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The Cultivation of Critical Thinking Skills in Intercultural Communication Course

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Abstract

The cultivation of critical thinking skills and intercultural communication competence have been put on list of top priorities in the current English teaching and education reform. The 2,000 version of Higher Education Teaching Syllabus for English Majors stresses the importance of cultivating independent thinking and innovative skills, and also emphasizes the significance of incorporating students’ cultural sensitivity, flexibility to meet the demands of increasingly widespread international communication. Moreover, fostering intercultural communication competence is an important part of developing critical thinking skills, and these two are correlated in the process of language teaching. This paper explores how to integrate the cultivation of critical thinking skills and intercultural communication competence in intercultural communication course by proposing two pedagogical approaches to teaching culture: critical pedagogy and comparative pedagogy.

Key words: Critical thinking skills; Intercultural communication competence; Critical pedagogy; Comparative pedagogy.

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1. CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Critical thinking is recognized as an important competence for students to acquire in academic language (Connolly, 2000; Davidson, 1998; Davidson & Dunham, 1997). Sun (2011) suggests three key reasons for cultivating critical thinking skills in China. First, it is the core target of China Higher Education. Second, it is the communal commission of world class universities. One of the missions of Harvard University is rejoice in discovery and critical thought; one of the key values of Cambridge University is the encouragement of a questioning spirit. Third, critical thinking skill is one of the most important transferable skills, which also refers to portable skills, which could be applied to various working conditions.

Researchers have posed a set of definitions of critical thinking skills. According to Sumner (1940): Criticism is the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances...education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty.

One of the most influential definitions is proposed by Facione, leader of The Delphi Project. His definition of critical thinking skills includes not only cognitive skills but also affective dispositions. Sun (2011) summarized it as below:

Table 1
Critical Thinking Cognitive Skills and Affective Dispositions

Cognitive skills	Sub-skills	Affective dispositions
Interpretation	Categorization	(1) Inquisitiveness with regard to a wide range of issues; (2) Concern to become and remain generally well-informed; (3) Alertness to opportunities to use critical thinking, trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry; (4) Self-confidence in one's own ability to reason; (5) Open-mindedness regarding divergent world views; (6) Flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions; (7) Understanding of the opinions of other people; (8) Fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning, honesty in facing one's own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, egocentric or sociocentric tendencies; (9) Prudence in suspending, making or altering judgments; (10) Willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted.
	Decoding significance Clarifying meaning	
Analysis	Examining ideas Identifying arguments Analyzing arguments	
	Evaluation	
Inference		
	Explanation	
Self-regulation		

In 1999 the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project issued standards for foreign language teaching in the United States. This project based its definition of culture on three interrelated components: Products, practices, and perspectives—which can also be described as artifacts, actions and meanings (Moran, 2001, p.23). Within the context of the classroom, Kramsch (1993) states that “Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background right from day one.” In other words, culture is an integral part of language learning and affects all aspects of learning.

Collier (1989) identifies three major issues to heed when studying ICC: How culture and intercultural communication are defined, the validity and consistency between assumptions made by the researcher, and the need for the researcher to be explicit about research goals, and the theoretical perspective. Collier also identifies four different approaches that have been taken in the past to study ICC, namely ethnography of speaking, cross-cultural attitudes, behavioral skills, and cultural identity.

Generally speaking, competence involves three aspects: emotion, cognition and behavior and these three aspects manifest themselves in three corresponding educational goals: attitudes knowledge and skills. Zhang Hongling proposes the framework for intercultural communication competence based on these three educational goals.

(i) Attitudes

- a. Enhance self-consciousness and has awareness of ethnocentrism and stereotypes and get rid of prejudice.
- b. Cultivate attitudes of curiosity, openness, appreciation and empathy towards foreign cultures;
- c. Raise the awareness of cultural relativism and intercultural communication.

(ii) Knowledge

- a. Accumulate knowledge on native and foreign cultures, and learn about the differences and similarities;
- b. Learn about the social context of language, and its effects on the communication process;
- c. Acquire knowledge on foreign languages and improve the ability of language use;
- d. Learn about nonverbal behaviors and its cultural differences;
- e. Learn about the fundamentals of sociology and psychology, grasp the basic patterns of intercultural communication.

(iii) Behavior

- a. Face up to the uncertainties in communicative context, take the challenge to meet cultural conflicts and tensions;
- b. Be willing to and be able to put oneself into others shoes, develop empathy;
- c. Better flexibility and adaptation, and can adjust one's verbal behavior according to different culture needs;
- d. Sensitive to diverse cultures, and make observation and comparison of different cultural phenomena;
- e. Constant reflection on one's own native culture, and intercultural communicative behavior;
- f. Be receptive to new culture and cope successfully with new intercultural environment.

From the above review, it can be clearly seen that the fostering of critical thinking skills and intercultural communication competence overlap to a certain extent. Affective dispositions like open-mindedness regarding divergent world views, flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions, understanding of the opinions of other people, fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning, honesty in facing one's own biases, prejudices, stereotypes,

egocentric or sociocentric tendencies are important components of Facione’s definition of critical thinking skills. These dispositions are also put on priorities of the framework of intercultural communication competence. It can be concluded that the cultivation of critical thinking skills is closely correlated to the fostering of intercultural communication competence. Therefore, it is applicable to incorporate the cultivation of critical thinking skills into the course of intercultural communication.

2. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND COMPARATIVE PEDAGOGY

Questions regarding how critical thinking skills in English should be taught have been raised (Suhor, 1984). A review of the literature shows that various techniques have been suggested. For example, Kabilan (2000) proposed the use of the pedagogy of questioning based on Freire’s constructs (1970, 1973); Kasper (2000) engaged high-intermediate ESL students in sustained content study within collaborative learning communities and used information technology resources to hone students’ linguistic as well as thinking skills.

Critical Pedagogy. A fairly recent development in the history of education has been the notion of critical pedagogy. The ideas and perspectives of critical pedagogy are most often attributed to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose book *pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970) forms an essential introduction to the topic. In this text, Freire leads teachers to a self-examination of their motives and their methods of teaching. He points out the extent to which teachers and the dominant culture impose their ideas on students and encourages teachers to create learning spaces in which information is exchanged between students and teacher, rather than simply having the teacher knowledge into the students.

Much has been written on critical pedagogy and theory in general, but its application to the teaching of ESL

and culture is comparatively recent. Pennycook (1999) addresses three areas of critical pedagogy in teaching English to students of other languages (TESOL): critical domains, transformative pedagogy, and a self-reflexive stance on critical theory. Pennycook proposes that the power of critical teaching is to transform the individual—both teacher and students. An initial step toward this should be to create an awareness, not only for the self but also of language and especially of issues that require change. When learning about a new culture, students have to consciously observe and be aware of events, behaviors, or situations. Students have to seek out information and ask questions. As they do this, they bring their own conscious level of awareness. This awareness can pave the way to their understanding of the unfamiliar.

A next step is one of transformative pedagogy—putting the curriculum in the hands of the students. This leads to what might be called a pedagogy of engagement: an approach to TESOL that sees such issues as gender, race, class, sexuality, and post colonialism as to fundamental to identity and language that they need to form the basis of curricular organization and pedagogy (p.340).

Teachers can help students implement critical pedagogy into their classroom by taking the following steps: First, name the problem or difficulty, then, reflect critically on the problem or difficulty and finally act to solve the problem or difficulty.

Wink (2005, p.125) notes that when teachers and learners make use of the following principles, they are empowered to solve problems. First is the principles of problem posing, secondly, teachers and learners trust each other, believe that their involvement will matter, understand resistance and institutional barriers to change, are aware of their own power and knowledge.

Teachers can use this activity to help students by asking them what they think about the way the class is run. This allows teachers to give learners more power by offering students an opportunity for input and the chance to voice their opinions about the course.

Table 2
Suggested Activities for Including Critical Pedagogy in Teaching Culture

Activity	Four corners
Level	Beginner-advanced
Handout	None
Tip	Include critical pedagogy in your approach to teaching culture
Steps:	
1. Tape a large piece of paper to the wall in each of the four corners of the room.	
2. Write each question on one of the pieces of paper. What has been the most valuable or most important thing that you have learned in this course so far? What have we discussed that you do not really understand? What can the students do make this a better class? What can the teacher do to make this a better class?	
3. Divide the class into four groups. Give each group a different colored marker.	
4. Tell students that each group will have a chance to answer each question by moving in a circle around the room. They will have 4-5 minutes for each question.	
5. Ask each group to stand in front of a piece of paper, discuss the question, and write down some of their ideas. After approximately five minutes, ask groups to move clockwise to the next piece of paper and question. Repeat this until each group has answered all of the questions.	
6. To finish the activity, review each piece of paper with the class. Ask students to clarify their ideas and give examples, as well as edit any information that is not clear.	

The essence of comparison is used both as a purpose and a method. We do not intend to offer everything concerning comparative studies, but rather attempt to build up a basic framework of platform on which students could start to work alongside some fundamental principles and precepts, all of which would go into and interact with students' deepening understanding of the cultural similarities and dissimilarities of the cultural phenomena. One of the attractions of comparative studies pedagogy is the academic freedom and advantages one can enjoy in doing research. Comparative studies enable us to explore more easily and to discern more clearly, a more precisely identified range of strengths and weakness on both sides. With comparative studies pedagogy, one can develop and establish one's view of certain subjects more consciously, more sharply and more effectively.

Table 3
Suggested Activities for the Teaching of Gender Roles

Activity	Who is he or she
Level	High beginner-Advanced
Handout	None
Tips	Exploring gender identity and roles

Steps :

1. The goal of this activity is for students to create a poster that represents their view of gender identity and roles.
2. Ask the class to brainstorm qualities and characteristics that they associate with women and then generate a similar list of men. Write the ideas on the board.
3. For homework, have students find visual images that represent the qualities and characteristics listed on the board. These images can come from their own photographs, from magazines or online sources, etc. Assign students a due date for bringing their images to class.
4. Form small groups. Ask each group to make two posters: one that represents women and one that represents men.
5. To finish the activity, display the posters around the room. Discuss the various presentations of images. Do students feel that these depictions of masculine and feminine qualities and characteristics are accurate and realistic? Are they creations of the media?

This class activity helps students to make a comparative study between men and women, also students can be encouraged to make comparative study of gender culture between eastern and western countries. As to a critical thinking perspective, students, male or female can take their own stance of choosing their preferred gender roles if they have the freedom. The critical thinking pedagogy and comparative studies pedagogy are integrated into this class activity, and thereby deepening students perceptions of different gender roles in diverse cultures.

3.2 How to Reduce Cultural Conflict

When people assume that all the members of a particular group or culture have the same attributes, we are stereotyping them. These can be positive or negative stereotypes, yet both types are problematic. Stereotypes not only create a false impression, but they also feed into our inaccurate observations and confirm our cultural biases.

Teachers can help reduce cultural conflict by exposing students to situations that allow them to explore different cultural biases and stereotypes. Students are then able to better understand how they might solve different cultural conflicts.

The below activity can be used to encourage students to contemplate causes of cultural misunderstandings

The following are case studies in intercultural communication course, which are illustrative of the application of comparative studies pedagogy.

3. CASE STUDY

3.1 The Teaching of Gender Roles

Gender roles are a fundamental part of identity. Pleck (1997) defines gender roles as “the psychological traits and the social responsibilities that individuals have and feel are appropriate for them because they are male or female”.

Teachers can help students explore gender identity and gender roles by having them discuss their views based on their own cultures. Building this kind of awareness will encourage students to go beyond their visible identities and reveal cultural and societal variations in male and female roles.

caused by biases and stereotypes. This practice can help them reduce cultural conflicts in future encounters.

Directions: form small groups. Read the incidents below. Think about the different cultural backgrounds of the participants. Discuss each story. What do you think happened? Why? How could the misunderstanding have been prevented?

(a) Critical Incident 1

Susanne, originally from New York City, came to Chicago to begin her internship as part of her final year of studies at Stanford University. Upon arriving at O'Hare Airport, she hailed a taxi and gave the driver the address of her aunt's house on Michigan Avenue. Soon Susanne realized that the driver was going the wrong way, and she attempted to give him directions. The taxi driver said that he knew the way and continued in the same direction. After some time, it was clear they were lost. Susanne yelled, “You idiot. You're all alike. Why didn't you listen to me?”

(b) Critical Incident 2

Dieter, an international student from Germany, was studying at an American university. When he arrived, he found he had been assigned an America roommate, Paul. On the first day, Dieter immediately arranged his books in the bookshelf, his shirts in the drawers, and his clothes

in the closet. Paul, on the other hand, did not. His clothes and books were strewn around on his side of the room. Paul commented to Dieter, "You are a typical German with all that organization!" Dieter replied, "And you're a typical American!"

The incidents are concerned with various dimensions of culture. Inform the students that there are no right or wrong answers but that there are solutions.

Undoubtedly, by putting students into these situations, and encourage them to reflect on these critical incidents, students will gradually learn to enhance self-consciousness and has awareness of ethnocentrism and stereotypes and get rid of prejudice; cultivate attitudes of curiosity, openness, appreciation and empathy towards foreign cultures; face up to the uncertainties in communicative context, take the challenge to meet cultural conflicts and tensions. By thinking critically and making comparative studies, students are willing to and be able to put oneself into others shoes, develop empathy; make constant reflection on one's own native culture, and intercultural communicative behavior; are receptive to new culture and cope successfully with new intercultural environment.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the cultivation of critical thinking skills and the fostering of intercultural communication competence has been generally acknowledged in language teaching. Given that critical thinking cognitive skills and affective dispositions and intercultural communication competence overlap to a large extent, it is feasible to integrate the cultivation of critical thinking skills into intercultural communication course. Two pedagogical approaches have been discussed by the author, however, the probe of the cultivation of critical thinking skills in intercultural communication course is just under way, teachers and researchers still have ample room for improvement and reform.

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