

Mutual Promotion between Language Skills and Critical Thinking Training in Business English Skill-based Courses

Jinxiang Tang

School of Languages & Media, Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu, 233041, China

Abstract: Critical thinking is commonly acknowledged as one of the primal abilities in a Business English graduates. The problem of “deficient critical thinking ability” in foreign language majors has long plagued professionals in college foreign language teaching. Skill-based language courses that constitute the majority of the English curriculum are the root. However, Business English major can effectively overcome the problem because of its advantages in integrating language-skill training into business-knowledge learning. Teachers of Business English skill courses should convert teaching philosophy and methods, and transform the skill-based courses into knowledge- and critical-thinking-oriented training courses. This will ultimately help realize mutual promotion of language capacities and critical thinking ability in Business English majors.

Keywords: Critical thinking ability, Business English major, Skill-based courses.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the cultivation of critical thinking ability has been highly valued in the field of higher education in many countries like America and Britain, and has been listed as the core of reform at universities. “To train students to find pleasure in discovery and critical thinking” is the top mission of Harvard University. Cambridge University, too, has made “the encouragement of a questioning spirit” into its educational quest. Richard C. Raven (2004), the former president of Yale University, pointed out when talking about the general education of Yale University: “No matter what the content of the course is, no matter how it develops, I think the purpose of general education is not to teach people what to think, but how to think.” That is to say, the root of the university education is not to instill knowledge, but to correct students’ habits of passively accepting knowledge, help students overcome instinctive, conservative, inefficient thinking, and develop critical reading and listening ability, so that they will eventually be able to observe, analyze, seek solutions, and solve problems. That is, they develop critical thinking skills. Only with this competence can students take on social responsibilities in their future work and life.

2. Constraints on Cultivation of Critical Thinking in Foreign Language Majors

The study on the critical thinking training in China’s foreign language teaching began in the middle and late 1990s. He Qishen (1999) emphasized the importance of ability training in college English teaching and defined critical thinking capacity of English majors as “the ability to acquire knowledge, use knowledge, analyze problems, independently put forward opinions and create new ideas”. At the same time, foreign language scholars also noticed that students majoring in foreign languages are deficient in reasoning ability. Hu Wenzhong and Sun Youzhong (2008) and other scholars warned that “graduates of foreign language major have poor humanistic foundation and weak reasoning ability.” Qu

Weiguo (2015) even pointed out what foreign language majors lack is not critical thinking ability. The problem “arises from deficiency in the systematicity of knowledge, and the solution lies in promoting systematic disciplinary training in the departments of foreign languages”. He believes that although the overall curriculum requires students to have a wide range of knowledge, it is mostly utilitarian and not systematic, so it is difficult for students to master reasoning methods and procedures”.

Further analyses reveal the reasons can be traced back to the curriculum, knowledge structures, and teaching methods. Skill-based language courses in particular are considered a stumbling block to the development of students’ critical thinking skills. Hu Wenzhong and Sun Youzhong (2008) believed that English colleges and faculty “always place skill training in the first place, while humanistic education takes a small proportion in curriculum”. Li Liwen (2010), taking English major as the subject, pointed out two reasons why language skill courses may hinder the cultivation of students’ critical thinking ability. First, “the teaching materials in skill courses are too simple to challenge students’ thinking or activate their thinking potential”. Texts or training materials in skill courses are mostly about popular science or daily life, news reports or excerpts from literary works, which are of no high intellectual level and involve little complex thinking process. Language teachers, taking into account of the students’ limited linguistic aptitude, often do not require much on the thinking level when planning in-class activities. That renders the thinking training in skill courses absent or at least in a low-level state. Second, “the training methods of skill classes are at odds with the qualities required for critical thinking...They actually becomes a barrier to the development of reasoning skills.” The learning process of foreign language majors is mostly memorizing, reciting, imitating and retelling in skill classes. These methods do not facilitate the progress of thinking ability, but instead suppress positive and healthy thinking habits. That is why some scholars propose to reduce the number of skill-based courses in curriculum, or even directly replace them with knowledge courses.

However, the foreign language education community

generally emphasizes that, to graduates of foreign language majors, owning solid language skills is the main competitive differentiator in job market, and college students must be drilled to develop their language skills. Eliminating skill courses would undermine the very advantage. Therefore, we need to find a way to retain the edge by retaining skill courses, but gain the effective combination of language skill drilling with critical thinking training, and achieve mutual development.

3. Critical Thinking Training in Business English Major

Business English major, as a branch in Foreign Languages and Literature, was first formally approved by Ministry of Education of China in 2012. Undergraduates of Business English are supposed to master English language as a tool for seeking information and means for communication. English language skills still serve as the main competitive differentiator of the graduates. But in addition, the training objectives of the major include to enable students to understand and get familiar with some specific disciplines related to business, such as international trade, economics, international finance, international economic law, etc. They need to get a brief idea of the relatively complete basic knowledge and core theoretical systems of these disciplines, together with basic capacity to work with the knowledge. Therefore, the fact that undergraduates of the Business English must master the basic knowledge of business- and economics-related disciplines in addition to English language skills, undoubtedly expands the practical platform for critical thinking cultivation. To some extent, it overcomes the weakness observed by Qu Weiguo (2015) that English majors cannot master systematic thinking methods and procedures owing to lack of systematic knowledge.

However, taking those courses as the only opportunity to develop critical thinking will not provide adequate training. Business English institutions in most colleges and universities are actually limited in total credits, allocation of professors, and teaching concepts. Therefore, these courses of relevant subjects are in actuality only the one-way transmission of knowledge, failing to take into account the cultivation of thinking. Students may not obtain a complete learning and thinking training process with core curriculum setting including basic theories, research methods, and practice. Fewer leaning hours, more content, and a lack of sensible teaching concepts, teaching faculty mostly adopt a one-way knowledge transmission method in courses of this category. It is difficult to guarantee the learning effect, let alone to ensure the cultivation of students' critical ability.

Therefore, the researcher will re-examine Business English language skills course to explore a way to overcome their defects and make them an important part of in students' thinking training. Taking Business English reading class as a window, the writer tries to elaborate the ideas that skill-based classes will serve as a platform to train and develop students' critical thinking ability, teachers of Business English skill courses should convert teaching philosophy and methods, and, taking advantage of the particularity of teaching content, transform the skill-based courses into knowledge- and critical-thinking-oriented training courses. This will ultimately help attain joint promotion of language capacities and critical thinking ability in Business English majors.

4. Mutual Promotion between Language Skill and Critical Thinking Training

4.1. Adopting a Teaching Philosophy Conducive to the Formation of Critical Thinking Development

As one the core courses of the major, Business English Reading is a skill-based course. The recommended teaching period is three semesters, but it varies from two to four semesters by institutions and colleges, with two school hours per week. Guidelines for Undergraduate Business English Teaching issued by the Ministry of Education in 2020 (thereafter referred to as Guidelines 2020) specifies the teaching objectives as "to help students master English reading tactics and skills, and improve students' speed and comprehension while reading business English materials. Through the training of the course, students should be able to read with appropriate reading methods, summarize the main ideas of the texts and paragraphs, analyze the structure of ideas, make inference on the writing purposes and points of view, understand detailed or implicit information." These goals fall under the category of "critical reading" skills. With that training in the course, students should be able to decode and interpret sentences, construct the meaning as text users to understand the text style, purpose, and structure. In addition, as is stated in the Guidelines 2020, students should also be "able to use language knowledge and reading skills to read business English texts of various subjects and genres, so as to expand business knowledge". This goal has risen to a "critical thinking" level; it requires a grasp of the texts' social and cultural functions in real life, and conduct critical thinking: understand their points of view, ask questions, look up for background information and data, make analyses, verify/falsify the points of view, obtain conclusions, and expand knowledge. This is the high-level goal of the business English Reading programme.

Therefore, teachers should realize that this Business English reading is not merely a language skill course, and should stick to the traditional methods of explaining difficult sentences and vocabulary, and analyzing grammar and discourse structure. It's more about how to stimulate students' minds: how to design questions to engage students in active thinking and discussions, and how to motivate them to solve problems on their own. Teachers ought to abandon the traditional teacher-centered model and transform it into a student-centered skill class in which teachers are designers, guides, assistants, resource distributors and information providers of class activities, while students can participate in activities and interact with classmates to discuss matters, express ideas on issues designed for critical thinking and exchange minds. While doing all these in-class activities, English is the only language for thinking and exchanging ideas. Outside the classroom, teachers should also assign various tasks, guide and urge students to expand reading and complete thinking training, thus really pushing students to form critical thinking habits.

Students must read extensively, complete tasks in and out of class based on their understanding of the reading materials, and use English as a tool to think, analyze, and express themselves. In the process of thinking and communicating, their linguistic capacity will naturally be improved. This idea of teaching goes in accordance with Yin Xiaofang (2004). She

put forward the teaching model “doing things with language”, to cultivate the ability to use English language when conducting critical analysis and expression, and believed that is an effective means to “break the bottleneck that restricts learners’ English proficiency,” and push the growth of their critical thinking and innovation ability as well.

4.2. Implementing Content-based Instruction to Exploit the Major’s Advantages

The nature of Business English as a major determines that the texts in its skill course textbooks are about business and economy, which is especially suitable for “content-based” instruction. Reasonable curriculum design will facilitate the achievement that language skills and critical thinking ability improve simultaneously.

Content-based Instruction refers to the model of language teaching based on a certain discipline or subject content; the combination of language acquisition and knowledge learning is the core of the model: the learning process enables students to acquire knowledge on certain subjects, promote cognitive ability, and improve their linguistic competence as well (Mohn 1986, Yang Dexiang and Zhao Yongping 2011). Bailin et al. (1999) also put forward the perspective that thinking training should be combined with knowledge acquisition. They believe that students should be assigned tasks that involve reasoning and evaluation. The tasks must be intellectually rewarding, providing an environment stimulating critical thinking, meanwhile highlighting the knowledge and key concepts in specific fields (Gao Ying, Xu Ying, 2015). Language skills training is not center to content-based teaching in skill courses. Teachers will organize teaching activities according to the knowledge that students will learn or opinions they are exposed to. By unifying skill training and knowledge learning, this model of instruction inspires students to think with the target language while acquiring new ideas, engaging them in tasks of thinking training while practicing listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. With more intellectually challenging learning materials rather than materials merely selected for language training, students’ motivation will be activated and learning strategies promoted.

The business-related reading passages in Business English Reading course are suitable for content-based teaching. Texts and reading materials in the course cover extensive themes, including aspects of international business activities, such as international trade, business management, marketing, financial management, business competition, e-commerce, logistics, and subjects all over economic life such as the national monetary policies, international settlement, international investment and trade disputes and settlement, the economic law, etc. Compared with other reading textbooks for language majors, reading textbooks for business English majors is more reflective of the economic pulse of the times and more down-to-earth, and thus better able to stimulate their thirst for exploration and provide materials for critical thinking training. Students will be eager to make sense of contemporary economic events and trace their future development, explaining the events with the economics theories they’ve learned and testing them as well. Teaching materials that can meet the needs of students is the guarantee of teaching effect.

4.3. Reforming Teaching Methods to Achieve a Mutual Promotion Situation

As early as 1999, He Qishen raised some forward-looking suggestions on the reform of foreign language teaching in the 21st century: 1) Teaching reform should focus on cultivating students’ innovative spirit and creative ability, and developing their abilities to analyze, synthesize, criticize and make arguments; 2) It is necessary to change the traditional teacher-centered methods, and highlight students as the center in teaching activities, to help them study independently according to their own leaning aptitude and needs. 3) Teaching plan should combine in-class leaning with out-class study. (Li Liwen 2010). After more than 20 years of exploration, Chinese scholars and foreign language teachers have absorbed foreign experience and developed a variety of teaching methods conducive to the cultivation of critical thinking. This study will introduce two major teaching methods in Business English reading course, question-driven teaching and group cooperation learning.

It should be noted that there are differences in English linguistic competences, learning abilities and learning peculiarities of students at different stages. Terenzini et al. (1995) summarized the factors influencing the learning effect in college: “The characteristics and experiences of students before the university will directly affect the learning experience and effects in and out of class; Classroom learning, course-related experiences, and extracurricular study are interrelated... We found that engagement in and out of the classroom has a significant impact on critical thinking development, and that experiences outside the classroom, especially the amount of time spent studying and reading out of the class, are important.” (Gao Ying, Xu Ying, 2015) Therefore, when choosing teaching contents and planning activities, teachers should take into full consideration students’ pre-college learning experience, stock of knowledge, their aptitude, and limitation in English language level, and the changing stages of these factors. Create circumstances in proportion to their evolving knowledge storage and growing linguistic aptitude. Stimulate and guide students through critical thinking practices. Meanwhile, urge students to utilize English and English only as a tool to fulfill these tasks. Then they will enable students to truly develop their language skills and high-level thinking skills, both in and out of class and throughout the course.

4.3.1. Question-driven Teaching

Question-driven teaching, also known as “Socratic teaching”, opposes the direct indoctrination of knowledge in traditional education but advocates that teachers, taking students as the center of learning process, create a variety of problem situations, guide them to raise questions, and stimulate inquiry thinking. In the real question-driven teaching, “the teacher does not design questions for inspiration, and the questions raised are not necessarily explicit questions in the texts” (Li Zhengshuan, Li Yingxin, 2014). Students, inspired by teachers, become questioners; they find questions or uncertainties in the question-provoking situations, and begin to establish hypothesis, start collecting relevant information and look up for knowledge and related theories, to observe, comb and explore into the information and knowledge, try to find connections, make reasonings and argumentations, and ultimately figure out the answers or solve the problems. In the whole process, students are the center of activities, and the role of teachers is to trigger

thinking and push students' self-correction according to the questions raised. In discussion in and out of class, teachers listen to students carefully, do not interrupt and comment on students' opinions at will, and do not destroy students' thinking by correcting language flaws, so that they provide a circumstance where students can express, be willing to express, or even actively express their opinions, and thus give full play to their critical thinking. Since the 1980s, question-driven teaching has been widely used in colleges in America, and approved of by scholars and educators. Paul (1995) proposed that "students can independently construct knowledge and generate reasonable high-level thinking through dialogue, dialectical thinking and questioning".

In the three semesters (or four semesters) of Business English reading course, teachers can always choose this method, in which deliberately designed scenes based on the content of texts, provoke questions, and questions provoke thinking. The questions raised can be about the topics of the reading materials, the structure of the texts, or about economic phenomena presented in texts. Take "Bankers vs. Mattresses" (a text in Unit 2, Volume 4 of Business English Reading edited by Wang Lifei, 2017) for an example. The article reports European Central Bank's repeated maneuvers of lowering the benchmark interest rates. There are many macro-economics concepts, such as inflation, national monetary policy, quantitative easing, benchmark interest rates, exchange rate peg, national sovereign bonds, etc. Teachers urge students to preview the text and learn the above concepts by themselves. The questions to provoke thinking can be about the writing purpose and main ideas of the passage. Also, from the explicit content of the text, students can be guided to explore and ask questions for critical thinking: how will a certain country's monetary policy, such as raising or cutting benchmark interest rates, affect its economy as a whole? And why? What impacts will inflation and deflation have on a country's economy? Why do some countries implement exchange rates peg? Further exploration may arouse questions like what are the impacts of exchange rate changes on a country's foreign trade and how? Why would investors buy sovereign bonds of countries with negative yields? Teachers can divert students' attention to current western central banks' interest rate hikes, especially the Fed's repeated interest rate hikes in 2022, and help students relate to recent economic events such as the US' implementation of quantitative easing policies at the wake of the break of covid-19 in 2020, the growing labor shortage in western countries since late 2021, enterprises' wage raises and promoting benefits to entice labor, excessively high inflation and so on. Students will be provided with additional materials on related topics to extend their reading. Teachers should supervise and urge students to expand reading, query data, promote thinking, and inspire them to keep a check on the subject in progress (the first question mentioned above). Students should also be encouraged to analyze the events with the aid of the theories of related disciplines, so that they can validate their reasonings and deepen their thinking.

Considering the fact that language competence of freshmen does not suffice to undertake the task involving complicated thinking in English, and that their previous knowledge background before college is scarcely related to business and economy, it is suggested that teachers take the first semester as a transitional period and pay more attention to the learning of discourse and vocabulary. Question-driven learning is still the main teaching method, but questions can be more directed

to language analysis and explicit ideas in discourse, such as comprehension of details. This transition period helps students overcome their fear of the course (which covers topics totally fresh to them), quickly expand their vocabulary, and adapt to the various styles and themes of reading materials in the course, so that it paves the way for students to fulfill more challenging tasks in subsequent semesters. In the second semester and later, teachers can set more types of question scenes: questions about text theme, organization of ideas, interpretation of denotations and connotations, and the like, to help improve critical reading ability, according to the improvement of students' linguistic competence and skills; Also, heuristic scenarios can be designed to guide students to find problems and exercise their critical thinking ability. In order to improve the efficiency of classroom teaching, teachers can assign some tasks before class and encourage students to explore into questions in advance. Web 2.0 can be employed to facilitate interaction and discussion between teachers and students, or among students.

4.3.2. Group Cooperation Study

This teaching method also places students as the center of learning activities, and facilitates interactive study mechanism in group cooperation. The teacher divides the class into several groups and assigns the group learning tasks. Members of each group complete the tasks collaboratively by collecting information, brainstorming, exchanging ideas, questioning, debating and analyzing, in the process of which they learn to listen and respect different opinions. The group leader makes overall arrangements, manages group members, resolves conflicts, adjusts differences and controls the overall progression. The role of the teacher is to design the task and be a listener in the group discussion. He/she does not bluntly deny the students' immature ideas, but offers analyses and guidance when necessary. The results of the group tasks are finally presented in class collaboratively by each group and shared by the whole class. Teachers listen to presentations of each group, make positive comments and give constructive suggestions. The division of group sub-tasks and the process of collaborative creation can foster cooperative and the innovative spirit. The exchange of knowledge and ideas between teachers and students, and among students can be realized and highlighted as an important feature of the method, in which students undergo critical thinking. In addition, not only are students' oral competence and reading comprehension exercised, but also their abilities to debate, analyze and solve problems in English are reinforced.

The group cooperation tasks must be designed in accordance with the varied language capacity, knowledge background, and texts being learning at different stages of the course. In the first semester (the transitional stage from high-school to college study), activities meant to increase vocabulary and promote textual comprehension are the major part of group cooperative tasks. It is suggested, but not confined to it that the second semester's group activities aim at students' analysis of discourse themes, structure and construction of meanings. They involve relatively simple thinking tasks, such as figuring out the author's views and arguments, deciding whether to agree with the author's views or not, and analyzing the logic or defects of the argumentation. It is a training for both critical reading and critical thinking, a process of testing and questioning that requires the elaboration, analysis, evaluation, reasoning and interpretation of concepts, methods, and situations.

In the third and fourth semesters, there added in abundance

informative articles on various fields of economics and reports about or comments on economic events. Students' oral competence and reading comprehension at this stage are generally significantly improved, and thus ready for more complicated thinking in English. Therefore, assignments to explore and analyze economic phenomena can be the main group tasks during the two terms. Students are required to expand reading, collect information, exchange opinions, demonstrate ideas, form reports and presentations according to the problems found. Each group completes the same tasks, or a general direction can be set, and students in each group choose a specific topic in the direction to explore into and have a study on it. The duration of the task varies from one week to one semester, depending on the nature and difficulty level of the task. For tasks with longer durations, two or more weeks, teachers should conduct mid-term check to get aware of the progression, put forward suggestions for improvement, and provide necessary coordination. The completion of tasks should be included in the course evaluation of the semester to promote active student participation.

5. Conclusion

When summarizing the fulfillments thus far achieved in teaching reforms oriented toward cultivation of critical thinking in foreign language majors, Sun Youzhong (2015) proposed "four innovations" as the fundamental approaches, namely, "knowledgeable skill-based courses" (the materials of skill courses must be able to present the basic humanistic knowledge of foreign language disciplines), "skill-enhancing knowledge courses" (knowledge-based courses must ensure continuous improvement of students' foreign language skills), "thinking-driven skill courses", "thinking-driven knowledge courses". Sun also pointed out that "it is necessary to set standards for critical thinking cultivation (teaching objectives), provide materials for thinking development (teaching content), build workshops for thinking training (teaching activities), and train teachers capable of attaining objectives (teaching practitioner)".

The talent training objectives of Business English major underline the importance of critical thinking capacity in undergraduate education. Thus, it's essential that skill-based courses must not be limited to the training of language skills only, but perform as a training process of critical thinking based on the acquisition of business knowledge. As a tool for obtaining information, making analysis and producing ideas, language skills are repeatedly practiced and improved in use. Students' self-learning competence and lifelong-learning abilities are also gradually formed. However, the actualization of these goals depends on teachers' awareness, plan of teaching, design and supervision of activities in and out of class. Through the reform of teaching ideas and methods, the skill courses of business English will be made more knowledgeable and critical-thinking oriented, and the language skills and reasoning ability of Business English majors can be enhanced mutually and simultaneously.

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