Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Ability through Simplified Modal United Nations Conference

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Abstract

Cultivating EFL learners' critical thinking ability is an urgent task for English teachers. To integrate the training of language skills and cultivation of critical thinking ability into one language course, the author designed an activity called simplified Modal United Nations conference, which is based on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy that classifies thinking as containing six cognitive levels of complexity. This activity would help learners to develop higher-level cognitive abilities such as abilities of analyzing, evaluating and creating, while enhancing their language competence by directing their attention to language forms.

Keywords: critical thinking, English teaching, simplified Modal United Nations conference

1. Introduction

The lack of critical thinking ability often put English majors at a disadvantage. In China, a large majority of the winners of the national English public speaking contest in the last decade were non-English majors. Most of the English majors were actually better than those non-English majors in the accuracy and fluency of spoken English. But unfortunately these advantages could not be displayed in their impromptu speeches, which were often characterized by unclear thinking, unnecessary repetitions and stumbling expressions. One reason for this phenomenon is their comparatively narrower scope of knowledge, but the most important reason is their lack of critical thinking ability. Thus, to provide students from English department a better future, we should teach them how to speak the English language and cultivate their critical thinking ability at the same time. And in order to fulfill this task, the author designed an activity called simplified Modal United Nations conference which integrates the training of language skills and cultivation of critical thinking ability into one language course.

2. Literature Review

Mason (2007) analyzed the interpretations of critical thinking given by five philosophers of education, and found out that each of them emphasized different features which they defended as the most important aspect of critical thinking, with some of the features being "the skills of critical reasoning", "a critical attitude" and "a moral orientation which motivates critical thinking". One result caused by the fact that different people may have different interpretations of critical thinking is that hundreds of definitions of critical thinking ability have been offered (Stroupe, 2006). However, just like what Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) said, "there is not much difference among these definitions." And in these definitions, the core abilities behind critical thinking remain the same. Ruggiero (2012) defined thinking as "a conscious mental process performed to solve a problem, make a decision, or gain understanding" and critical thinking as "the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not", with its essence being evaluation. Accordingly, critical thinking ability is concerned with the ability to analyze and evaluate things and then make due judgments about them. These abilities were also emphasized by Cambridge Assessment which defined critical thinking as analytical thinking with its explicit focuses on the processes of "analysing arguments, judging the relevance and significance of information, evaluating claims, inferences, arguments and explanations, constructing clear and coherent arguments, and forming well-reasoned judgements and decisions" (Black, 2012).

The importance of critical thinking in education has been widely acknowledged (Facione, 2015; Kiruthika & Kumaar, 2011; Mason, 2007; Stroupe, 2006), and enhancing learners' critical thinking ability is also considered an important task of foreign language teachers (Huang, 1998; Huang, 2010; Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). Huang

(1998) noticed the fact that English major students in China lacked the critical thinking ability, and further illustrated that when it was time for them to argue in a debate, to make a statement in an article or to ask questions in a lecture, English major students often had nothing to say or even if they had a vague idea, they often did not know where to start (Huang 1998). So he strongly advocated that immediate attention shall be given to the cultivation of critical thinking ability of English major students (Huang, 1998; Huang, 2010). Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) held similar ideas and thought that "language development and thinking are closely related and the teaching of higher-order thinking skills should be an integral part of an L2 curriculum".

Though it is an urgent task for English teachers to cultivate learners' critical thinking ability, many of them may "become disillusioned because of the difficulty in implementing and motivating nonnative English-speaking students to become involved in critical thinking strategies and activities in the classroom" (Stroupe, 2006). Recently, the cultivation of English learners' critical thinking ability has been widely discussed by Chinese scholars. For example, Han and Wang (2009) discussed how to cultivate learners' critical thinking in intensive reading course; Li (2010) studied the relationship between the training of English language skills and the development of critical thinking; Liu and Lv (2012) explored strategies for improving learners' critical thinking ability in network-based autonomous learning; Gao and Xu (2015) constructed a conceptual framework for the development of critical thinking; Xu (2015) and Wu (2015) proposed that content-based teaching be adopted to develop learners' critical thinking ability. However, most of the studies have stopped at the theoretical or conceptual construction. Studies about what teachers should actually do to help learners develop their critical thinking ability are lacking.

In this paper, the author will introduce an activity called simplified Modal United Nations conference, which is designed to help learners to develop higher-level cognitive abilities such as abilities of analyzing, evaluating and creating, while enhancing their language competence by directing their attention to language forms.

3. The Theoretical Foundations

The design of the activity, simplified Modal United Nations conference, is based on the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, which classifies thinking as containing six cognitive levels of complexity, i.e. remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating. Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) defined these terms as follows:

"Remembering: Retrieving, recognizing, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.

Understanding: Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining.

Applying: Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing.

Analyzing: Breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organizing, and attributing.

Evaluating: Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.

Creating: Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing."

With careful reflections about the present situation of English teaching in China, Sun (2011) pointed out that much classroom training of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills had been carried out on the level of remembering and understanding, and many specialized courses also only emphasized the remembering and understanding of certain knowledge points. But as we know, critical thinking ability is displayed on the levels of applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating, so to cultivate students' critical thinking ability, the classroom activities should be focused on enhancing their higher-level cognitive abilities instead of stopping at the first two levels. And this forms the basis of the activity this paper is going to introduce.

Besides cultivating learners' critical thinking ability, another purpose of the activity to be introduced is to enhance their language competence by directing their attention to language forms. As we know, an important factor to be considered when we judge the quality of an ESL classroom activity is its effectiveness in helping learners to enhance their L2 competence. As Saville-Troike et al. (1984) concluded, "Second language acquisition is largely a matter of learning new linguistic forms to fulfill the same functions [as already acquired and used in L1] within a different social milieu." So any good activity should be able to direct learners' attention to those new forms they need to fulfill the functions they have acquired in their L1.

Meaning and form, which are like two sides of the same coin, are attached to each other and should not be separated in L2 learning. Once meaning and form are detached from each other, difficulties will arise for learners

to acquire a new language. When we are learning a new language, we are actually trying to get ourselves familiar with a new kind of meaning-making system, which contains new language forms we could employ to express our meaning when communicating with speakers of another language. The need for expressing meanings to speakers of another language is the prerequisite of learning new language forms. So a good activity should be able to help students to develop their ideas (meanings) first and then direct their attention to relevant forms in the target language. Zhang (2009) introduced a small "read to debate" activity, which "can help students notice the gap between what they said and what they wanted to mean". The debate activity to be discussed in this article, which is more complex and challenging, also serves the same purpose.

4. The simplified Modal United Nations conference

The activity is originated from the Modal United Nations conference. "Model United Nations (also Model UN or MUN) is an academic simulation of the United Nations that aims to educate participants about current events, topics in international relations, diplomacy and the United Nations agenda. The participants role-play as diplomats representing a nation or NGO in a simulated session of the United Nations, such as the Security Council or the General Assembly. Participants research a country, take on roles as diplomats, investigate international issues, debate, deliberate, consult, and then develop solutions to world problems." (From Wikipedia) MUN is very popular around the world and every year tens of thousands of students attend MUN of different levels. MUN conference procedures are very complex when it is held on national, regional or global level, but once it is simplified, it can also be held in classes. The following framework is what I adhered to in my classes and teachers may also develop their own procedures according to their own particular situation.

Step one: Setting up a working committee

A number of students are selected to form a working committee which is responsible for the organization of the conference. To keep students' participating enthusiasm, teachers may let students serve in the working committee by turns.

Step two: Choosing a topic

The working committee is responsible for deciding the topic of the conference. The topic can be large as "the global fight against AIDS" or small as "opening university libraries to the public". The point is the topic should be chosen by students themselves instead of by teachers as it was usually done in classroom debates. In this way, the topic chosen may be more likely to arouse the interest of the whole class and that will lay a solid foundation for students' active participation in the future.

Step three: Assigning roles

Students are divided into groups by drawing lots. Each group contains at least two students so that students can learn how to cooperate with others. Each group will be assigned a role. The roles to be assigned vary with different needs of different topics. If the topic is about a global issue such as "the fight against AIDS", students may role-play as diplomats representing different countries. Meanwhile, if the topic is about an issue such as "opening university libraries to the public", students may be divided into the pros and the cons.

Step four: Preparing for the conference

Students hold discussion in English within groups about their position, and about where and how to find relative information. This had better be done in class so that the teacher can provide timely support when necessary. Each group is required to write its prepared speech for the conference, which in MUN is called the position paper.

Discussion: The discussion within groups could help students realize their lack of a certain knowledge which will arouse their interest to search for relevant ideas, and once they know there is a need of using those ideas in their future debate they will pay more attention to those relevant linguistic forms. Students are required to search for information stored in English instead of their native language, and this will increase their exposure to the target language. When writing their speech, they are required to firstly weigh whether their ideas are clear and coherent, and secondly polish their language to make it as idiomatic as possible. In this way, they will be directed to pay more attention to the form-meaning connections. Since the speech is written by group members together, this practice provides students a very good opportunity to learn from their peers. And since students are given enough time for preparation and they can get support from their peers, it is more likely for them to endure less anxiety and make better performance in the future debate, thus increasing their confidence in communicating with others in the target language.

All of the six cognitive levels of thinking skills will be practiced during this process. Let's take "creating" as an example. After sorting out the materials they have collected, students have to put relevant ideas together to form

a coherent whole, and reorganize those ideas in their own way so that they can serve their purpose. This is the creating ability English major students usually lack so that when it is time for them to write the graduation thesis most of them do not know where and how to locate the relative information and how to use others' idea to support their statements.

Step five: Holding the conference

Once the preparation is finished, the conference can be held in class. If the topic is one like "the global fight against AIDS", the conference may roughly follow the MUN procedures. Firstly, the chair of the conference may set up the speakers' list, and each group will send one representative to state the position of their "country". That is called the general debate, which can be limited within two or three minutes if necessary. During the general debate, each "representative" can motion for a moderated consultation or an unmoderated consultation. If it is an unmoderated consultation, the representative making the motion must briefly state its purpose and specify a time limit for the consultation. The motion shall be immediately put to a vote. A simple majority is required for passage of motions. During an unmoderated consultation, representatives of different countries can meet to discuss around the stated topic. If it is a moderated consultation, the representative making the motion must briefly state its purpose and specify a time limit for the consultation, and a time limit for the individual speeches. In a moderated consultation, the chair shall call on representatives to speak who signifies his/her wish by raising his/her hand. If no representative wishes to speak during a moderated consultation, the consultation shall immediately end. During a moderated consultation, representatives can make improvised speeches on the stated topic.

The general debate and the consultations are the core of the simplified MUN conference, other procedures such as discussing of working papers and draft resolutions will make the classroom MUN conference too complicated to manage within the limited time and should be excluded. However, another procedure can be added to make this activity more challenging, and that is what step six is about.

If the topic is one like "opening university libraries to the public", more modifications should be made about the procedures of MUN conferences. Let's suppose there were altogether ten groups in our class, five arguing for the topic and five against it. During the general debate, these ten groups may take turns to do their prepared speech. When a speech has been finished, students holding a different position may motion for a moderated consultation, specifying an issue and asking the opponent groups to provide their answer in turns. Unmoderated consultation can also be motioned, but no specific topics are required. Groups holding the same position may meet to discuss what challenging issues should be raised for moderated consultations. The moderated consultation here is quite different from those in MUN conferences. In a MUN conference, during a moderated consultation, representatives from each country can seek their opportunity to express their position on the stated topic, while in our activity the motion is actually a challenging question waiting for the opponents to answer.

Discussion: Since the general debate is well prepared, there will be less workload for students if we compare it with the consultation part, during which higher levels of thinking skills will be employed. For example, in a moderated consultation students have to analyze the motion to see its purpose and how it is related to the topic of the conference, then make judgment based on the policy of their "country" or the materials they have gathered, and at last organize relevant ideas to make an improvised speech.

Step six: Writing "resolutions" about the debated issue

In general a resolution is a formulation of opinion submitted to an assembly or conference for consideration. Before a resolution is adopted, it is called a draft resolution. Since time may not be available for the debates about "draft resolutions" in our classroom MUN conference, all of the "draft resolutions" are considered "adopted" and they shall be submitted directly to the teacher instead of the conference committee. Each group is required to write a resolution in my classroom practice. If students role-play as diplomats of different countries, the resolution they compose should stick as closely as possible to the policy of their "country".

Discussion: Like in step four, students' higher level of thinking skills will also be practiced in this part. Writing resolutions will be more challenging than writing those "position papers", since students have to analyze and evaluate the position of the other "countries" and make their resolution friendly to them. This writing practice can also strengthen students' impression of the related target language forms.

5. Conclusions

When Wagner interviewed Clay Parker, president of the Chemical Management Division of BOC Edwards, about the skills he looked for when he hired young people, he got the following answer, "First and foremost, I look for someone who asks good questions,' ... 'We can teach them the technical stuff, but we can't teach them

how to ask good questions—how to think.' (Wagner 2008)" He also cited one senior executive from Dell as saying, "Yesterday's answers won't solve today's problems." And To solve problems, we need to be able to think critically. And to provide students from English department a better future, we should teach them how to speak the English language and cultivate their critical thinking ability at the same time.

The advantage of the activity, simplified MUN conference, is its integrating of listening, speaking, reading, writing and more importantly critical thinking ability into one course. The organization of the activity, seemingly complicated, can be very flexible. If time is limited, the whole process other than step five can be finished before or after class. Teachers of different courses can adapt this activity according to their specific needs. For example, teachers of writing can use this activity to help students to explore ideas and regard the "resolutions" as part of their writing portfolio.

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