

Original Paper

A Probe into the Integrated Learning Model of Academic English “Writing + Critical Thinking” in Sino-Foreign Joint Education

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Received: October 27, 2023 Accepted: February 13, 2024 Online Published: February 27, 2024
doi:10.22158/wjeh.v6n1p132 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v6n1p132>

Abstract

This research attempts to reconstruct an integrated learning model of academic English “writing + critical thinking”, which is better targeted at talent cultivation in Sino-foreign Joint Education, a prominent entity in China’s higher education. This model, under the guidance of six critical thinking skills from the Delphi Report, boasts 3 vital revisions in the teaching process of academic writing: critical reading, exemplar writing methodology, and a co-constructed updated version of academic English “writing + critical thinking” marking criteria. This could enhance critical thinking dispositions and skills of students in Sino-foreign Joint Education who, with the help of these skills, can ultimately develop into critical, globally literate and competitive talents. This research could benefit the teaching reform in Sino-foreign Joint Education and its Academic English courses.

Keywords

Sino-foreign Joint Education, academic English writing, critical thinking, critical reading, exemplar

1. Introduction

In 2020, China’s Ministry of Education and other seven related departments officially issued “Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening Up of Education to the World in the New Era”, which explicitly encourages that higher education should fulfill the mission of cultivating globally competitive talents. Among them, Sino-foreign Joint Education programs and institutions are listed as an important component of China’s becoming a modern educational powerhouse to nurture interdisciplinary talents with global insights. Meanwhile, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is

widely recognized as a core course of Sino-foreign Joint Education, therefore its teaching quality has a direct impact on the effectiveness of talent cultivation in this education body.

At present, most EAP curricula in Sino-foreign Joint Education programs and institutions are very similar to those of College English courses offered for general undergraduate majors. However, because of their different talent cultivation goals, that is the mission of Sino-foreign Joint Education is to foster students' global literacy, and their ability to participate in international affairs and competitions (Lin, 2012). It is widely acknowledged by education scholars and employers that critical thinking (hereafter CT) is a cornerstone to thrive in a globalized world. In 2016, the Ministers of Education of Canada has prioritized CT and problem-solving ability as one of the six broad global competencies in their school education system (Council of Ministers of Education, 2018). What's more, OECD (2018) regards that schools should take the responsibility of improving students' awareness and ability to think and examine global issues as well as digital information critically. Therefore, in order to enhance students' international competence in Sino-foreign Joint Education, EAP courses there should lay a bolder emphasis on empowering students' CT abilities.

Academic English writing, as an academic output skill, is of great importance in terms of research communication and results presentation on the international platform. This paper will try to build a better-fitted curriculum system of academic English writing course for Sino-foreign Joint Education programs, which finds a way to integrate critical thinking skills (hereafter CTS) while learning academic English writing skills, to optimize the effects of academic English writing on the quality cultivation of students in Chinese-foreign Joint Education programs.

2. Research Background

2.1 Critical Thinking

CT is generally recognized to consist of disposition and skills. Critical thinking disposition (CTD) is for thinking habits and attitudes that can make a critical thinker, including attentiveness, the habit of inquiry, self-confidence, and faith in reason (Facione, 1990; Facione, Facione, & Giancarlo, 1998). Whereas CTS are associated with abilities such as analyzing, evaluating, judging, considering alternatives and inferring (Facione, 1990).

A study on the application of CTD in educational settings was carried out by Paul (1989) where he proposed that critical thinking could be constructed from skills such as recognizing conclusions, evaluating premises, drawing conclusions, and identifying fallacies. In other words, skills can be imparted and trained, and dispositions can be shaped during the learning process. Sun Youzhong (2015) believes that the cultivation of critical thinking is an enduring motif in higher education. It is due to the fact that academic studies require students to evaluate data from numerous sources, synthesize information, analyze cases, and reflect on their reasoning to form a solid argument. That is to say, in order to succeed academically, CTS serves as the underpinning for undergraduates.

In China's context, some scholars surveyed students' critical thinking ability in Sino-foreign Joint Education programs in one province and found that students have not yet formed an effective way of critical thinking. Results show that they scored the highest on the desire for knowledge, but the lowest for the ability to find the truth and systematize it (Wang, 2013), which indicates that the students in Sino-foreign Joint Education have the desire to acquire critical thinking abilities, but they lack a systematic training of it, which will be the main direction of reforming curricula in Sino-foreign Joint Education programs. Han Xue (2017) conducted a quantitative and qualitative research with 270 freshman and sophomore students of the Sino-foreign Joint Education program at Hubei University of Technology using the Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory proposed by Wen Qiufang and the California Critical Thinking Skills Test revised by Luo Yujiao. The findings paralleled with previous study that students' overall CTD and CTS scored relatively low, even sophomores were significantly weaker than freshmen in terms of CTS.

As a foundational core course of Sino-foreign Joint Education, academic English writing usually operates through the freshman and sophomore years, and plays an indispensable role in fostering students' critical thinking mentality and abilities, which, in turn, ultimately enhances their global literacy and academic communication ability. Writing, especially argumentative writing, which is the most common text genre in academic English, is both a process and a result of using CTS (Bean & Merzel, 2011). The process of producing an academic English essay requires students to formulate and argue the validity of their argument, provide solid reasoning to support it and refute the opposing viewpoints. ESL teachers Tanaka and Gilliland (2017) demonstrated the link by leading students to read texts with different viewpoints. They conducted action research to prove that, after eight weeks of study, non-native English EAP learners were able to consciously consider alternatives and evaluate them in writing. The majority of the students believed that critical thinking also had a positive impact on their values of life.

Secondly, integrating CTS criteria into the assessment scale of academic English writing can help to improve students' writing quality by enhancing the presence of critical thinking awareness in students' writing (Mu, 2016). Meanwhile, the grading criteria of academic English argumentative writing usually focus on argument relevance, coherence and cohesion, logic in reasoning, and unbiased and accurate academic language. They correspond to the main criteria of critical thinking: relevance, clarity, logic, accuracy, and fairness (Elder & Paul, 2008). As a result, the cultivation of CTD and skills can be seamlessly blended into academic English writing courses, transforming the traditional academic English language class into an academic English "writing+critical thinking" class.

At present, although preliminary research on the cultivation of critical thinking in academic English writing has been carried out, a spotlight is seldom shed on Sino-foreign Joint Education, which is an emerging education context in China. Studies have shown that students in these programs have a strong need for critical thinking training, but their acquisition of skills has been proven unsatisfactory, which

proves the necessity of reforming academic English writing curriculum into a better befitting “language + critical thinking” model.

3. Academic English “Writing + Critical Thinking” Teaching Model for Sino-foreign Joint Education

This paper attempts to construct a “writing + critical thinking” teaching model for the academic English writing course directed by the educational outcomes for student development in Sino-foreign Joint Education and under the guidance of cognitive skills and subskills of critical thinking provided by the American Philosophical Association Expert Panel (Facione, 1990). The updated learning model will focus on promoting students’ CTS, because frequent and apt using of CTS will naturally foster their CTD to a great extent. During pre-writing sessions, students are able to acquire the ability to read critically and evaluate information by being offered the skill and list of critical reading questions; students’ reflection and independent thinking abilities are trained from the “exemplar” writing method; finally, a co-constructed “writing+critical thinking” marking criteria would be used to reinforce students’ logical reasoning, deeper thinking, and independent study abilities. The academic English “writing + critical thinking” model is shown in Figure 1:

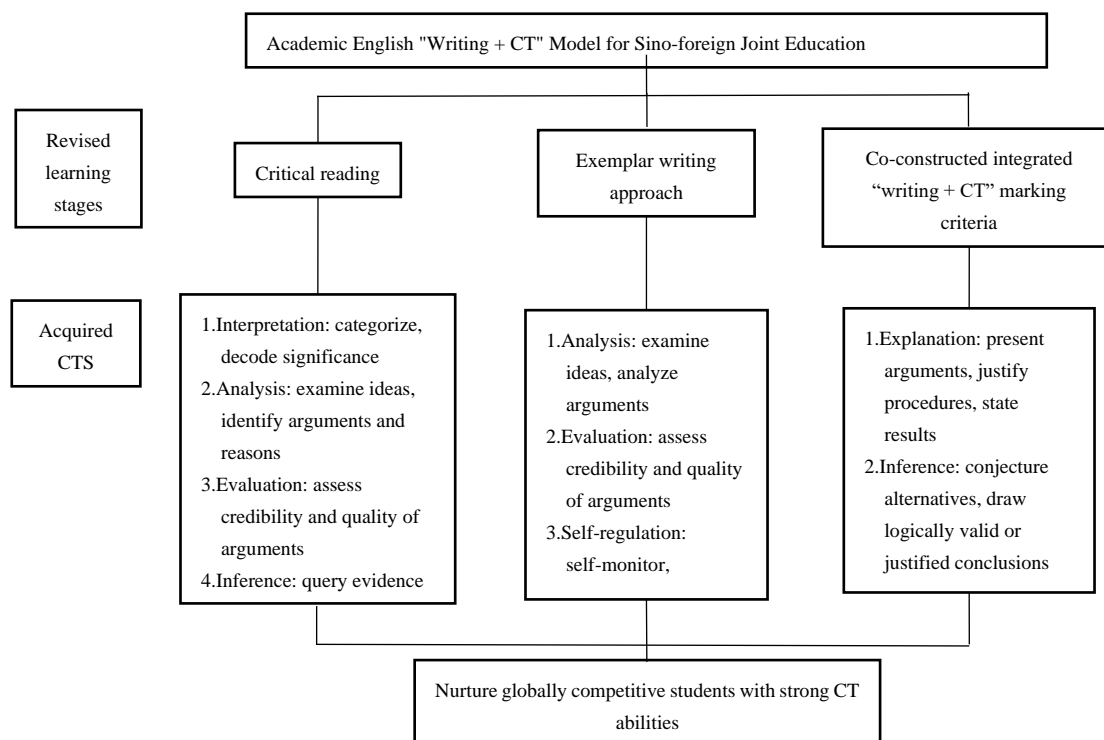


Figure 1. Academic English “Writing + Critical Thinking” Model for Sino-Foreign Joint Education

3.1 Critical Reading: Reading into Writing

In the pre-writing stage, student writers need input information for the assigned writing topic. However, reading into writing needs to be differentiated from exam reading exercises and extensive reading for interest. That is, students need to evaluate the arguments and evidences in selected reading materials that are applicable to their essays. Teachers use the “critical reading question list” to carefully direct students in their search for credible and useful information.

Richard Paul (1992) explains that critical reading skills require readers to be able to accurately identify an author’s point of view, evaluate evidence, arguments, and assumptions, analyze the author’s logic, judge the author’s writing purpose, and decide the author’s credibility. Instead of focusing solely on content comprehension and language points, which is the focus of test-oriented reading exercises, readers analyze and critique the logic of reasoning, its relevance to the stance, quality of the arguments, and academic writing style.

The critical reading process is centered on practicing CTS, and these reading questions are used to elicit students’ ideas and learning interests. Learners need to analyze the reading materials to locate claims and supporting evidences, and then examine their validity and quality to evaluate the texts. Furthermore, students have to classify the input readings together with their arguments and evidences into groups, for example, “useful” or “not useful”, and “credible” or “not credible”. At the same time, the significance of the input information may also be marked for later essay writing’s sake.

This study refers to the list of critical reading questions provided by the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Toronto (no date) and adapts it to suit the needs of academic English writing courses in China’s Sino-foreign Joint Education context, and the “Critical Reading Question List” is shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Critical Reading Question List

Who is the author? Is the author credible in the field?
Who are the target readers of the article?
What is the thesis statement?
Can the main idea in each paragraph support the thesis statement?
Can the evidences presented support the main idea and minor points in each paragraph?
Are the evidences credible?
Does the article attempt to discuss counterarguments or consider other viewpoints?
What is the signposting language in the article?

To be specific, the process of critical reading is in line with the cultivation goal of Sino-foreign Joint Education, which is to prepare students for industry-leading international talents. In the process of reading into writing, they not only absorb knowledge on the topic but also need to judge and decide the credibility and applicability of the presented information, ultimately achieving the purpose of utilizing

it in their academic English writing. What's more, the four dimensions of academic English are also exercised: academic language skills, genre mastery, reasoning/argumentative strategies, and disciplinary knowledge (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Under the guidance of content-based learning strategy, critical reading period is output-driven and input-enabled. Learners put on the hat of "researchers" and "critiques" to critically evaluate information, thus generating a sense of responsibility and motivation for writing.

3.2 Exemplar Writing Methodology

In Sino-foreign Joint Education programs, academic English writing courses mainly adopt the process writing method, in which there are multiple times of feedback and revisions between student and teacher, and among students and students. However, the truth is that Chinese students are more accustomed to lectures. After completing the critical reading input, in the traditional classroom, the teacher will provide one or two model essays and lecture about them, and students will imitate the structure and language of the model essays. This is consistent with students' previous learning habits. However, in the eyes of most students, model essays are the only answer and the artificial ceiling, which is obviously not conducive to developing CT.

Exemplars are no longer the only answer, but those that can be used by learners for reference, evaluation, and self-examination. Exemplars are usually defined as writing samples from students, teachers, or other sources to illustrate different levels and dimensions of writing quality (Carless et al., 2018). In recent ELT research,

The dialogic approach is applied when students and instructors work together to analyze and assess the strengths, weaknesses, and structure of the exemplar essays to judge the task achievement and writing quality of the chosen exemplars. Given that the largest source of exemplar essays is usually the work of previous and current students, a common result of analysis and assessment is that learners will compare, reflect on, and revise their own writing to avoid the fallacies in the exemplars. The phenomenon that students independently and actively reflecting on their own writing and revising it based on the results of the discussion is in line with three of the six characteristics of CT summarized by Yingxin LI (2018): independence, proactivity, and reflexivity. In this way, it can be summarized that exemplar teaching is highly beneficial for improving students' CTS.

When teachers select and discuss exemplars, students often need to use inductive reasoning, an important CTS categorized by Robert Ennis (1962), to receive tacit knowledge of the marking criteria. For instance, they will inevitably compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses among exemplars to decide which one fulfill the writing task better, and they have to examine the logical relationships to see if there is a flow of ideas. In this way, exemplars, as a student-centered pedagogy, can enable learners to better comprehend the otherwise ambiguous criteria of "good writing" (Chong, 2019). It also helps the later co-construction of the academic English "writing + CT" marking criteria with the teacher.

3.3 The Integrated Grading Scale of “Writing + Critical Thinking” for Academic English in Sino-Foreign Joint Education

While Bloom’s six-level taxonomy of cognitive thinking skills and Robert Ennis’ twelve aspects of CT are the most applied theories when evaluating learners’ CT ability, they both lack specific and measurable rubrics.

Later, many scholars managed to concretize applicable marking scales. Wen Qiufang et al. (2009) developed a hierarchical model of CTS, and Chen Zehang et al. (2016) interpreted performances of CTS in academic English argumentative writing, which provides a feasible reference for teaching practice. Dong (2017), following the predecessors, improved a marking scale specifically for CTS in second-language writing. However, for Sino-foreign Joint Education, a burgeoning learning context with a global vision, the rubrics to assess academic English “writing + CT” needs to be more targeted. This study adopted the rating scale for assessing CT in L2 writing proposed by Dong Yanning, and adapted it according to the talent cultivation objectives of Sino-foreign Joint Education and the learning needs of academic English writing in this context. The new criteria categorize nine indicators of CTS into three scoring items: structure + CT (consistency, credibility, and logic), content + CT (depth, critical stance, and logic), and language + CT (impartiality, academic style, and logic). Scores are assigned as 10, 8, 6, 4, and 2 (9, 7, 5, and 3 as half marks), respectively, in order of high or low scores. The new academic English “writing + CT” marking scale is shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Academic English “Writing + CT” Grading Scale for Sino-Foreign Joint Education

Rating scale	Description	Band				
		10	8	6	4	2
		Excellent	Good	Competent	Basic	Limited
Structure + CT	Consistency	Stance is clear, consistent, and justified; main ideas are clear, and well-supported by evidences				
	Credibility	Arguments and sources of evidence are credible and justifiable				
	Logic	flow of ideas; presents global and local academic essay organization; links between ideas are well-connected				
	Depth	the requirements of the task are fully covered with sophistication; ideas are complex and explored and evaluated in depth				
Content + CT	Critical stance	the stance presents a carefully considered position; effective analysis and evaluation from more than one perspective				

Language + CT	Logic	No inconsistencies or logical errors in stance and development
	Impartiality	No signs of biased or offensive language against religion, race, sex, age, occupation, etc.
	Academic style	Ability to use academic English vocabulary correctly
Logic		Some sophisticated use of a wide range of cohesive devices appropriately
Total		

In terms of structure + CT, the three indicators can examine if student writers' present their reasoning in the form of persuasive and relevant arguments, stating and justifying them by providing logical chains and evidences that can support well. In this way, the authenticity and consistency of the main ideas can be ensured.

For content + CT, it is more concerned with idea complexity and consideration of alternative arguments, as well as the logical development of ideas. A set of connected concepts should be logically combined to create a viewpoint and conclusions should be drawn based on careful evaluation and analysis of ideas and reasons from different perspectives. If writers miss opportunities to do so, the discussion of the topic will be superficial and repetitive. Then it can be deducted that the writer may lack some critical thinking abilities in academic writing.

As for language + CT, teachers mainly focus on whether learners are able to use academic language to express critical stance, for example, incorporating academic vocabulary and hedging language is an important element to demonstrate caution and academic linguistic skills. Meanwhile, the logic of the essay also is reflected by the writers' choice of appropriate cohesive devices.

It can be concluded that this updated grading scale for Sino-foreign Joint Education combines the assessment of academic writing itself and the evaluation of CTS in writing in one sheet, which can not only lighten teachers' workload but also provides students with a clearer reference in achieving the writing task.

As Sun Youzhong et al. (2013) point out, incorporating CTS in English classrooms can be "the jumping pole" for students' CT development, while the assessment is to provide students with a "benchmark" to reach the height of CT abilities. Therefore, this Academic English "writing + CT" grading scale for Sino-foreign Joint Education can not only serve as a reference material for English teachers in practice but also as a touchstone for learners to compare and improve towards.

4. Conclusion

Sino-foreign Joint Education programs and institutions have been in full swing in China for around twenty years, but its academic English writing curriculum, a foundational core course, still often follows the traditional way, which is not in line with the cultivation outcomes of students in these programs as well as the needs of a globalized world. This study attempts to construct an integrated teaching model of academic English “writing+CT” that is more adaptable in these contexts. It starts with critical reading during the pre-writing stage, and then the teacher and students together co-construct a revised and targeted version of academic English “writing+CT” by using exemplars. The originally divided language skills and CTS training are now integrated, and at the same time, a feasible, effective, and targeted writing assessment criteria is provided to solve the problem of students lacking global literacy and CT abilities. In the future, Research will be carried out on better applying CT training in academic English writing classrooms to serve the improvement of the quality of talent cultivation in Sino-foreign Joint Education and try to radiate further to college English curricula.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by “the General Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Jiangsu Province Year 2022” (Project name: Research into Academic English writing curriculum in Sino-foreign Joint Education under Empowerment Theory; Project number: 2022SJYB0192) and “the Teaching Reform in International Education of Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology Year 2023” (Project name: Exploring critical thinking cultivation in Academic English course in Sino-foreign Joint Education under the perspective of global competence; project number: 2023GYBJG10)

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