

Enhancing English Writing Quality: An Exploration of Teaching Practices Based on Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract—This research explores the integration of critical thinking into English writing teaching to elevate the standard of students' compositions. It assesses a range of pedagogical approaches, including a novel “corpus” task, on their efficacy in enhancing the logical structuring of arguments and the robustness of evidence provided by students. Results demonstrate a substantial boost in students' abilities to select pertinent information, critically evaluate, and construct coherent arguments, thereby improving their writing skills. The paper presents actionable strategies for embedding critical thinking in English writing instruction, advocating for innovative teaching methodologies.

Keywords—critical thinking, critical reasoning, English writing enhancement, teaching strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Amidst globalization, English education aims not just at language knowledge dissemination but also at fostering students' critical thinking and advanced cognitive abilities. “*Advanced English Writing 2*”, centered on cultivating critical thinking through case studies and hands-on exploration, seeks to elevate students' English writing levels. This study thoroughly documents the course execution, examines challenges in nurturing critical thinking, and proposes how these educational concepts might be extended to a broader teaching context, offering guidance for enhancing the quality and innovation of English writing instruction.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical thinking is defined as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, serving as a guide to belief and action” [1]. In essence, critical thinking involves scrutinizing information with a critical eye and guiding actions with rational thought.

The relationship between critical thinking and writing is inseparable. Rahmat's qualitative study explored the connection between thinking and writing, finding that writing mirrors the thinking process and thus encouraging teachers to focus on students' thinking process while teaching writing [2]. Gao and Wen [3] also confirmed the overall predictive power of critical thinking and linguistic factors on second language writing, advocating for the positive role of critical thinking in foreign language teaching.

Research on cultivating critical thinking in English writing primarily revolves around macro-discussions on pedagogical paths or models centered on critical thinking [4, 5], detailed case studies [6], and the evaluation of critical thinking's

effectiveness [7–9]. While previous studies have examined the link between critical thinking and English writing, there's a lack of in-depth analysis on instructional strategies. This study aims to shed light on practical applications of integrating critical thinking into teaching through case studies of instructional design, contributing new insights to the field.

III. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

The course “*Advanced English Writing 2*”, designed for third-year English majors, uses *Argumentative Writing* as its textbook [10], aiming to deepen critical thinking skills. Incorporating exploring the issue, writing techniques, case analysis, and language study with a problem-driven teaching approach, the course seeks to enhance students' critical thinking and advanced writing abilities.

To gain insight into students' English writing competencies and challenges, a survey was conducted at the beginning of the term. The results revealed that 47.62% of students found organizing thoughts to be the most challenging, indicating deficiencies in logic and depth; 23.81% felt the brainstorming phase was the most daunting, hinting at a lack of analytical and reasoning skills. Additionally, 20.24% viewed writing itself as the greatest hurdle, reflecting deficiencies in grammar, syntax, and precision in expression. Moreover, 52.38% and 62.71% of students overly relied on existing knowledge during idea generation and organization, lacking innovation and flexibility. Their troubles in finding suitable materials further underscored evaluative skill deficiencies, particularly in judging information's quality and relevance.

Wen's [11] model for critical thinking levels underpins this course's design, providing a robust theoretical base and clear benchmarks for skills and assessments. Reflecting on the survey findings, this study focuses on nurturing students' metacognitive skills and critical thinking capabilities, aiming to substantially improve their English writing proficiency.

IV. OVERALL TEACHING DESIGN

The overall design of this study is founded on Wen Qiufang's theoretical model for the hierarchical development of critical thinking skills, aiming to enhance students' analytical abilities and English writing proficiency through targeted activities.

A. Warming-up

Before entering a new teaching unit, an innovative “corpus” assignment is introduced, distinct from conventional writing tasks. This involves collecting materials, exploring themes, summarizing key points, and engaging in

creative thinking, thereby fostering a comprehensive development of language skills from basic expression to advanced critical thinking. In the “Material Collection” phase, students are encouraged to independently gather relevant information, sharpening their evaluative and information filtering skills, thereby enriching their understanding and expressive capabilities. Moving on to “Theme Exploration”, students leverage gathered data to identify relevant topics, improving their analytical skills and thought flexibility. The “Summary Writing” segment demands the distillation of information into core insights, enriching their understanding of logical constructs. Lastly, the “Creative Thinking” phase culminates in the formulation of original insights, emphasizing the development of metacognitive skills alongside emotional dimensions such as openness, confidence, and resilience. Outstanding works are reviewed and discussed in class to motivate quality improvement and further cultivate critical thinking skills.

Take the “corpus” assignment in unit one “*Human Beings and Nature*” as an example.

In the “Material Collection” phase, students collected information on authoritative organizations related to environmental and natural issues, such as the UN Environment Programme, and significant international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement, as well as data on global water scarcity. This phase enriched students’ understanding of the current state of human-nature interactions, laying a vital groundwork for their linguistic articulation and critical analysis on the subject.

During the “Theme Exploration” segment, students came up with thought-provoking subjects such as the benefits of global warming, the role of cloning in conserving wildlife, and the ethical use of animals in scientific and commercial contexts. This phase highlighted their augmented ability to dissect and logically evaluate topics, indicating a substantial enhancement in their critical thought process.

During the “Summary Writing” segment, students effectively synthesized the core points and supporting evidence from the article “*Should We Save the Jerboa?*”. This underscored their adeptness in filtering information and pinpointing key aspects, enhancing their ability for logical coherence and deeper insight.

In the “Creative Thinking” section, students used the proverb “Giving a handful of rice brings thanks; a heap invites envy” to explore themes of human envy and greed against nature’s generosity, expressing concerns for Earth’s future. They analyzed apocalyptic themes in movies like “*The Wandering Earth*” underscoring the urgency of environmental protection. This section highlighted their emotional engagement, depth of thought, and enhanced metacognitive skills, particularly in self-regulation and analytical refinement.

These stages significantly advanced students’ critical thinking capabilities, enhancing their ability to effectively structure thoughts and express ideas in English writing.

B. Lead-in

After the “corpus” assignment on the unit’s theme, students delve into open-ended questions in the unit’s lead-in, promoting independent thinking and critical analysis.

For example, unit one “*Human Beings and Nature*”, discussions explore differing views on human-nature

relations across cultures and students’ own environmental perspectives. This approach broadens their understanding and deepens their insight into global environmental challenges. Discussions begin in small groups and broaden to include the entire class, guided by the instructor’s feedback, fostering a dynamic learning environment. For example, in debates about the ideal human-nature relationship, students examine ethical, traditional, religious, and cultural perspectives, tracing their origins. This approach enhances their metacognitive skills and their ability to assess information, build arguments, and substantiate claims.

Delving into pressing environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss, students learn to assess them from various perspectives, sharpening their evaluative and reasoning abilities. This approach leverages course content to substantially enhance student’ critical thinking, particularly in analysis, evaluation, and creative thought.

C. Text Analysis

Departing from traditional methods, the author uses open questions and inquiry-based learning to encourage active engagement and critical analysis of texts. Students start by pinpointing the main arguments and evidence, enhancing their analytical skills. They then critically evaluate the arguments relevance and strength, integrating personal reflections to assess persuasiveness. Guidance on exploring the text’s logical framework strengthens their reasoning. Discussions also focus on refining language use for clearer expression.

For instance, in unit one “*Human Beings and Nature*”, students engage in profound discussions sparked by the case study “*Should We Save the Jerboa?*”. These discussions cover a broad spectrum, from the imperatives of conservation to a critical evaluation of supporting evidence’s relevance and reliability, further extending to how interactions with endangered species shape one’s receptiveness to arguments. Attention is also given to language concerns like the impact of hedge words on the cogency of arguments. This pedagogical approach not only refines their critical thinking and reasoning faculties but also polishes their prowess in academic English writing.

D. Writing

The course’s writing component encompasses collaborative brainstorming sessions, reflections throughout the writing journey, and peer reviews upon completion.

After delving into the unit’s theme, the course initiates with a brainstorming session, setting the stage for students to share preliminary essay concepts, encompassing chosen topics, thesis statements, and evidentiary support. Peers actively engage, offering insights and constructive feedback. This process not only cultivates students’ ability to self-reflect and fine-tune their ideas but also encourages the generation of novel perspectives and articulations.

For instance, unit one “*Human Beings and Nature*”, discussions evolve from conventional environmental issues, such as pollution control and deforestation, to more nuanced debates on ethical considerations in scientific research involving animals or the implications of genetically modified organisms. This broadened discourse enriches the learning experience, fostering a deeper understanding and more sophisticated argumentation in students’ writing.

After the writing phase, the peer review process begins with students providing feedback to one another within their groups, progressing to wider group discussions. A standout essay is then chosen for each group to showcase its revisions, highlighting the process of critique and improvement. This method not only hones the students' abilities to analyze and assess but also encourages articulate defense of their viewpoints in class-wide debates. Such an approach nurtures a deeper level of critical thinking and cultivates an environment of respectful academic exchange.

V. EMPIRICAL STUDY AND ANALYSIS

This section evaluates the influence of “*Advanced English Writing 2*” course on 105 students' critical thinking and writing abilities, employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative analysis of essays with qualitative feedback from students.

A. Data Analysis

Writing Quality Evaluation: Throughout the course, each participant is required to craft four argumentative essays. The essays, assessed at the beginning and end of the semester, are critiqued based on argument clarity, evidence adequacy, logical coherence, originality, and linguistic precision. The results post-intervention reveal significant enhancements: logical coherence witnessed a 20.13% enhancement, evidential adequacy rose by 13.74%, and originality surged by 24.33%, collectively signaling a substantial boost in the students' critical thinking prowess.

Student Feedback: Following the course, semi-structured interview gathered students' perspectives. A notable 85.3% commended the discussion's open dialogue, highlighting how the structured lead-in questions significantly sharpened their critical thinking. In semi-structured interviews, 83.6% remarked that the “corpus” tasks not only sharpened their awareness to thematic content but also spurred creative exploration, deepened their grasp of the underlying logic within articles, solidified their reasoning, spurred reflective thought, and honed linguistic precision. Additionally, 80.1% underscored that the “text analysis” segment particularly emphasized the importance of evidence validity, thereby augmenting their abilities in dissecting and appraising articles.

Observations by the Instructor: Detailed records of students' contributions to class debates and their collaboration in group tasks show a notable boost in their confidence to articulate their ideas. Their inquiries and feedback to peers have become more insightful and targeted. Notably, in brainstorming and peer review sessions, students exhibit strong critical thinking skills, fostering a culture of academic respect and constructive dialogue within the class.

Based on analysis of writing samples and feedback from 105 students, this empirical study shows that the “*Advanced English Writing 2*” course improves students' critical thinking abilities and English writing skills. Through diverse teaching activities, students exhibit significant enhancements in logical thinking, critical analysis, innovation, clear expression, and emotional resonance. These findings highlight the importance of a critical-thinking-oriented teaching approach in English writing instruction, providing valuable insights and evidence for future teaching practices.

B. Empirical Research Summary

Based on analysis of writing samples and feedback from 105 students, this empirical study shows that the “*Advanced English Writing 2*” course improves students' critical thinking abilities and English writing skills. Through diverse teaching activities, students exhibit significant enhancements in logical thinking, critical analysis, innovation, clear expression, and emotional resonance. These findings highlight the importance of a critical-thinking-oriented teaching approach in English writing instruction, providing valuable insights and evidence for future teaching practices.

VI. REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The teaching journey presents several hurdles. Initially, a number of students were hesitant about participating in open discussions and peer evaluations, indicating a struggle with the new interactive teaching style and a reluctance to voice their opinions freely. This situation highlights the necessity for more targeted guidance to ease students into participatory learning and bolster their confidence. Furthermore, converting critical thinking into effective writing poses a significant challenge for some, especially in crafting arguments with depth and innovation. The broad curriculum, coupled with time limitations, also restricts the ability to provide detailed feedback on each student's work, potentially limiting full mastery of critical thinking skills. Additionally, the varied levels of student proficiency necessitate adaptable teaching approaches to cater to diverse needs, adding a layer of complexity to instruction.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study's case analysis of the “*Advanced English Writing 2*” course demonstrates the value of embedding critical thinking in English writing education. Varied pedagogical approaches, notably the unique “corpus” assignment, markedly bolster student's abilities to construct logical arguments and use reliable evidence, leading to improved writing standards. In light of challenges such as student acclimation to novel teaching methodologies and applying critical thinking skills in writing, recommendations include refining student orientation, streamlining the course framework, and adopting tailored teaching strategies. These insights not only offer actionable strategies for nurturing critical thinking within English writing pedagogy but also advocate for pedagogical innovation to holistically enhance student capabilities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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