logical thinking ability, effective inferencing ability and evidence-evaluating ability (Wen Qiufang et al, 2008: 38). However, in China, the English language teaching for English majors have just been engaged in imparting language knowledge and skills and thus neglected the cultivation of critical thinking competence. Huang Yuanshen (1998, 2010) revealed the “absence of critique” in foreign language learners and stressed the urgency and necessity of foreign language teaching reform. In 2000, the revision of “English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors at Universities” has taken “cultivation of learners’ thinking competence and innovative competence” as one of the principles of foreign language teaching. Therefore, it is of great significance to effectively develop students’ critical thinking competence in the course of language teaching and learning. Under such circumstances, the author decides to carry out a study to evaluate English seniors’ critical thinking competence through the reading reports they are asked to write.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars have defined critical thinking from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology and pedagogy. Among them, the most well-known definition of critical thinking originates from Ennis (1991: 1-2), who defines critical thinking as “reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do”. In his definition, he distinguishes between skills and attitudes, the so-called disposition, which means being prepared to determine and maintain focus on the conclusion or question, willing to take the whole situation into account, prepared to seek and offer reasons, amenable to being well informed, willing to look for alternatives, and withholding judgment when evidence and reasons are insufficient. Dewey (1909: 9) has defined critical thinking as “an individual’s active, enduring and delicate thinking over any beliefs or assumptions and the evidences and conclusions based on the beliefs and assumptions”. He has further classified critical thinking into “critical analysis”, “critical consciousness” and “critical reflection”. Paul et al (1990: 17) have integrated critical thinking competence with strategies and proposed a list of 35 strategies in three categories. In his classification, macro-competence is

equated with meta-cognitive strategies while micro-competence is equated with cognitive strategies. Besides, a third group of strategies are defined as affective strategies. Similarly, based on the three relevant models, Wen Qiufang (2008, 2009) has proposed a conceptual framework for assessing Chinese postgraduate students' critical thinking skills. The framework consists of two levels. On the higher level are the meta-critical thinking skills and on the lower level are the critical thinking skills, with the former governing the latter. The critical thinking skills comprise two components: cognitive and affective. The cognitive component includes the cognitive skills and the standards which the cognitive skills are supposed to meet, and the affective component possesses some typical emotional attributes. The cognitive skills include analysis, inference and evaluation, while the standards are clarity, preciseness, relevance, logic, depth and flexibility. She has conducted a course called Literature Reading and Evaluation to postgraduates and doctoral students according to the model suggested above. Wu Zhihong (2010) has put forward four inquiry models to cultivate students' critical thinking skills, which are Socratic Method, reflexive thinking, meta-cognition and higher cognition. Han Shaojie and Wang Xiaoying (2009) have divided critical thinking into critical thinking skills and critical thinking quality. In their framework of critical thinking development, they have integrated the three stages of reading teaching with critical thinking process, which includes reflexive questioning, reflexive evaluation and evaluating questioning.

3. Data Collection

One of the major tasks for English major senior students is to write their graduate thesis. As a necessary step of thesis writing, students are required to read the related literature concerning their chosen topics for writing research papers. In preparing thesis proposal, they are asked to list five to seven sources to show that their thesis proposals are based on these sources. In order to understand how the students have reviewed the literature and whether they have understood the conventions of reading and citing literature in their thesis writing, we assigned students to write a reading report of 1500 words. The specific criteria to judge students' performance of literature reading and evaluation are whether they have selected sources related to their chosen topics and whether they are able to summarize the information by attending to the main issues covered in the material. What's more, students should be able to distinguish the unique contribution of previous researches to the related fields and to evaluate the merits and limitations of the conclusions drawn by previous researchers. In other words, our aim is to check students' critical thinking competence.

4. Results analysis

Among the 90 reading reports she has collected, the author has randomly selected 35 copies for analysis. There are 9 pieces on the topic of literary studies and 15 pieces for language teaching, 4 pieces on translation and 7 pieces on culture. Generally speaking, students have not demonstrated their ability to summarize the reading materials. On one hand, they were unable to locate the

main ideas from the academic books or articles. As a consequence, they just quoted some sentences or even paragraphs. On the other hand, they just copied from the reading materials instead of paraphrasing the main points in their own words. As for the literary studies, although some reports contain some topics, like the use of imagery in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Gothic element in *Wuthering Heights*, humanitarianism in *A Tale of Two Cities*, most students illustrated the topic by summarizing the main plots of literary works. They did not back up their understanding of the topics by referring to the latest researches on the literary works. As for the reading reports of other topics, much of the space is occupied by the theories underlying the teaching methods, including the key concepts, the definition, the activities and strategies, problems and solution together with the analysis of some examples. Even though they have listed several entries of reference materials in the end of the reading report, it seems that they have not completely read the books or journal articles, nor have they digested the information and known where to cite the information. In the 35 pieces of reading reports, only eleven pieces have cited from previous researches and most of the citations appear in reading reports on teaching methodology and translation. We find no indication of citation in reading reports of literary works where many critics have done researches. Thus we may see that students have not acquired the competence to summarize and synthesize the information and evaluate the relevance of the information critically, which are the core of critical thinking. The citations often appear in the form of several sentences or sometimes a long paragraph, which shows that students are unable to select the most relevant information from the sources.

As for the types of information source, out of the total of 233, only 68 belong to the secondary source, namely the journal articles or collected essays. The number of sources varies from 2 to 13 with the average being 6.66 while the requirement of the number of source is 5 to 7. There are five reading reports containing fewer than five sources (accounting for 14%) and 12 containing more than seven sources (accounting for 34%).

Table 1: Types of information in students' reading reports

Types	primary source	secondary source	Total
No.	165	68	233

Table 2: Distribution of sources in students' reading reports

	below 5	percentage	above 7	percentage	average
No.	5	14%	12	34%	6.66

5. Discussion

Reading reports is defined as a “critical evaluation” of what one reads. It is not only a concluding summary, but also a critical evaluation of the reading work. It contains a concise summary of the reading piece, providing an overview of what it actually concluded and a brief critique, giving an evaluation of the piece by expressing their opinions, ideas or reactions to the information the readers have acquired in the reading. To do so, readers must first of all read critically rather than accepting what is presented to them passively. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (Cited in ten Dam and Volman. 2004: 362), critical thinking involves an individual’s ability to identify central issues and assumptions in an argument, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences from data, draw conclusion from information or data provided, interpret whether conclusions are warranted on the basis of the data given, and evaluate evidence or authority. In other words, to be critical, students must be sceptical. They should approach literature with scepticism and suspicion. In the process, they should ask questions and analyze information. They should consciously apply strategies to uncover meaning or verify their understanding.

What’s more, they should not take an egotistical view of the world. Instead, they should be open to new ideas and perspectives and be willing to challenge their beliefs and investigate competing evidence. However, from the reading reports handed in by the seniors, we have hardly noticed students’ demonstration of critical thinking even though they have been taught the procedures and principles of writing reading report. The reason why they did not criticize while summarizing the literature is due to the insufficient practice of critical thinking skills in the long run of English learning. Liu Donghong (2005) has attributed the absence of critical thinking to the rote memory teaching model of most language teaching classes in which the teacher dominates the class in the form of lectures while the students seldom ask questions. As a result, they are likely to develop fixed thinking patterns. She believes that the root of the teaching model lies in the rigid cultural atmosphere, blind worship of authority and the psychology of conforming to the public. In the course of teaching and learning, both students and teachers attach great importance to the unity of answers while ignoring diversity. In the learning of English reading, listening and American or British literature courses, for most of the time, they just passively receive what is offered by the teachers who conduct the courses mostly in the form of lectures.

In the classroom, there is no genuine exchange of ideas and negotiation of meaning. What’s more, most of the exercises in the reading courses are examining students’ literal comprehension in the form of multiple choices or true or false statement or questions. There is hardly any chance for students to express their own understanding of passages or their own opinions concerning some issues. This can be said to be the washback effects of some nationwide examinations like CET 4 and CET 6 and TEM 4 and TEM 8 which are comprised mainly of multiple choices for the sake of objectivity and easy measurement. The lack of subjective questions and essay writing leads to students’ incompetence in critical thinking as they seldom need to think analytically and critically. Hence, when it comes for students to write the research papers in the last year of their

college life, most students will be confused about the selection of reading materials and are unable to summarize the information and come up with adequate criticism of relevant information.

6. Suggestions

To solve the problem of students' lack of critical thinking competence, it is crucial to change the teaching format of the courses of English majors, especially the reading and literature courses. Instead of having students discuss ideas found in their texts, teachers should have students brainstorm their own ideas and argue among themselves about problems and the solution to the problems. They should ask students for their point of view on issues, concepts and ideas. Whenever possible, they should give students tasks that require them to develop their own categories and modes of classification instead of being provided with them in advance (Paul, 1990). Dennick and Exley (1998, cited in ten Dam and Volman, 2004: 366) discusses four methods of small group teaching that enhance critical thinking: focused discussion, student-led seminar, problem-based learning and role play. Ten Dam and Volman, (2004: 375) suggest to adopt a social constructivist approach to learning how to think critically which emphasizes the importance of participation and reflection. Han Shaojie and Wang Xiaoying (2009: 68) have integrated critical thinking process with the three stages of teaching activities, namely previewing, teaching and consolidation. Through different teaching activities, students may practice reflecting and questioning in the preview stage, practice reflecting and evaluating in the teaching stage and practice evaluating and questioning in the consolidation stage, thus enhancing their critical thinking. In a word, only when students are involved in the process of learning and associate the learning material with some real-life problems can we foster their critical thinking.

7. Conclusion

The enhancement of critical thinking is not gained overnight. It requires the language teachers to change their teaching concept and realize the importance of critical thinking so that they may change their traditional teaching methods and then foster the critical thinking in their students. Besides, the examination system also needs to change to incorporate more items that test students' critical thinking, like analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

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