

# Critical Thinking and Difficult Problems in Foreign Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** Critical thinking plays an important role in life. The small one is to solve the daily trivial problems, and the large one is related to the development of the country's economy, technological progress, and social progress. Therefore, in the field of foreign language research, more and more scholars are focusing on cultivating students' critical thinking. The focus of this article is to analyze why it is so important to cultivate students' critical thinking in foreign language teaching and why it is difficult to develop students' critical thinking. Based on this, the author will analyze the problems existing in foreign language teaching today.

**Key words:** critical thinking; foreign language teaching; difficult problems

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## 1. Introduction

In such an era of innovation, as a chef, you must innovate your own dishes; as a designer, you must innovate your own designs; as a magician, you must innovate your own unique skills. Innovation is playing an increasingly important role in life. Chefs, designers, and magicians need to have critical thinking in order to have new ideas to update their work. When talking about innovation, one must mention adjectives such as dare to criticize, willing to question, and good at reflecting, and these adjectives are typical characteristics of critical thinkers. In the research of foreign language education, how to cultivate students' critical thinking ability in foreign language teaching has become the focus of many scholars. This article intends to analyze the cultivation of critical thinking, why critical thinking is important in foreign language teaching and why it is difficult to cultivate critical thinking, and reflect on the current situation of foreign language teaching.

## 2. Critical Thinking Concept

As the country's demand for innovative talents continues to expand, it has become clearer that cultivating innovative talents is one of the top tasks of education in China today, and critical thinking that goes "side by side" with innovative thinking has received more and more attention. Concerns about critical thinking are also emerging in endlessly. The definition of critical thinking has been continuously enriched after a long journey.

### 2.1 The definition of critical thinking

Regarding the definition of critical thinking concepts, different fields have different focuses. For example, philosophers emphasize critical thinking attitudes, while psychologists emphasize critical thinking skills; the former is because philosophical theory is about understanding the logic and insights of events theory; the latter is due to the fact that psychological theories pay more attention to growth, cognitive psychology and intelligence theories. Different scholars have different definitions of critical thinking in their research based on their own understanding, therefore, the following

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will briefly review the research on the definition of critical thinking.

Critical thinking originated from the question-and-answer method of the famous ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, also known as “Midwives”. Socrates uses dialogue, discussion, and heuristic education methods. Both parties constantly question and challenge the contradictions exposed in the question and answer or the flaws in reasoning, so as to stimulate in-depth thinking and find the meaning of the concept. The Socrates question and answer method emphasizes logical reasoning and speculation, and opposes the inertia of obedience to authority or other people’s opinions. It has enlightening significance for cultivating independent thinking ability and critical spirit. In short, Socrates advocated the discovery of truth by individuals, rather than directly accepting truth.

Critical thinking was first seen in Dewey’s related discourses. He believed that the essence of critical thinking is a kind of “delayed judgment”, that is, do not draw conclusions easily before things are fully understood. He advocates bold questioning, cautious assertions, and emphasizes deductive reasoning and the importance of logic. Fifty years after the idea that critical thinking is a kind of “delayed judgment”, Smith researched that teaching students logic is not the same as teaching students critical thinking. After that, Ennis and Paulus also disagree with deduction logic can summarize critical thinking. Subsequently, Ennis proposed a generally accepted definition of critical thinking, that is, it is reasonable and reflective thinking, and its purpose is to determine our beliefs and actions. Mcpeck defines critical thinking as appropriate use when thinking about problems reflective questioning. Paul and Elder regard critical thinking as a metacognitive skill; in addition, other scholars have also explored the “transferability” of critical thinking and the relationship between critical thinking and psychological beliefs.

In order to further clarify the meaning of critical thinking, 46 experts from the United States and Canada, led by Peter Facion, conducted another study on it. These experts came from philosophy, economics, computer science, education and other fields. The concept of thinking reached a consensus and was published in the “Delphi Report” in 1990: critical thinking is purposeful and self-calibrated judgment.

## 2.2 The meaning of critical thinking

The previous article described the research on the definition of critical thinking, and with the continuous deepening of the research on the definition of critical thinking, the connotation of critical thinking has been continuously improved and enriched. The connotation of critical thinking has basically gone through three stages: initiation, development and enrichment. The initial stage is from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, mainly from the cognitive and technical level to understand critical thinking. Dewey, a representative of critical thinking research, proposed the prototype of critical thinking, that is, before making judgments, we should think carefully and make careful decisions. Since then, Ennis (1996) believes that critical thinking is a series of skills based on formal logical reasoning and the ability to correctly judge opinions. The development stage was from the 1980s to the 1990s. Researchers broke through the cognitive level and began to focus on the process and methods of critical thinking. Critical thinking is a high-level way of thinking in which individuals seek solutions through active analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation when facing problems (Paul 1993). Since entering the 21st century, the connotation of critical thinking has been further refined. Luo Qingxu (2001) pointed out that critical thinking is not only a kind of thinking ability, but also an individual’s quality tendency.

## 3. Critical Thinking and Foreign Language Teaching

In this era of information explosion, it is particularly important to treat people and things around you with a critical eye. However, the development of critical thinking alone is far from enough. It needs to be cultivated from the time of a student. Therefore, some scholars have pointed out that curriculum teaching requires teachers not only to interpret knowledge points, carry out thinking based on teaching cases, and clarify teaching goals, but also to strengthen students’

dominant position, and cultivate students' openness, questioning spirit and innovative ability. This is a realistic demand for my country to train applied and innovative high-quality talents in the new era. In foreign language teaching, the responsibility of guiding students to have critical thinking is even more important.

### 3.1 The importance of cultivating critical thinking in foreign language teaching

*General High School English Curriculum Standards* (2017 Edition) clearly stated that thinking quality reflects the mental characteristics of English subject literacy and the development of the quality of thinking helps students improve their ability to analyze and solve problems, enabling them to observe and understand the world from a cross-cultural perspective, and make correct value judgments about things; criticality is listed as an aspect of the important ability and level of thinking quality. The importance of critical thinking in foreign language teaching is not only reflected in the documents issued by the state, but also in the research based on the cultivation of critical thinking by domestic and foreign language scholars.

Yang Yanxia and Ren Jingsheng combed the relevant literature on critical thinking research in CSSCI source journals of our foreign languages from 2010 to 2015 in the article *Visual Analysis and Reflection on Critical Thinking Research in Foreign Languages*, and presented them through visual analysis of keywords and author knowledge Current status and hot spots of critical thinking research in China. The analysis results show that the number of critical thinking studies in China is on the rise. The integration of critical thinking and specific courses is mainly reflected in the teaching of reading, writing, translation and oral speech. After 2015, the number of documents related to critical thinking and foreign language teaching has also been increasing. It can be seen that the importance of critical thinking in foreign language teaching is driving more and more researchers and teachers to study how to inspire students to critically and speculatively understand, master and apply knowledge in foreign language teaching.

In addition, the cultivation of critical thinking plays an important role in foreign language teaching for teachers and students. In today's English classroom, many teachers have the phenomenon of "rigid teaching", and students correspondingly have a situation of "rigid learning". Because English is an unfamiliar language, students need to accept it with interest in order to learn happily and effectively. The students are facing tremendous pressure to enter a higher education. Teachers are forced to make English learning a "dead" language due to the intense teaching progress. They recite words, phrases, sentences, and articles. Students' learning is full of mechanical rote memorization, which makes students' impression of English learning always "boring" and "difficult". Therefore, it is especially important for teachers to learn how to design classroom activities flexibly and guide students to learn actively and critically. Students should understand that English cannot be mastered by just memorizing it by rote. It is more important for them to accept and use it with a thinking and critical attitude. This is the correct way to learn English.

In order to cultivate the core literacy of students in the English subject, the country has incorporated the cultivation of critical thinking into one of the important links. Foreign language scholars at home and abroad are also contributing ideas and suggestions on how to cultivate critical thinking in foreign language teaching. Teachers and knowledge-thirsty students also need critical thinking to help teachers smooth their teaching and help students absorb other cultures. The importance of critical thinking in foreign language teaching is self-evident, but today's foreign language teaching is faced with a series of difficult problems. Among them, how to train students to think critically and learn foreign languages with a critical eye is a representative problem.

### 3.2 The difficulties of cultivating critical thinking in foreign language teaching

In *Problems in Foreign Language Classroom Teaching and Several Research Topics*, Shu Dingfang pointed out the problems in foreign language classroom teaching in China. Among them, the lack of innovation in the teaching process and

mechanical teaching theory are typical representative problems. In other words, these existing problems are exactly the problems that need to be solved in foreign language teaching, and most of these problems are linked to critical thinking. For instance, the lack of innovation in the teaching process and the use of rigid teaching theories all point to the lack of critical thinking by teachers. And teachers have no reflection or judgment on teaching methods and teaching theories, but blindly accept others' teaching methods and teaching theories, without caring whether they are suitable for themselves and their own students. With teachers who lack critical thinking, there are students who lack critical thinking surely. This is exactly the difficulty in cultivating students' critical thinking in foreign language teaching. In the following, the author will describe why it is difficult to cultivate critical thinking from three perspectives related to students, teachers, and culture. These three perspectives are expanded in response to the three factors mentioned by Li Ruifang in *Foreign Language Teaching and the Cultivation of Students' Creativity and Critical Thinking*: education, culture, and understanding, which influence students' creativity and critical thinking training.

### 3.2.1 Formal education suppresses critical thinking

Today's society advocates "positive energy" and encourages contemporary students to move closer to all good things. School education will show all the right and good knowledge and models in front of students for students to learn the truth and understand the spirit. But these orthodox views, mainstream views, and well-founded facts, on the other hand, inhibit students from viewing them with their own understanding and personal experience. Over time, students only care about accepting, but it is difficult to reflect on what they accept. If the thing stated in the book is right, and the teacher said it is right to do so, it is right; once a student commits a behavior that violates the book or the teacher, he will fall into endless pain. It will not help students to understand themselves clearly and judge something correctly, but will put students in a dilemma. Puppy love is one of the typical representatives. If you can guide students to reflect on their behavior in time, and carefully consider how such behavior will affect the future, it may lead students to develop in a direction that is truly beneficial to them; instead of just telling them that such behavior is strictly prohibited, cannot be tolerated.

Therefore, in teaching, especially in foreign language teaching, students are receiving cultural influences from different countries. It is necessary to guide students to think positively, dare to criticize, and dare to deny, but not blindly deny, which can help students improve their learning ability.

### 3.2.2 Traditional culture obstructs critical thinking

The importance of culture cannot be ignored. As Li Ruifang said, culture affects our words and deeds and dominates our way of thinking. As a big country with a long civilization of 5,000 years, China's culture has nourished generations of descendants of Yan and Huang. However, the feudal society of China for thousands of years has formed an atmosphere of supremacy, books and ready-made answers, which makes people afraid to cross the thunder pond and makes students lack the spirit of independent thinking and the courage to criticize and explore. The respect for teachers rooted in culture seriously hinders the development of critical thinking among students. Respect the teacher, so what the teacher said is correct; respect the teacher, so you should not disobey the teacher and respect the teacher, and thus you should not question the teacher. This kind of "teacher-centered" phenomenon is not uncommon. In a class, the teacher talks and the students listen. After the lecture, the class is over.

As a deep-rooted source of nutrition, culture is difficult to cut off. Therefore, teachers should try their best to return the classroom to students and give them more opportunities to express their personal opinions, so that students can learn to reflect and think.

### 3.2.3 Superficial knowledge hinders critical thinking

Critical thinking is very important, as students' ability to think independently and solve problems independently. This

understanding is remembered by every teacher, but it is difficult to achieve this in real teaching. Teachers do not allow students to think independently, but just let students listen to them for the complete course; instead of providing opportunities for students to question themselves, they only provide mechanical tasks such as writing and recitation; students were not encouraged to question themselves, but rather were told: “Don’t ask why, that’s it.” Obviously, such a concept of teachers is not only not conducive to the cultivation of students’ critical thinking, but also gradually wears down their learning interest and enthusiasm.

Therefore, first of all, teachers should design lively and interestingly, interlocking teaching activities, leading students to explore and discover new knowledge, and then teachers should summarize these knowledge for students. Secondly, teachers should set up homework reasonably and replace mechanical copying with tasks that are beneficial to students’ divergent thinking. Finally, teachers must boldly admit that “no one is perfect, no one can fault”, and students are welcome to question and challenge themselves.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In order to study the importance and difficulty of critical thinking in foreign language teaching, this article first starts with the meaning of the concept of critical thinking and analyzes the different definitions of critical thinking by modern scholars. And the second part is a brief description of the connotation of critical thinking. Finally, there is an analysis about the importance and difficulties of the cultivation of critical thinking in foreign language teaching.

As an abstract concept, critical thinking is difficult to generalize. That’s why many scholars have divergent definitions. But as the research on critical thinking continues to deepen, there have been pioneering progress on what critical thinking is and what kind of talent is a true critical thinker. It is with the development of a series of studies that the importance of thinking that guides people to make the right decision is shown to the world, and everyone truly understands the indisputable importance of critical thinking. In today’s information age, people cannot hold all the information in our hearts but need to look at the world with a critical attitude. As a foreign language teacher, what is taught to students is not only language knowledge, but more importantly, cultural knowledge from other countries in the world. At this time, critical thinking is particularly important. Because critical thinking is not equal to negation, but cautious reflection and creation. It is necessary to guide students to develop the habit of critical thinking, that is, to reflect on themselves and continue to create and innovate when absorbing the culture of other countries.

But the cultivation of critical thinking does not happen overnight. Teachers need to be a critical thinker and a model for students to follow suit. This is the profound significance of the teaching profession. Therefore, for teachers who are about to take up their posts, it is necessary to work harder to become a critical thinker, to have an open mind, a cautious attitude, and a tolerant heart. It is important but not the only task to cultivate students to become critical thinkers. Don't be afraid of hardships and face them bravely.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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