

Typology of EFL Writing Tasks and the  
Cultivation of College Students' Critical Thinking

*Lian Dan*



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# **Typology of EFL Writing Tasks and the Cultivation of College Students' Critical Thinking**

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# PREFACE

Critical thinking has drawn much concern from scholars and researchers in the education field and they have conducted many studies on it. A variety of programs have been established in the western schools to train students' critical thinking in recent decades. However, there exists a void in the cultivation of students' critical thinking in College English teaching for traditional EFL teaching merely attaches emphasis to training students' linguistic knowledge and language skills. Therefore, EFL teachers are required to adopt appropriate writing tasks and teaching approaches to foster college students' critical thinking.

At first, Qualitative Critical Thinking Skills Scale was revised to assess students' critical thinking abilities reflected in their essays, which would help instructors find out the characteristics and weaknesses of students' critical thinking skills and design targeted writing tasks to improve their abilities from all aspects.

This study follows the essential steps of action research on the basis of College English writing teaching. The researcher discovered some problems in her own teaching practice, made some reforms, put reformed learning tasks as well as teaching approaches into practice and reflected upon the implementation and effectiveness. Text analysis, questionnaires and interviews are employed for repeated "action-reflection-action" and constant improvement. In the course of three-round action research, various writing tasks and teaching approaches and corresponding assessment methods are designed to aim at the cultivation of language proficiency and critical thinking skills, such as inference, reasoning, classification, analysis and self-validation.

Based on Constructivism, Cooperative Learning and Process Writing Theory, the researcher attempted to adopt different teaching approaches like teachers' written feedback in the form of questions, peer feedback, self-assessment and brainstorming. In addition, various writing tasks, ranging from topic writing to pictorial writing, read-to-write to task-based writing, were chosen to nurture college students' English proficiency and critical thinking abilities and diminish boredom in EFL writing.

The results indicate that brainstorming at the pre-writing stage, peer feedback and teachers' content-related comments are instrumental in promoting critical thinking, while teachers' written feedback in the form of Socratic questions and self-evaluation have little effect. On one hand, with the shift of teaching focus from sheer language to the combination of form and content, foreign language learners' critical thinking abilities in analysis, evaluation, inference etc. have been improved after a period of English writing practice. On the other hand, students are still short of awareness of reflection upon their own thinking process.

It is also found that college students' poor performance of critical thinking skills in writing has been improved by leaps and bounds in the study. Nevertheless, this result shows a departure from the common sense that the cultivation of critical thinking must be a long and arduous process. As a matter of fact, English learners' critical thinking abilities would gradually improve regardless of the type of writing tasks, as long as teachers emphasized the significance of writing content, which has driven the researcher to further reflect on the existing examination system, assessment standards, and the focus of College English teaching. It is urgent to eliminate negative effects of traditional language teaching that has already seriously blocked college students' cognitive development in that it overemphasizes language form, ignoring writing content for a long time.

Another problem arising in the study is obvious boredom in English writ-

ing. Students have become utilitarian under great external pressure of CET – 4/6, employment and further study. They are reluctant to write in English after they were driven to take repeated writing exercises mechanically, which extinguished their interest that can only be fueled by the inner thirst for knowledge. Therefore, the researcher calls for holistic education that accentuates effective teaching methods should meet college students' needs in language, cognition and affect simultaneously and suggests that exploratory writing tasks should be designed where novel and challenging tasks may ignite and keep learning interest. Moreover, task-based writing has been introduced into the last round of action research based on the organic combination of process writing and product writing. It keeps learners writing and rewriting on the same theme, constantly exploring the same topic from different perspectives. The greatest advantage of this type of writing task is to help learners out of weariness, writing anxiety and other negative affects. Both linguistic form and writing content have been attached importance to during the entire spiral writing process. In order to take full advantage of this teaching approach, a variety of meaningful and authentic or quasi-authentic tasks need to be designed to cultivate students' learning autonomy, after their psychological characteristics and cognitive demands have been taken into account.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

Critical thinking, as a kind of essential thinking abilities, aims at enhancing people's awareness of criticism and openness, independence and confidence. Since the early 20th century, how to improve the students' critical thinking competence has always been the hotspot of western higher education reform. Higher education in China also highlights the cultivation of critical thinking competence in recent years. However, there exists a void in the cultivation of students' critical thinking in College English teaching for traditional EFL teaching merely attaches emphasis to training students' linguistic knowledge and language skills. And this phenomenon has drawn some scholars' attention (Wen Qiufang, 2006; Liu Donghong, 2005; Li Ruifang, 2002; Huang Yuansheng, 1999).

## 1.1 Research Purpose

Writing is often regarded one of effective means to foster critical thinking competence in that one has to interpret, reason, infer, evaluate, analyze, make interconnections between ideas and then express their own thoughts when using a target language to write. Thus EFL writing plays a significant role in College English teaching, as one of the most salient outcomes of foreign lan-

guage learning. The majority of foreign language learners, however, continue to be challenged by writing long after they have been accepted into the university. Instead of traditional writing assessment which carries certain expectations of language form, such as clarity, accuracy and complexity, this study has laid an emphasis on the promotion of critical thinking competence and has attempted to cultivate foreign language learners' critical thinking abilities by continuous exploration of EFL writing teaching.

Although both learning task types and teaching approaches have been widely acknowledged to take predominance in L1, L2 and FL learning, there are disproportional studies on to what extent certain type of writing tasks and teaching approaches facilitate or inhibit students' performance in writing and what kinds of writing tasks and teaching approaches are desirable for the development of college students' critical thinking in EFL writing. Therefore, in the course of EFL writing teaching, how to improve learners' critical thinking through the application of proper writing tasks and teaching approaches is still an unknown field waiting to be further explored.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine whether certain type of writing task in EFL writing and certain kind of teaching approach can enhance college students' critical thinking abilities as well as promote advanced thinking skills. The research attempts to address the following research questions:

1. How well do college students use critical thinking skills when writing in English? Do they make significant improvement in critical thinking skills, as measured by analytic and holistic scoring, after receiving different types of writing tasks and teaching approaches?

2. If so, in what critical thinking skills do students' English compositions show the significant change? To what extent do their critical thinking skills improve during the process of study? And what are the contributing factors to their changes?

3. What kinds of writing tasks are desirable to improve students' critical thinking in EFL writing?

4. How does the certain kind of teaching approaches influence students' critical thinking in the process of EFL writing?

These research questions will be further explored in the following three-around action research. The detail findings will be elaborately presented in the researcher's reflection upon study results obtained from students' compositions, classroom observation and interviews.

### **1.3 Research Methodology**

The researcher began the study with a curiosity about the improvement of students' critical thinking initiated by foreign language writing. As is known, whether a study is experimental or quasi-experimental, the data collection and analysis methods are known to hide some details. This research has been based on action research, which has been used in various investigations, especially in language teaching research. It is an ideal methodology when an in-depth study is needed because it allows the researcher into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the logic by which the participants respond to different types of writing tasks and teaching approaches. Therefore, this research method is usually qualitative and interpretive on the basis of a large quantity of observations, interviews and researchers' own reflective thinking as Rubin and Rubin (1995) stress that the importance of action research is to pinpoint the

teaching problems in the authentic context and solve them in the overall situation.

In this study, the researcher and teacher are one. This teacher-as-researcher study is to examine students' English writing performance based on different types of writing tasks. Students' essays will be collected every week. Of particular focus is the performance of students' critical thinking skills shown in their compositions and their response to the different types of writing tasks and teaching approaches. In order to triangulate research data, other artifacts are taken into the research design to gather information, including critical thinking assessment tools, student essays, holistic grading and analytical measure.

Besides, interviews, observation and think aloud are conducted among students and researchers to gather information as much as possible, because observation gives the opportunity to gather "live" data from "live" situations, that is, from what is actually happening in the classroom (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Given the necessity, semi-structured interviews and informal conversational interviews with no fixed questions are adopted throughout the study period as problems emerge from the ongoing study, which allows the researcher to probe into problems flexibly and reduce the possibility of bias.

On the whole, the purpose of this research is to understand the change of language learners' critical thinking levels and seek for appropriate methods to promote this ability, so that qualitative analysis are preferred by the researcher to develop good insights and intuitions concerning the data so that we could fully understand the phenomenon we are exploring. Action research, as a form of naturalistic inquiry, allows practitioners to make studies in a natural state without manipulating variables so as to obtain largely unadorned solutions to problems of special relevance to their own teaching practice. This research adds to the body of knowledge researchers have compiled about how to culti-

vate critical thinking by adopting different types of writing tasks and teaching approaches in the EFL acquisition.

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

Only with critical spirit can people think profoundly, find questions, and then discover and invent new things. Nowadays, great concern has been focused on the cultivation of university students' critical thinking, which is one of the key targets of quality education. In China, English teaching is a basic course in higher education. However, it is only treated as an opportunity to teach grammar and vocabulary. This is almost the case in China's English classrooms. EFL teachers have long been considering English course simply as a means to improve students' linguistic knowledge and the main objective of traditional English writing is to correct grammatical mistakes through teachers' feedback. One vital aspect of language teaching that has so far been left out is cultivation of students' abilities to analyze, evaluate and think critically.

Critical thinking is rarely involved in English teaching, let alone EFL writing. This seems to go against with the current context of global trend in which students are required to read and write critically in the learning process. Under such circumstances, almost all education departments and college teachers advocate that critical thinking should be set as a fundamental goal of education. This study pointed out the necessity and practicability of implementing reflective writing in English teaching so as to foster students' critical thinking.

Many scholars pointed out that critical thinking is best developed as students grapple with specific content (such as reading, writing, social studies and science) rather than taught exclusively as a separate set of skills



( Brookfield, 1987; Wallace, 2003; Kurubacak, 2006; Pan Jiaming, 2009; Liu Siyuan, 2010 ). However, one will find out that college students lack basic critical thinking skills, such as analyzing, questioning, distinguishing and criticizing, while they are composing essays, which to a great extent mirrors the poor performance of students' critical thinking and in turn restrains the all-round development of their learning competence. Compared with the traditional English writing teaching, process-oriented writing is considered instrumental to improve students' critical thinking because it attaches more attention to content and meanings writers intend to convey. With the aim of exploring a more operational teaching mode for English writing teaching, the researcher makes a further probe into the effectiveness of different kinds of teaching methods in her classroom, ranging from brainstorming to Socratic questioning, from peer feedback to self-assessment.

In addition, this research has pointed out that EFL writing is greatly lacking appropriate writing tasks and activities to promote learners' critical thinking abilities. How to improve critical thinking by EFL writing through more effective and inspiring tasks is still a mysterious field waiting to be explored. Therefore, this study is designed to explore what kinds of writing tasks will facilitate or inhibit students' performance in EFL writing and to what extent these writing tasks influence students' critical thinking development.

Last but not least, the value of action research is that the research can learn a lot from her own study and teaching practice. There is much evidence that if teachers want students to think critically, teachers must teach them explicitly how to do so. Teachers' guidance is absolutely indispensable to the construction of critical thinking environment. If teachers' emphasis on content of essay and critical thinking abilities shown in students' writing would encourage or reinforce students' positive perceptions and interest in those aspects. While choosing writing tasks, EFL teachers should bear on mind that critical thinking abilities such as deriving plausible conclusions from one's own list of infor-