The Impact of English Debate on Developing College Students’ Critical Thinking Skills

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Cultivating students with excellent critical thinking skills and good communication capabilities is the fundamental goal of college education. English debate is now arousing more and more attention in college education while more colleges in China are promoting English debate clubs and activities to introduce such an English learning tool for college students. The current study managed to conduct a questionnaire on 92 college students in China who had English debating experience for their attitude and acceptance of English debate as a useful tool for English study. The study showed that though different grades took a different attitude towards the positive impact of English debate on English study, all of the respondents agreed that English debate brought them practical benefit for English study and acted positively in many aspects of English skills or improvement on their critical thinking abilities. College students as freshmen and sophomores did not react as positively as juniors and seniors did. Among the seniors, 87.5% of them agreed that English debate equipped them with advanced critical thinking abilities. The acknowledgement of the merits of English debate increases along with their grades. In detailed parts of benefits brought by English debate, respondents reacted differently ranging from oral improvement, listening skills, to confidence receiving and logical thinking. The statistics also illustrated that respondents had various interests in debate topics covering. For sake of limitation of students-only questionnaire, room for improvements is put forward in discussion part to include more teachers in the research.

Keywords: English debate, critical thinking, attitude, college cultivation

Introduction and Literature Review

For English majors, many of which who lack critical thinking ability are fluent in spoken English and idiomatic in pronunciation but lack depth and logic in content. Due to various commands of college students and fierce competitiveness in job market, innovative approaches of teaching are required in university studying. And the critical and logical thinking is of great importance in evaluating a college student’s versatile ability, especially in recent years. According to the 2010-2020 National Mid-Long Term Outline of Education Revolution and Developing Plans, forming innovative modes of talent cultivating is an essential target. For higher educational institutions, improving education quality is a crucial task, which should be prioritized in schemes, so as to produce graduates with tough will, social morality, solid base of knowledge within his or her major and innovative thinking patterns (Gu & Shi, 2000). The English syllabus clearly points out that thinking

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ability and innovation ability of students are indispensable factors in the comprehensive quality English teaching, where it is of necessity to cultivate students’ thinking patterns, such as analyzing and synthesizing, abstracting and summarizing, analyzing problems from multiple perspectives and innovating abilities including discovering and solving problems. Integrating English debate into English teaching can not only improve students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, but also cultivate students’ ability of analysis, synthesis, assessment, and judgment (Shi, 2013). The frequently recognized definition is from Michael Scriven and Richard Paul, known 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, as a guide to belief and action. Higher education success depends on the extent to which its students are guided and assisted to think independently and critically, and build up their opinions according to valid research studies, evidences, theories, and professional values and principles (Zare & Othman, 2015).

In college education, critical thinking ability has been given more credit in making students more suitable for the competitive society. Contemporary educational theories show that learning process relies on students’ subjective participation, and the best method to obtain new knowledge is participating in learning activities. However, studies conducted to evaluate the acceptance and attitudes in their participation of English debate are scarce. This study attempts to explore the effectiveness of English debate by conducting a survey among college students and seeking for more ways to strengthen the college English critical thinking education.

**Research Questions**

Based on the relevant introduction and literature review outlined above, the current study aims to further study the significance of English debate and how it will help both the students’ critical thinking ability and also provides enlightenment and reference for college English education through empirical research. This paper is therefore aimed at exploring and answering the following two questions:

1. What is the attitude of English major teachers and students on English debate?
2. In what ways can we strengthen the college English critical thinking education?

**Methodology**

**Data Collection**

Ninety-two students from almost 10 colleges in China were selected in this research, and all of them have English debate experience or at least have some background knowledge about it. A standard questionnaire was responded by English major students of the fourth grades. Apart the multiple choices, participants were asked open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire about the knowledge, incentives, attitudes, and suggestions towards English debate.

**Analysis Method**

The methodology of this research is to collect questionnaires of college students of four grades and through interviews of English major of their attitudes towards English debate, so as to answer the first question in our research. The information is based on multiple criteria, such as students’ English proficiency level and participation in English debate on campus. We further analyze the popular English debate topics and current existing courses of English critical thinking, such as the short-term courses of English debate at the end of every semester, to explore the students’ cognitive understanding and recognition for English debate in the hope
of providing some references for the next stage to better integrate English debate into college English teaching, so as to answer the second question in our research.

**Results and Findings**

The questionnaire covered 92 college students and answers from 12 non-experience English debaters were removed from data collecting. Table 1 shows the various answers of how the 92 respondents think of the different aspects in English learning that English debate offers assistance in.

Table 1

*Debate-Related Questions and Answers From Different Grades*

| Question                                                   | Grade                  | Freshmen 34(42.5%) | Sophomore 19(23.75%) | Junior 19(23.75%) | Senior 8(10%) |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Q1: Do you like English Debating?                         | Dislike                | 8(23.53%)           | 6(31.58%)            | 9(50%)           | 5(62.5%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 2(6.06%)            | 1(5.26%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I Like It              | 20(58.82%)          | 10(52.63%)           | 3(16.67%)        | 3(37.5%)      |
|                                                            | I Love It              | 62(180.60%)         | 63(31.58%)           | 9(50%)           | 5(62.5%)      |
| Q2: Do you believe that English Debating is a good tool for English learning? | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 4(11.76%)           | 3(15.79%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 17(50.00%)          | 7(36.84%)            | 5(27.78%)        | 3(37.5%)      |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 16(45.15%)          | 10(52.63%)           | 7(37.5%)         | 6(75%)        |
| Q3: Do you agree that English Debating would improve oral English skills? | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 5(14.71%)           | 2(10.53%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 13(38.24%)          | 8(42.11%)            | 3(16.67%)        | 2(25%)        |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 14(41.18%)          | 9(47.06%)            | 4(23%)           | 1(12.5%)      |
| Q4: Do you agree that English Debating would improve your critical thinking abilities? | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 5(14.71%)           | 2(10.53%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 16(47.06%)          | 8(42.11%)            | 3(16.67%)        | 2(25%)        |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 15(43.24%)          | 11(57.89%)           | 6(37.5%)         | 5(62.5%)      |
| Q5: Do you agree that English Debating would improve your English listening skills? | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 7(20.59%)           | 2(10.53%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 15(44.12%)          | 10(52.63%)           | 2(11.11%)        | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 14(40.59%)          | 9(47.06%)            | 4(23%)           | 1(12.5%)      |
| Q6: After joining English debating, do you feel yourself more confident on stage doing public speaking? | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 5(14.71%)           | 2(10.53%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 13(38.24%)          | 6(31.58%)            | 3(16.67%)        | 1(12.5%)      |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 12(35.29%)          | 7(36.84%)            | 3(16.67%)        | 1(12.5%)      |
| Q7: Do you agree that after joining English debating, you become more logical and you can speak in a more organized way? | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 5(14.71%)           | 2(10.53%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 14(41.18%)          | 9(47.06%)            | 4(23%)           | 1(12.5%)      |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 13(38.24%)          | 8(42.11%)            | 2(11.11%)        | 0(0.00%)      |
| Q8: Do you agree that English debating offers you more knowledge in various aspects? (Such as International relations, Gender equality, religious issues and other English debating topics) | Disagree               | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Not Really             | 0(0.00%)            | 0(0.00%)             | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | Just OK                | 5(14.71%)           | 2(10.53%)            | 0(0.00%)         | 0(0.00%)      |
|                                                            | I can agree to that    | 13(38.24%)          | 8(42.11%)            | 2(11.11%)        | 1(12.5%)      |
|                                                            | Absolutely agree       | 12(35.29%)          | 8(42.11%)            | 3(16.67%)        | 1(12.5%)      |
Considering the more experience in English debate and the English exams they have passed, such as the College English Test (CET) 4, CET 6, Test for English Majors (TEM) 4, students in higher grades showed in Table 1 are comparatively more likely to participate English debate and they would agree more to the idea that English debate brought practical help in English studying.

As an activity that requires much talking in English, two questions were raised to testify how English debate helped improve oral English, the confidence of public speaking and the better handling of making clearer and logical statements in conversations. Table 1 illustrates that most senior and junior students claimed that they would agree to the idea that English debating did improve their oral language skills and they became more confident on stages when asked to give public speeches. On the other hand, compared with seniors and juniors, freshmen and sophomores are not that strongly convinced by this thought.

Table 1 also demonstrated that critical thinking senses and English listening skills can be well trained by English debate is an idea that can be acknowledged by most students who had experience participating in relevant activities. English debating will have to include topics covering a wide range. Table 1 shows that the majority of sophomores, juniors, and seniors appreciate the knowledge they obtained during English debate while freshmen have very distinctive answers to this question.

In Table 2, respondents replied on the top skills that they managed during English debate activities. Most of them acknowledged that their oral English, especially English speaking fluency and the ability of language organization and sentence structure were massively improved by practicing English debate. The second ranking element is critically thinking. Respondents claimed that critical thinking is what they are eager to acquire from the very beginning of joining English debate, and they were mostly satisfied with what they have achieved in the improvement of their critical judging and thinking abilities. Whereas other answers are relatively random, respondents came to English debate for various purposes. Eleven point twenty-five percent of them learned new knowledge while 10% of them believed that English debate enabled them to improve their vocabulary and memory. Other skills trained are being a confident self on stage, making oneself a better listener and making more friends in English debates.

Table 2

| Numbers for Skills Managed in English Debating |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Skills managed in English debating            |
| No.                                           |
| Oral English                                 | 37 |
| Critical thinking                            | 25 |
| Learning knowledge                           | 9  |
| Broaden lexicon                              | 8  |
| Listening skills                             | 7  |
| Confidence                                   | 5  |
| Making friends                               | 3  |

Respondents were requested to list out the topics that they were most interested in for English debate. The statistics in Table 4 proves that culture, international relations, feminism, education and social media are among the most popular topic. In Figure 1, results claimed that 33.75% of the respondents ranked international relations as their first choice for debating while 20% of them would like to talk about feminism topics. In fact, the most widely recognized English debate form is the British Parliamentary Debate, which is most adopted in the college students’ English debate competitions. As the topics motions in British Parliamentary Debate is
highly related to culture, international relations, feminism, education, etc. Therefore, it is a great forum and opportunity for the students to know more cultural background knowledge and improve their global vision.

Table 3

*Marks for Favorite Topics (Average Marks is Calculated by: $\frac{\sum \text{Frequency by Weight}}{\text{Chosen Times}}$)*

| Topics             | Average marks |
|--------------------|---------------|
| Culture            | 6.43          |
| International relations | 5.8          |
| Feminism           | 5.255         |
| Education          | 4.95          |
| Social media       | 4.95          |
| Criminal justice system | 4.53        |
| Economy            | 4.38          |
| Policy             | 3.34          |
| Religions          | 3.15          |
| Other topics       | 0.39          |

Table 4

*Chosen Times of Favorite Topics*

| Topics             | Times |
|--------------------|-------|
| International relations | 27    |
| Feminism           | 16    |
| Economy            | 9     |
| Culture            | 8     |
| Social media       | 7     |
| Criminal justice system | 4     |
| Policy             | 4     |
| Education          | 4     |
| Religions          | 1     |
| Other topics       | 0     |

![Figure 1. Chosen times of favorite topics.](image)
Weak and lack of confidence is the major problem for the participation of college students in English debate, but the critical thinking ability in colleges and universities has begun to attract wide attention. So, we can answer the first research question that the attitude of college students towards English debate is positive and active, as it does help improve their critical thinking ability. Therefore, for colleges and universities, the establishment of courses and related activities related to English speculation or debate should be strengthened, and the corresponding publicity should be in place. In English class, teachers should strengthen the interaction with students and cultivate and exercise students’ critical thinking ability. Students should also practice their English expression ability, develop critical and logical thinking, read extensively, and cooperate with teachers.

To answer the second research question, the absence of critical thinking restricts the comprehensive application ability of college students’ English and becomes an obstacle to the all-round development of contemporary college students. From the analysis of the above survey results, it can be seen that Chinese college students have made some attempts and reflections on the improvement of critical thinking ability, but lack of profound understanding and long-term exploration. At the same time, through multiple sets of data research and offline interviews, it is speculated that the phenomenon of critical absence is caused by various reasons. In order to solve this problem and by analyzing data above, it is suggested that the traditional teaching mode in class can be changed, meaning holding winter or summer camp activities of English debate competition vacations. The target of introducing English debate competition into the classroom is to break the shackles of conventional formal learning with a new teaching mode, which is conducive to the collision of thinking sparks in extracurricular classes. Compared with major courses, elective courses have more freedom and teachers have more flexibility in teaching mode. Teachers can guide students to discuss challenging topics in different fields with high frequency and broad dimensions of learning. Driven by their interests, students can take the initiative to participate in the class, making the class a combination of theory, knowledge and application, realizing the optimal combination of foundation and application, theory and practice.

Discussion, Limitations and Further Study

However, our research still has some limitations. For instance, the number of students responding the questionnaire is small, and we only discuss the problem from the perspective of students, not including the teachers. Therefore, we should conduct more interviews among teacher in English majors, especially those who have English debating teaching experience. We need to further improve our research by involving more teachers and understand their viewpoints of English debate, so as to make our research more comprehensive and has more reference value.

Conclusion

It is essential for the graduates of higher education system to have the capability of forming independent perspectives based on evidences and professional values, and also the ability to appreciate a variety of viewpoints, so that they can work successfully with people who come from diverse backgrounds with different points of view. Through the detailed data investigation and analysis of the questionnaire survey of 92 college students from about ten universities in China, this study explores the phenomenon of critical absence from the perspective of English debate competition, so as to further analyze the cultivation strategies of college students’ English critical ability. It can be clearly seen from the research that college students in the 21st century lack creative thinking and critical thinking ability in the process of learning English, but have a positive attitude
towards the cultivation and improvement of critical thinking ability. Traditional classroom still has the drawbacks of “spoon-feeding” teaching, lacking student-led and extended courses. However, most teachers and universities have begun to pay attention to the application of speculative ideas in class teaching and constantly offer courses to guide students to think critically and learn daily. Therefore, this article proposed the present stage for cultivating innovative talents, with international vision of global talent, ought to combine theory with practice, the improvement of students’ autonomous learning mode in combination with the expansion of theoretical courses and the teaching pattern in colleges and universities, suit the remedy to the case, promote the students’ versatile English ability and innovative thinking in the process of practice step by step. English debate also attaches great importance to the debaters’ understanding of the topic and the strength of their logical thinking expression, emphasizing equality and tolerance, which requires the debaters to know and understand the knowledge content with profound cultural background, such as customs, lifestyles, religious beliefs and ways of thinking of different countries. In this way, the students in the 21st century can better enhance their cross-cultural awareness and global vision, thus better adapting themselves to the society in the future.

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