

THE ADOPTION OF COLLABORATIVE GROUP DISCUSSION TO ENHANCE
CRITICAL THINKING IN THE EFL CLASSROOM IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Kara Candito

The present study is an attempt to explore the theoretical relevance and efficacy of adopting collaborative group discussion in the EFL classroom setting in China. To be more specific, the main purpose of the research is to find out how and to what extent the collaborative group discussion affects the development of students' critical thinking skills based on the previous research efforts, thus shedding some light on foreign language teaching in China by inspiring collaborative group discussion to facilitate the development of students' critical thinking skills and overall ability.

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Chapter I Introduction

In the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, critical thinking has long been regarded as a higher-order thinking skill, continuously receiving wide academic attention at home and abroad. Numerous researches have been conducted to study the development of critical thinking skills as well as their cultivation through teaching.

Collaborative group discussion is a pedagogical approach that encourages student interaction by working in small groups to intensify their learning and reach their intended objective. Considerable researches have shown that collaborative learning results in higher achievement and more positive relationships among students. Moreover, group discussion can stimulate creativity and foster students' comprehension.

Therefore, the adoption of collaborative group discussion in the EFL classroom has been advocated to promote classroom interaction, enhance learners' cognitive and communicative development and facilitate their critical thinking abilities.

Statement of the Problem

In the age globalization, the negative effects of exam-oriented education in China has become more and more obvious. The country's education system dangerously depends on rote memorization and rigid testing. Emphasis on rote learning and test-taking techniques adversely influences students' academic performance and discourages their critical thinking. Without classroom interaction, students' scores are ensured at the cost of creativity.

As teaching of foreign languages in recent years in China overemphasizes the instruction of language itself, ways in which critical thinking might be interpreted and fostered have become urgent issues for scholars and practitioners.

Definition of Terms

Critical thinking:

Although widely used, critical thinking has been regarded as a concept difficult to define and specify with precision. The various definitions can be mainly categorized from three perspectives.

Firstly, from a philosophical point of view, critical thinking is primarily approached as "the norm of good thinking, the rational aspect of human thought, and as the intellectual virtues needed to approach the world in a reasonable, fair-minded way" (Gibson, 1995). Moreover, critical thinking is considered a logical and reflective thought which focuses on a decision in what to believe and what to do (Ennis, 1989). Facione (1990) advanced the definition of critical thinking as "a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological and contextual consideration upon which that judgment is based". Among those researchers, Paul (1996) simplified it as a skill of taking responsibility and controlling our own mind.

Secondly, critical thinking is perceived from the psychological conceptions with an empirical research basis. Unlike the philosophy-based theories, psychology-based theories are grounded in the cognitive dimension of critical thinking. Psychologists conceptualize critical thinking first and foremost as higher-order thinking skills and focus on the appropriate process of learning and instruction. Halpern (1998), the former president of the American Psychological Association, defined critical thinking as "the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome, that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed." It is the type of thinking used in solving problems, determining probable outcomes, formulating inferences and making decisions. Other definitions from a psychological perspective include the views that

critical thinking is an active and systematic attempt to understand and evaluate arguments (Mayer & Goodchild, 1990), an application of the cognitive system to select between environments (Hartman & Sternberg, 1993) and a sequence of internal symbolic activities that leads to novel, productive ideas or conclusion (Ericson & Hastie, 1994).

Lastly, the concept of critical thinking functions in "critical pedagogy", referring to the capacity to recognize and overcome social injustice. Critical pedagogues argued that critical thinking takes insufficient account of the social context (Giroux, 1994). McLaren (1994) called on a repositioning of critical thinking as a sociopolitical practice, who shared similar values with Freire and Macedo (1987). They advocated that instead of "reading the word", students should be taught to "read the world".

Though the definitions of critical thinking vary greatly among researchers, the common ground they share is the fact that it is the mode of thinking that helps people see the world with a mature skepticism by means of analyzing, inferring and assessing.

Critical thinking skills:

Various kinds of definitions of critical thinking have contributed to the diversified categorizations of critical thinking skills. According to Kuhn (1999), metacognitive skills, metacognitive knowledge and epistemological beliefs are crucial for critical thinking, with the epistemological beliefs considered to be the most important. Other researchers categorized critical thinking skills as "formation of logical inferences" (Simon & Kaplan, 1989) and "purposeful determination of whether to accept, reject or suspend judgment" (Moore & Parker, 1994). Among them, there are two major studies of critical thinking skills.

Bloom's taxonomy:

Bloom's taxonomy, published in 1956 in the *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, has long

been regarded as an important means of categorizing the levels of reasoning skills required in classroom situations. It classifies critical thinking into two major categories: the cognitive domain and the affective domain. In the cognitive domain, Bloom's taxonomy organizes six elements of thinking in descending order. The affective domain consists of "attitudes" that are believed to be worthwhile in developing and maintaining the skills described in the first domain.

Five "attitudinal dispositions" about critical thinking are listed in the affective domain of higher-order thinking.

The Delphi Report:

From 1987 to 1989, a committee of forty-six professionals in the field of higher education, under the direction of Facione (1991), studied the topic "critical thinking with the "Delphi Method". The two-year study contributed to the committee 's consensus on the definition of critical thinking, along with descriptions of the skills and dispositions involved in critical thinking. The experts in the Delphi study agreed that critical thinking includes five core skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation.

Critical thinking assessment:

As critical thinking has received wide academic attention in the field of education, the assessment and cultivation of critical thinking skills deserve further investigations. Among various kinds of assessing tools, two of the most universally acknowledged ones are the Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (1980) and California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (1992). The former is designed to measure different, though interdependent, aspects of critical thinking through its subtests, namely the inferences, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation and evaluation of arguments, while the latter can be divided into seven dimensions to measure students' dispositions, including truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, self-

confidence, inquisitiveness and maturity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the theoretical relevance and efficacy of adopting collaborative group discussion in the EFL classroom setting in China. To be more specific, the main purpose of the research is to analyze and synthesize how and to what extent the collaborative group discussion affects the development of students' critical thinking skills based on the previous research efforts.

Significance of the Study

First of all, although in the academic world, lots of efforts have been made regarding the field of critical thinking and collaborative learning respectively, the study of the two fields in the context of College English class can be a new attempt since there has been few relevant in-depth theoretical and empirical research. The contribution of this study lies in its unique perspective of investigating learners' critical thinking skills in the context of collaborative learning setting.

Besides, the research findings might shed some light on foreign language learning and teaching in China. On the one hand, the study provides implications for foreign language learners. Their involvement in English study and development of critical thinking skills are helpful for them in their educational achievements. On the other hand, it inspires language teaching by encouraging collaborative group discussions with the ultimate purpose of cultivating students' critical thinking skills. Finally, this study will also benefit the teaching material designers. Critical thinking ability should be embedded in teaching materials. However, without specific exploration of how critical thinking abilities are developed, the designers will not be able to apply their ideas into practice. The current study will provide evidence to support designers to achieve this goal.

Methodology

EBSCO Academic Search Premier has been searched for scholarly journal articles published from 2010 to 2019 in the field of critical thinking. Among the results, there are 12874 papers written on this topic. The search terms were limited to “critical thinking” and “teaching English as a foreign language”. Meanwhile, with the key words of “critical thinking”, one can find 69138 scholarly journal articles published in the past ten years on ProQuest Database.

In order to explore the current studies of critical thinking cultivation in EFL classroom in China, online databases of China National Knowledge Infrastructure and Wanfang Data have been searched for relevant papers published from 2000 to 2019 in the field of education with the key words of “critical thinking” and “ESL/EFL teaching”.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Researches concerning critical thinking abroad

There has been a substantial amount of researches on critical thinking in western countries so far. Most of the studies focus on testing the effectiveness of using critical thinking framework to teach elementary school students or community college students. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that critical thinking can be influenced by the instructional strategies utilized in the teaching-learning process.

Reed (1998) wrote a PhD dissertation on the effect of integrating critical thinking into history teaching in a community college. His careful data analyses offered evidence that this teaching method had contributed to the significant improvement in students' academic achievements as well as their general critical thinking skills.

Tsui (1999) compared a number of more specific instructional variables. Instead of specifically designed programs, courses or pedagogical approaches, he focused on the impact of the experiences of ordinary class on students' critical thinking. In his study, compared with multiple choice exams, assignments of class presentations, critical analysis and essay exams were much more positively related to students' self-reported growth in critical thinking. Due to the limitations of traditional research approaches, significant influence of course characteristics that one would expect to enhance critical thinking was not found.

In the course of biotechnology, Lundy et al. (2002) explored the critical thinking ability of college students. Their mixed-method study compared male and female students as well as honors and non-honors students on disposition of critical thinking. It was found that all students, regardless of gender or academic status, showed gains in their disposition toward critical thinking.

A longitudinal case study was conducted to examine whether purposeful teaching for the promotion of higher order thinking skills could enhance critical thinking abilities (Barak & Dori,

2005). Within the framework of science education, there was a good chance for a consequent development of critical thinking capabilities. However, the design and implementation of teaching strategies that enhanced higher order thinking among students were not a simple endeavor; they challenged even the most expert teachers (Tobin, Kahle & Fraser, 1990).

Duron (2006) set up a 5-step framework supposed to be applicable to the fostering of learners' critical thinking skills. The framework included determining learning objectives, teaching through questioning, practicing before you assess, reviewing, refining and improving, providing feedback and assessment of learning.

In the field of foreign language learning, critical thinking deserves additional consideration due to its crucial role of problem-solving and meta-cognitive abilities. Ways in which critical thinking might be interpreted and fostered have become highly controversial issues for scholars and practitioners (Pennycook, 1999). Gradually, a shift has occurred from viewing learning primarily as rote learning to conceptualizing learning as a constantly evolving process of discovering, questioning and reformulating hypotheses. In an experimental study in Japan, Davidson and Dunham (1997) found the integration of critical thinking into English teaching could greatly improve the writing ability of Japanese college students. Afsaneh (2011) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' self-regulation and their critical thinking ability in language institutes. The findings supported the theoretical expectation of a linkage between self-regulation and critical thinking. In addition, significant correlations were found among teachers' self-regulation, teaching experience and age. As Davidson (1998) discussed, since part of the English teacher's task is to prepare learners for interacting with native speakers who value explicit comment, intelligent criticism and intellectual assertion, it was quite essential for language teachers to cultivate students' critical thinking skills. Ghaemi and Taherian (2011) investigated 70

EFL teachers and proved the correlation between their critical thinking ability and teaching success. Therefore, it has been strongly recommended by Thompson (2002) that teachers should equip themselves with critical thinking ability before engaging in teaching. In other words, being enthusiastic, creative and informative in language teaching are three features that a critically reflective teacher ought to possess (Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010).

Researches concerning critical thinking in China

As critical thinking is now a concept of intense interest around the world, modern Chinese researchers are inspired to study critical thinking and its application in teaching. In 2002, Luo wrote the first thesis on this topic and has been honored as the pioneering character in the field of critical thinking. Since then, many scholars and experts have recognized the great importance of fostering critical thinking in EFL teaching. According to them, critical thinking skills include two dimensions: the cognitive dimension and the affective dimension. The cognitive dimension includes the core skills of analysis, evaluation and reasoning, while affective dispositions include curiosity, self-confidence, openness, flexibility, honesty and tolerance. Luo (2003) analyzed critical thinking from the perspective of social culture and historical theories. He claimed that the characteristics of critical thinking included emphasizing the role of language, the influence of environment on the development of thinking, the importance of methodology and the connection of sentiment, attitudes, tendencies and morality to critical thinking. In the process of teaching, Wu (2010) mainly discussed the connotation of higher-order questions and the means of using higher-order strategy in developing students' thinking abilities. In terms of spoken English, a series of researches were conducted on how to foster students' critical thinking and four rules were finally proposed (Wen, 1999). As for English writing, Han (2009) suggested five strategies to deal with the overemphasis of imitation and rote learning in English teaching. In his works, the cultivation

of independent thinking and problem analysis were highly advocated. Also in the aspect of English writing, Liu (2005) explored the impact of task complexity on the critical thinking of college students. The findings proved that familiar topics without time constraint encouraged students to challenge authorities and think creatively.

Besides, the development of the critical thinking skills of the English majors was systematically analyzed (Wen & Zhou, 2006). After the eighth basic education curriculum reform in China, one of the major issues for English majors in higher education was changing the learning focus from "basic knowledge and skills" to the "capacity of students to engage in critical thinking, problem solving and creative efforts" (Anastasia et al., 2009). Since then, researchers in the field of English teaching have been making lasting efforts to achieve this goal.

Zhu (2009) continued the research of Wen & Zhou (2006). In his study, Zhu attempted to make an observation of students' critical thinking by analyzing the argumentative compositions. Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the result indicated that the presentations of critical thinking abilities of English majors are a bit of weaker than other major students.

Tian (2007) conducted an exploratory study on the characteristics at English majors' language talents and the development of thinking ability in argumentative compositions. The result indicated that participants' first language thinking ability has less difference. But the second language thinking ability has tremendous difference.

Wen and Liu (2006) conducted a study that made a research on the characteristics and problems of English majors' abstract thinking ability through analyzing English argumentative compositions. Based on the analysis of these compositions, the result indicated that English majors' development is limited, owing to the features of English majors.

Wen et al. (2010) conducted a comparative study on critical thinking skills between English

majors and other liberal arts majors. The purpose of the study was to check whether the English majors were inferior to the other majors in critical thinking ability. The result indicated that generally the English majors' critical thinking ability was significantly better than that of the other liberal arts majors, but the gap diminished with the increase of grade.

The supporting data indicated the fact that the present English teaching strategies confined the development of critical thinking ability. Consequently, a model was proposed to enhance learners' critical thinking skills, laying essential theoretical foundation for the successful development of critical thinking in China (Wen, 2008).

Adopting collaborative group discussion to enhance critical thinking

In order to cultivate critical thinking skills, several scholars went back to Bloom's work (1956), who proposed that students' critical thinking does improve through instruction (Kennedy et al., 1991). Since the 1840s, the lecture method of instruction had been the primary teaching method in the college classroom (Good, 1979). However, compared with the mastery of lower-order thinking skills with a focus on knowledge and comprehension, students had trouble learning the higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation through this kind of instruction (Garside, 1996). Therefore, ways in which critical thinking might be cultivated have become urgent issues for recent scholars and practitioners.

Collaborative learning closely paralleled the collaborative group discussion as individuals engaged in discussion to enhance understanding through verbalization of their own ideas and response to the ideas of others (Dixson, 1994). For a long time, academic institutions of higher learning have adopted group methods to facilitate learning and goal completion (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). The ordinary group discussion reflected some features of cooperative learning, which was a very structured process characterized by a high degree of individual accountability

and knowledge development (Johnson et al., 1998). During the ordinary group discussion, students focused on the delivery of personal opinions, with less willingness to comment on the dissent from other group members. Therefore, they often finished tasks with diversified ideas, which resulted in their poor performance in thinking development. Moreover, ordinary group discussion placed tremendous authority in the teacher, who structured group exercises and maintained complete control of the group activities (Bruffee, 1993).

Different from the ordinary group discussion, collaborative group discussion reflected the unique features of collaborative learning, which was an unstructured small group process that was concerned with cultivating students' independence, an atmosphere of dissent and a free exchange of ideas. It was an instructional method in which students at various performance levels worked together in small groups toward a common goal of solving a problem, completing a task or creating a product (Johnson et al., 1998). During this kind of discussion, students were demanded to reach a consensus by means of expressing individual thoughts, evaluating others' ideas and drawing the final conclusion. Unlike the ordinary group discussion, students paid more attention to the dissent and felt highly motivated to defend their own positions. Furthermore, collaborative group discussion placed the governance of the students in the hands of the students, with the teacher serving as a facilitator (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998) or guide (Dewey, 1916). In the 1990s, some researchers claimed that collaborative group discussion activated prior knowledge, mobilized existing knowledge and restructured this knowledge by creating new relations between concepts, which conformed to the developmental sequence of critical thinking skills (Kruse, 1988; Lindsey, 1988). Besides, this shared learning from collaborative group activities gave students an opportunity to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers (Totten, 1991). Therefore, scholars gradually shifted their attention to the

manifestation of collaborative learning and started to explore its correlation with the cultivation of critical thinking.

Dennick and Exley (1998) systematically explored the correlation between the two aspects and discovered four methods of group activities that enhanced critical thinking, including focused group discussion, student-led seminars, problem-based learning and role play. In their study, students were given the responsibility of creating a collaborative group discussion where all students participated in significant and meaningful ways. They grouped together to elaborate, defend and extend their ideas and eventually attained higher-order thinking levels.

McPeck (1990) examined the effect of collaborative group discussion and suggested that teachers need to change their teaching methods from a didactic mode to a more discursive or argumentative mode in order to emphasize critical thinking skills. During the discussion, students felt much freer to risk, challenge and question the ideas, contributions and arguments of peers, and also took more responsibility for their own thinking and learning as active learners rather than passive recipients of information.

Smith et al. (1991) studied students engaged in controversial issues and found that the cognitive rehearsal of their own position and the attempts to understand their opponents' position resulted in a high level of thinking skills. In their study, besides mere statements of personal opinions, students needed to evaluate others' ideas, defend their own position and finally reach an agreement. Their findings vividly showed that the collaborative group discussion provided students with ample opportunities to interact with other members and contributed to the improvement of critical thinking skills.

Brown's (1997) study laid stress on the importance of transforming the whole class into small groups and proved that critical thinking was most effectively developed within the context

of a subject area and the concrete form of collaborative group activities. Her findings vividly showed the significant impact of collaborative group discussion on promoting critical thinking skills.

Halpern (1998) explicitly addressed the issue of the correlation by noting that students in the less teacher-dominated classroom environment scored slightly higher than others on tasks calling for creativity and thinking. According to him, collaborative group discussion provided more opportunities for students to interact with each other, think out loud and see how other students thinking processes operate--all of which were essential elements in developing new modes of critical thinking.

Summary

The use of collaborative group discussion in the EFL classroom has shown its positive impact in many ways. Many studies reported better learning experiences, promoted academic achievements and improved level of understanding, while others found collaborative group discussion to be fruitful in teaching communicative skills and building better debate characteristics. Learners have opportunities to use authentic language in order to perform communicative and referential tasks, even when the focus of the lesson is on language rules rather than the development of language skills. More specifically, learners experience active listening as they listen to explanations from their teachers and peers. Likewise, they practice the pragmatics of language and their oral communication skills during group discussion.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Students' ability to think critically can be developed through collaborative group discussion. The implementation of collaborative group discussion method emphasizes students' mastery of the concepts of the material to solve a problem through a process of critical thinking

and the ability to interact with friends and the social environment.

Numerous studies have shown that the key to developing critical thinking lay in creating conditions for participants and providing opportunities for the emotional engagement with the materials, which could be perfectly attained in collaborative group discussion (Mayer, 1986).

Critical thinking skills are associated with problem solving or collaborative learning. At the end of collaborative work, all of the group members are supposed to be able to demonstrate the discussion product. They have to think critically in order to deliver the things that they learned.

The present study has sought to explore the theoretical relevance and efficacy of adopting collaborative group discussion in the EFL classroom setting, thus shedding some light on foreign language teaching in China by inspiring collaborative group discussion to facilitate the development of students' critical thinking skills and overall ability. Practitioners and researchers are encouraged to further explore more applications of various collaborative learning strategies to enhance critical thinking among students.

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