

The Application of Communication Language Teaching Method in Reading Classes to Cultivate Learner's Critical Thinking

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Abstract:

The 21st has witnessed the coming of the information era, which requires intelligence and ability to deal with the overwhelmed information. Among all these required skills, critical thinking ability is highly valued. Therefore, countries like America attaches great emphasis on the cultivation of critical thinking; while China, a teaching haunted by test-oriented education, lags behind other countries in this perspective. Alarmed by the urgency, effective action must be taken to solve the problem.

Critical thinking ability matters a lot in learners' building of their creative thinking and their ability to create. While the traditional reading teaching only focus on the acquisition of the vocabulary and the understanding of the main idea of the passage, ignoring the cultivation of communicative skills which lays the foundation for the building of critical thinking.

Therefore, this passage will briefly introduce what critical thinking is and how to cultivate it in real teaching situations by making a conclusion on what the previous researchers have done and combining the current author's ideas. What's more, this passage will apply communicative teaching method, which facilitates communicative competence, to help the building of critical thinking. Last but not least, self-questioning is also assumed as a key part of critical thinking which may be not emphasized much in other essays.

Key words: communicative teaching method; critical thinking; self-questioning.

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1. Introduction.

1.1. Research background.

The entry of 21st century not only give people access to mass information but also bring people many troubles in distinguishing the good information from the bad ones, trapping some “illiteracy” into the information boom. Therefore, there is a need to cultivate learners’ ability to know the good and the bad, helping them get out of the information trap. In the same vein, a country needs intellectuals to put forward the development of the whole society, which means those who have an insight and critical thinking ability to absorb the good and give up the low-quality stuffs.

At the same time, critical thinking ability is an emphasis in The Curriculum Standard for Senior High School in China, which says “to cultivate learners’ ability to apply English in analyzing and solving problems as well as their ability to see problems critically”. But in reality, students often lose themselves in the guidance by the teachers which stress vocabulary and sentence pattern. Therefore, some necessary measures must be taken to meet the requirements of the standard and the needs of the learners. In the long run, the atmosphere of critical thinking and creativity will push forward our society in a fundamental way.

1.2. Communicative language teaching.

Communicative language teaching is also named as communicative approach, or notional approach as well as functional approach. Specifically, it refers to learners, under the guidance of the teacher, to use English to exchange information, thoughts and messages in the forms of speech, signals, writing as well as behavior on English classes (Xu Zhijian, 1997). The ultimate goal of communicative language teaching is to cultivate learners’ communicative competence, enabling students the ability to communicate freely. Chen Hongmei (2004) also mentioned in her paper that Communicative Approach is a kind of teaching method that stresses on the use of English in classes, learner’s self-correction of the use and perfect their use in real communication. However, the status quo of reading class is far from reaching that teaching aim in that teacher focusing on the vocabulary and sentence patterns. In that case, even though teachers give opportunities for learners to practice communication, students’ focus will only on the surface level, talking about the use of single words and surface meaning of the paragraphs.

Therefore, this passage will give a new definition to communicative language method, that is, not only focus on the use of the language on classes, but also cultivate learner’s critical thinking ability by questioning, including questioning themselves as well as the passage, which will greatly enhance their critical thinking ability.

1.3. Critical thinking.

As early as a century ago, the western countries began their study on critical thinking. For instance, John Dewey (1910) put forward his definition on self-reflection, that is, to carefully observe and think about any information, and to find evidence to support them and predicate the conclusion they will lead to. Grazay (1941) also mentioned critical thinking in his book, from the discussion he made on children’s critical thinking; and he concluded that critical thinking is composed of attitude, knowledge and skills. Later on, Robert Ennis (1991) hold the view that critical thinking is about what you believe and what you do and your reflection on them. Besides, according to Luo Xuqing (2002) the number of related researches is on the rise,

which is a good evidence to show that critical thinking has been a heatedly discussed topic in recent years. From what have been mentioned above, we can know that many researchers highly valued the cultivation of critical thinking ability to enhance the comprehensive ability of the learners.

Based on the definitions given by the previous researchers, in this paper, critical thinking ability is referred as the ability to questioning, and to reflect.

In a nutshell, this paper is aimed at explaining how to cooperate communicative language teaching method into the cultivation of the critical thinking ability in reading classes. In details, this paper is not only to boost the development of students' communicative ability but also their critical thinking ability.

2. Problem identification.

Many researches have been found out that the reading classes in China is a poor situation in which teachers put their emphasis on the teaching of the vocabulary or the sentence pattern; the teaching model is so fixed and inflexible that it gives the feeling that reading class is boring and dreary, thus, in the long run, learners will have no passion for reading, or to use their fixed thinking pattern to deal with it, that is, "vocabulary first then sentence pattern later, then to know the meaning of the passage". To solve the problem, the teachers need a radical change not only in the method of teaching but also the purpose of teaching reading.

3. Problem solving.

In addressing the problem, communicative teaching method will be used; at the same time, some guidance will be given to teachers to help them changing their teaching.

Firstly, communicative teaching method will be used to foster the communicative skills, and then students have the chance to pose some questions themselves, which is the most crucial part in reading in that in this part students will have to pose some question on the passage, for example, what do the author wants to tell? Or what's the purpose of the author of writing the passage? Or have the author reach the purpose by using what he said, etc., questions like these will facilitate learner's thinking a lot.

To make it very clear to the teachers of how to cultivate critical thinking, a demonstration will be given to guide teachers to give a better teaching.

Demonstration 1):

Reading: Module 2 My New Teachers

They say that first impressions are very important. My first impression of Mrs. Li was that she was nervous and shy. I think perhaps she was, as it was her first lesson with us. But now, after two weeks, the class really likes working with her. She's kind and patient, and she explains English grammar so clearly that even I can understand it! She avoids making you feel stupid! I've always hated making mistakes or pronouncing a word incorrectly when I speak English, but Mrs. Li just smiles, so that you don't feel completely stupid! I think maybe she goes a bit too slowly for the faster students, but for me it's wonderful! I feel I'm going to make progress with her.

I'd guess that Mrs. Chen is almost sixty. She's very strict—we don't dare to say a word unless she asks us to. She's also very serious and doesn't smile much. When she asks you to do something, you do it immediately! There are a few students in our class who keep coming to class late but they're always on time

for Mrs. Chen's lessons! Some of our class don't like her, but most of us really appreciate her because her teaching is so well organised and clear. And a few students even admit liking her! During scientific experiments, she explains exactly what is happening and as a result my work is improving. Physics will never be my favourite lesson, but I think that I'll do well in the exam with Mrs Chen teaching me.

Mr. Wu's only been teaching us for two weeks and he's already very popular. I think this is because he really enjoys teaching Chinese literature ---- he loves it, infact! He's got so much energy; this is one class you do not fall asleep in! He's about 28, I think, and is rather good-looking. He talks loudly and fast, and waves his hands about a lot when he gets excited. He's really amusing and tells jokes when he thinks we're getting bored. Even things like compositions and summaries are fun with Mr Wu. I respect him a lot.

Table one: Reading Class Demonstration

Steps	Teacher's activity	Students' activity	Purpose
One	Invite Ss to read the passage carefully	Read the passage carefully	To let Ss know about the main contents of the passage
Two	Invite Ss to give out the main idea of the passage	To conclude the main idea of the passage	To grasp the main contents of the passage
Three	Invite Ss to give out their questions on the passage	To put forward several questions that they are interested to know (communication with the passage)	To inspire Ss' thinking, but not confined by teacher's guidance.
Four	Invite Ss to discuss the questions they raised with their partners.	To give out their unique ideas on the questions. (communication with their partners)	To explore the learner's critical thinking ability.
Five	Put out the following questions: What's the purpose of the writer? Did he/she reach the goal? If you were the writer, what will you write down to achieve your purpose? What do you think of the author' writing, is it a good one or bad one?	Ss answer teacher's questions after careful consideration, also, Ss can give out their own questions. (Communication with the author; or in a deeper sense, the communication with the reader him himself.)	This is a crucial part to foster Ss' critical thinking and have a communication with their hearts.

Six	To invite Ss to give out their own questions, the question that they want to know the most.	To brainstorm what they can think of the passage, without confinement and the perception of what is right and what is wrong.	To facilitate Ss' thinking, to open their mind.
Seven	Draw a conclusion on the passage.	Get their own understanding of the passage and their questions about the passage.	To enable Ss a new perspective of reading, no longer restricted to vocabulary and sentence patterns.
Eight	Invite Ss to write a short passage about their understanding/comments of the passage and their ideas if they want to write a passage like that	To pour out their understanding/comments on the passage	A chance for Ss to give their ideas and understandings.

During this reading process, learners will have a better understanding of the passage and their own ideas if they want to write a passage like that. In the long run, critical thinking will be fostered and creativity will be cultivated.

Demonstration 2):

(This text is from the Second book of FLRTP, New Standard English. Module Four, passage three)

Cultural corner

In some countries in Western Europe, such as France, Spain and Britain, the countryside is changing.

Life has become difficult for many villages, and some are disappearing

There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, young people from villages usually want to live somewhere livelier and they often move to the towns and do not return. Secondly, people move to the cities to find work, as there are often very few jobs in the countryside. Sometimes villages remain because people from the cities have bought a "second home" in the village, where they come and stay at weekends. The price of homes goes up and people from the area cannot afford to buy a house there. Another problem is that it is becoming more and more difficult for farmers to make money from their farms. Therefore, they sell their land and find another job.

All these things mean that many villages in Western Europe are fighting to survive. We can only hope that they will remain. The countryside would be a sadder and uglier place without them.

This is a passage talking about the changes that taken place in the western countries, so how can teachers, assisted with communicative method, to use this passage to cultivate learners' critical thinking? Here comes the teaching plan to show how to realize that goal.

Steps	Teacher's activity	Students' activity	Purposes
Step one: fast reading.	To give students guidance on how to read the passage: reading the passage quickly and give out the main idea if the passage	To read the passage as teacher required.	Before our comparison, students shall have a general idea of the passage and what they are going to compare.
Step two:	Invite students to give put the main idea of the passage	After a discussion with group members, students give their understanding of the passage.	To train students' ability in analyzing.
Step three: Careful reading	After students' performance, teacher gives a generalization of the main idea: the reasons why changes happened in the western European countries.	Reading the passage carefully to check the details of the passage.	
Step four:	After knowing the general idea of passage, the teacher put forward several questions to facilitate students' understanding: A: Why people move outside the countryside? B: Are these changes good or bad for the country? Why?	To read the passage carefully and find answers for the teacher's questions.	Train learners' analyzing and summarizing ability.
Step five:	To check students' understanding of the passage and the questions.	Give out their understanding of the questions.	

Step six:	After knowing about the status quo of the countryside, the teacher guides students to think about the situation in China, what about the China's countryside? Is there any differences or similarities?	According to their own living situation and their knowledge about the countryside, students compare the two kinds of countryside: the European one and the Chinese one.	To enable students to compare two different cultures and the reasons that contributes to the situations.
Step seven:	Give students several hints on comparison. A: The reasons contribute the situations in China and in European. B: Is there any similarities between the reasons.	Students think over the questions and give out their understandings with the help of teachers' guidance.	To enable students to have a clear understanding of the passage and the differences between two different societies.
Step eight:	Teacher guide students to summarize the differences and similarities between the two kinds of countryside to deepen students' understanding.	To brainstorm more perspectives about the differences and similarities, and think over why we have all kinds of differences and similarities.	To cultivate learners' critical thinking, to push them to dig out the truth and the reasons that contribute to these phenomena
Step nine:	Invite learner to think about one questions: are those phenomena good or bad? What do you think about it?	Think upon the question and find details to support their views.	Reading is not only about know that truth but think further more about the pros and cons to facilitate learners' critical thinking.

4. Conclusion.

Critical thinking ability matters a lot in learners' development, therefore teachers must give due attention to it. In this paper, communicative teaching method has been applied in the reading process; at the same time, critical thinking is also get facilitated by peer-questions and self-questioning. If more practices can be given to students, critical thinking would be gradually cultivated with the time.

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