

A Review on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking in English Teaching in China

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Abstract

The cultivation of critical thinking is an important topic in English teaching in China in recent years. Taking CNKI as the data source, this paper synthesizes and analyzes the relevant papers published in major foreign language and teaching journals in China in the past ten years, and summarizes the characteristics and trends of research on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China. The results show that related researches in this field are increasing year by year. The research objects are too concentrated, mainly college students. The research topics are diversified, but the distribution of which is not balanced. In terms of research methods, non-empirical studies occupy the majority, but empirical studies are also increasing year by year. At present, there is much room for expansion in the research on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China and this paper further discusses the future research directions of it.

Keywords

Cultivation of critical thinking, English teaching, literature review.

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is an important part of thinking ability, which plays an important role in students' forming good thinking habits, self-regulation and correct judgment. Under the background of information age and knowledge-based economy, it is very important to understand and cultivate students' critical thinking both from the country's demand for high-quality innovative talents and from the perspective of students' long-term development [1]. The research on critical thinking started late in China. Some scholars believe that Asian English learning groups usually lack critical thinking, and "thinking absence" has become an important problem faced by Chinese education [2][3]. Nowadays, the cultivation of critical thinking has gradually become the focus of the future development of Chinese education. In many domestic disciplines, including ideological and political disciplines, science and technology disciplines, literature, history and philosophy disciplines, people are actively exploring how to combine the cultivation of critical thinking with the content of professional knowledge, and use rich teaching modes in classrooms to improve students' critical thinking.

In response to the call of the Ministry of Education, English teaching has paid more and more attention to the cultivation of students' critical thinking in recent years. English teaching is an important part of the teaching system running through all stages of our country. It covers a wide range and has a large base. It is the frontier of the reform of teaching thinking. Both the National Standard for the Teaching Quality of English Majors and the College English Teaching Guide have listed critical thinking as the core training objective of foreign language teaching, which fully reflects the importance attached to critical thinking in foreign language teaching in China. However, the critical thinking of Chinese students still needs to be improved. Huang Yuanshen points out that English classes generally focus on the cultivation of language skills, but ignore the improvement of students' critical thinking [5]. In recent years, this phenomenon

has attracted the attention of more and more teachers and scholars. How to integrate the cultivation of critical thinking into English classroom teaching has become a topic of increasing concern in the academic world. Scholars have put forward their own ideas and suggestions on how to integrate the cultivation of critical thinking into English teaching. Sun Youzhong pointed out that learning English and cultivating critical thinking are inseparable, and critical thinking and English competence should be improved simultaneously and promote each other [6].

At present, there are few domestic literature reviews on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching through special statistical analysis. This paper takes CNKI as the data source and comprehensively collates and analyzes the relevant papers published in major foreign language and teaching journals in China in the recent ten years. This paper summarizes the characteristics and trends of researches on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China, considers the problems existing in current researches, and puts forward suggestions for the follow-up research. This paper can provide a strong reference and basis for the future reform of English teaching and the cultivation of students' critical thinking.

2. Data Analysis of Researches on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking in English Teaching in China

This paper adopts the literature research method to make an in-depth reading, classification and summary of the selected literature content, so as to reveal the similarities and differences of literature and the research trends. In this paper, the writer uses CNKI as the data source to select the core foreign language and teaching journals represented by Foreign Language World, Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching, and Educational Theory and Practice. After carefully reading the literature on the cultivation of critical thinking at home and abroad, the author determined the search keywords: "critical thinking", "the cultivation of critical thinking", and "the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching". After determining the source of the journal and searching keywords, the articles of the foreign language and teaching journals involved were retrieved in (CNKI). Finally, 157 articles meeting all indicators were obtained. After reading, sorting, classifying and analyzing the literature, the author summarizes and reviews researches on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China.

2.1. Annual trend of articles published

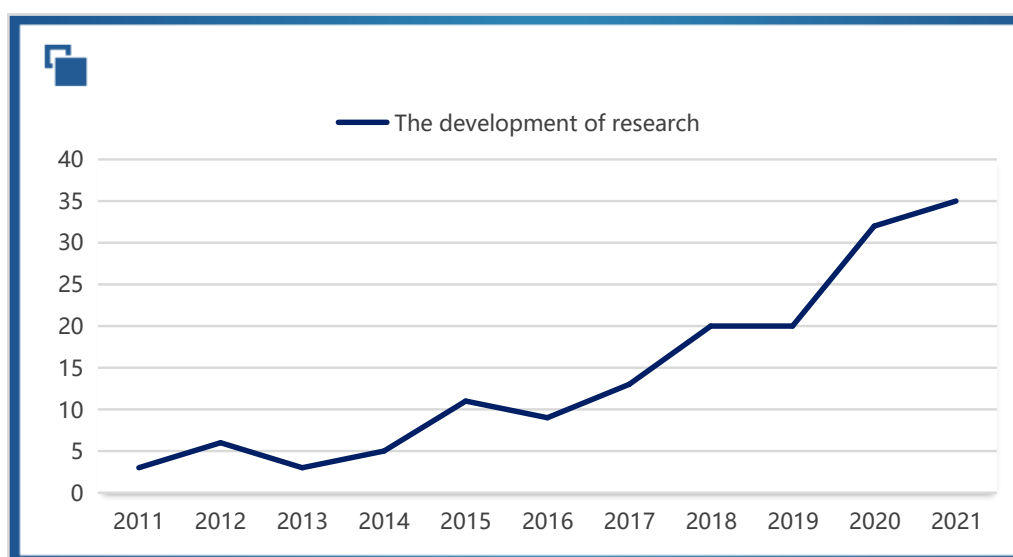


Figure 1 The development of researches on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China

As shown in Figure 1, the research on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China began in 2011. Except for a few years, the number of articles published on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China showed a slight fluctuation and an overall trend of annual increase. This reflects the importance attached to the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China. It can be seen that from 2016 to 2018, the research increased rapidly, and the number of papers increased year by year, indicating that scholars paid more attention to the research on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in these two years. The most important reason is that the *English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School (2017 Edition)* were officially issued at the end of 2017. The number of articles published between 2019 and 2020 has changed significantly. However, from 2020 to 2021, the number of papers presented a trend of slow rising, indicating that China's attention to the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching still exists and is increasing year by year.

2.2. Research objects

The research objects in this field are very rich and diverse.

First of all, according to the classification of academic background, the main research objects of the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching from 2011 to 2021 are college undergraduates, and there are as many as 102 relevant papers. In addition, there are few studies on the cultivation of critical thinking of students at other academic levels, including middle school students, higher vocational students and postgraduates, which reflects the limitation of current research objects. The cultivation of critical thinking is a gradual process. Cultivating students' critical thinking from middle school or even primary school is very helpful for the long-term development of students' thinking. However, current researches are limited to college students, ignoring the attention of students in other education stages.

According to the classification of major, the research objects of the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in recent 10 years can also be divided into English majors and non-English majors. The former has 76 related research papers, while the latter has only 26. It can be seen that current research objects mostly focus on college undergraduates, and relatively focus on the discussion of English majors, ignoring the huge student groups from other disciplines. And this also exposes the problem of narrow and single scope of researches. In addition, the research on English majors has rich research topics, involving the exploration of the cultivation of critical thinking in various Courses of English majors, including reading, speaking, writing, etc. However, for non-English majors, researches are only limited to college English course teaching. Most of researches take college English course as a whole, and does not separately explore the relationship between the teaching content of various parts of college English and the cultivation of critical thinking. Compared with English majors, English teaching for critical thinking in China pays less attention to non-English majors at present.

In addition to students, there are 10 articles on the study of English teachers. Compared with a large number of student-centered research papers, English teachers play an important role in cultivating students' critical thinking, and their own critical thinking, professional competence and teaching attitude should be paid more attention in future research.

To sum up the above analysis, it can be seen that in the past ten years, there have been a wide variety of research objects on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China, but research objects have been too concentrated. Since the undergraduates of English major are paid more attention while the students of other majors in other stages are neglected.

2.3. Research topics

Based on the diverse research objects mentioned above, China has achieved relatively good results in the cultivation of English critical thinking. It is found that the research topics in this

field in China can be divided into three categories: macro thinking researches, practice researches and the role of teachers in English teaching for critical thinking.

2.3.1. Macro thinking researches in English teaching for critical thinking

In the macro thinking researches in English teaching for critical thinking, some scholars discussed the specific manifestations of the lack of critical thinking in English teaching from the current background of English education in China, and what measures can be taken to help the development of English teaching for critical thinking and improve students' critical thinking.

On the one hand, many researchers construct theoretical framework for the cultivation of critical thinking. Ruan Quanyou constructed a theoretical framework for the cultivation of critical thinking of English majors [7]. In theory, the framework combines the latest foreign theories in the field of language teaching, especially based on the development strategy of English major in China, and tries to design an innovative framework for the cultivation of students' critical thinking that is suitable for the current situation and long-term planning of English major teaching in China. In practice, this framework integrates mature practice programs at home and abroad, so as to facilitate domestic educators to form a systematic understanding of critical thinking. Liu Xiaomin constructed the cultivation mode of critical thinking in college English teaching based on the hierarchical theory of critical thinking, that is, creating classroom atmosphere, relying on course content, strengthening independent learning and reforming evaluation methods, so as to truly ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of cultivating students' critical thinking in college English teaching [8]. Gao Ying and Xu Ying constructed a "trinity" cultivation model of critical thinking for English majors among teachers, learners and teaching institutions [9]. This training mode aims at improving students' language ability, cultural accomplishment and thinking ability. The professional training program of teaching institutions, the teaching practice of teachers and the learning process of learners are integrated, so as to design a long-term training framework from multiple angles. The aim is to create a comprehensive teaching culture and path for the cultivation of critical thinking of English majors, and to provide scientific and operable programs and guidance for teaching practice. On the other hand, Sun Youzhong et al. discussed the cultivation of critical thinking from the perspective of foreign language specialty reform and proposed reform methods and directions [10].

It can be seen that Chinese scholars have begun to pay attention to the integration of the factors affecting the teaching for critical thinking, and have made some efforts to put forward a framework for the cultivation of English critical thinking with universal value. However, there is still a small amount of literature available, and scholars are required to further put forward macro-speculative discourse keeping pace with the development of the era based on a large number of case studies in the future.

2.3.2. Practice researches in English teaching for critical thinking

The number of practice researches in English teaching for critical thinking the largest. Based on the actual English classroom teaching, these articles discussed how to apply elements of critical thinking into various classroom teaching from the perspective of various English skills, mainly including college English classroom teaching, as well as the teaching of reading, speaking and writing for English majors. In particular, the lesson designs or lesson studies of writing and speaking teaching are the most common. It can be seen that Chinese scholars pay more attention to the integration of critical thinking cultivation into output teaching activities. However, there are only about 10 articles talk about input teaching activities, such as reading and listening teaching. In recent years, critical reading has been studied by scholars, but the design of critical thinking cultivation in listening teaching has not been found in the current literature. Sun Youzhong pointed out that critical thinking is an aspect of advanced language ability, which is the ability to interpret, analyze and evaluate input information, including oral

and written information [11]. English teaching for critical thinking should integrate English learning with critical thinking by carrying out all kinds of language skills training activities, including listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. This suggests that English teachers and teaching researchers in China should not neglect the cultivation of critical thinking of input skills.

(1) The cultivation of critical thinking in speaking classes

Among all kinds of language skills teaching, oral language teaching is the field in which scholars have carried out the most empirical researches, especially the empirical researches on the role of speech and debate courses in the cultivation of critical thinking. In 2012, Jin Limin conducted an empirical study and found that the overall level of critical thinking skills of subjects improved after seven months of training in debate classes and other courses, but there was no obvious trend of change in the disposition of critical thinking [12]. In 2012, Lin Yan conducted a follow-up study on the reflective diaries written by English major students in the course of critical thinking [13]. The research results show that the writing of reflective journal by students is conducive to the cultivation and improvement of critical thinking, and at the same time, helps to strengthen the communication between teachers and students, and promotes the feelings between teachers and students. In 2014, Sun Min carried out research on the cultivation of critical thinking skills in speech teaching, providing ideas for the cultivation of critical thinking in speech teaching [14]. In the past ten years, various English speech courses have become more and more popular in public elective courses in colleges and universities. Sun Min et al. have carefully sorted out the analytical, reasoning and evaluation skills of critical thinking required in each stage of speech task through empirical research, and discussed corresponding teaching methods [15]. However, the sample sizes of the above studies are very limited, and some of them are even limited to a certain class, so the research results are not highly representative.

In addition to studying the cultivation of critical thinking in oral English teaching relying on debate and speech courses, Song Yi pointed out in 2012 that adding theoretical knowledge to oral English teaching is conducive to the cultivation and improvement of critical thinking, and plays an important role in the improvement of students' cognitive ability in various aspects [16]. Therefore, teachers can integrate different professional knowledge into oral English teaching according to students' professional background. However, a series of preparatory work needs to be done to realize this kind of oral English teaching reform, which requires higher requirements on the level of teachers, the compilation of teaching materials, and the transformation of students' negative emotions in learning boring theories.

(2) The cultivation of critical thinking in writing class

In recent years, scholars have begun to study how to cultivate students' critical thinking in writing teaching. As a whole, these researches focus on teaching methods and assessment models.

First of all, in terms of teaching methods, researchers prefer the writing teaching concept of "one article and two drafts" compared with the traditional "eight-part style": lecture-evaluation-practice. In addition, they use the network platform to assist writing teaching, which can improve the efficiency of writing correction and increase more opportunities for students to practice [17].

Secondly, summative evaluation and formative evaluation are combined in the evaluation mode. In 2011, Li Liwen proposed that English writing assessment should include two main aspects: incorporating speculative writing topics into the summative assessment and improving the standard and content of formative assessment [18]. This evaluation method is more conducive to the cultivation of critical thinking throughout the whole teaching process compared with the traditional evaluation of going after high score. However, some researchers have higher requirements for students in the assessment. For example, the "writing portfolio" requires

students to practice writing at the frequency of one essay every two weeks. The "writing portfolio" contains up to nine items. Students are required to complete other courses in addition to writing assignments, so will "homework overload" cause students to muddle through in order to meet the task? Therefore, further research is needed. Secondly, how to cultivate students' critical thinking in writing teaching has been involved in the selection of teaching materials, teaching orientation and other fields. However, it mainly focuses on the theoretical level, and its operability is unknown.

(3) The cultivation of critical thinking in reading class

On the whole, researches on the cultivation of critical thinking in English reading teaching mainly focus on the level of "what is", while the specific "how to do it" is less involved in the classroom. Through the analysis and collation of literature, the strategies of critical thinking cultivation are finally divided into three parts: selection of appropriate teaching materials, innovation of teaching methods, reform of test questions.

First of all, the selection of appropriate textbooks is one of the ways to realize the cultivation of critical reading. A good textbook can promote students' self-reflection and creative thinking, and cultivate students' good and personalized critical thinking in reading. However, researchers usually just take a textbook that already exists on the market to develop critical thinking and begin to discuss how to use that textbook. For example, taking Integrated College English Course as an example, Li Bing (2019) discusses how to use specific teaching materials and conduct teaching design for the cultivation of critical thinking through classroom operation, in order to provide referential experience and inspiration for the cultivation of students' critical thinking [19]. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the teaching material is worth further study.

Secondly, to change the traditional teaching method that only focuses on students' language knowledge and skills is the only way to cultivate students' critical thinking in reading. The cultivation of students' critical thinking in reading teaching is mainly through setting special courses or combining subject teaching and critical thinking cultivation. For now, researchers prefer the second approach. Many researchers advocate highlighting problem guidance and group discussion and attaching importance to the combination of reading and writing in the whole process of reading before, during and after reading. In 2015, Yang Lifang used Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives to analyze the characteristics of questioning in reading class [20]. Through comparative analysis, it is concluded that different stages of reading teaching have different effects on the cultivation of critical thinking. In particular, it is pointed out that waveform development in the cognitive development trajectory of classroom questioning is more conducive to the cultivation of students' critical thinking. In general, current researches on teaching methods for the cultivation of reading critical thinking are still insufficient, either lack of theoretical support, or do not provide clear instructions for reading teaching, only generically mentioned.

Finally, in order to cultivate students' critical thinking in reading, many scholars began to study the reform of reading test. For example, in 2013, Li Liwen started from the analysis of the reading comprehension part of the English examination paper of the National College Entrance Examination, and put forward suggestions on the reform of the reading comprehension part of the English examination paper of the National College Entrance Examination for the purpose of cultivating students' critical thinking -- the way of combining reading and writing [21]. However, exactly how it fits in is still unknown.

2.3.3. The role of teachers in English teaching for critical thinking

Although there are not many papers published on the role of English teachers in the cultivation of critical thinking, it has reflected scholars' attention to teachers as an important role in teaching activity. In her research in 2019, Wang Jing discussed the reasons for English teachers'

lack of critical thinking spirit, including the influence of solidized educational background, imperfect training mechanism and weak scientific research ability [22]. She also called on teachers to start from themselves and cultivate their critical thinking to better complete teaching tasks. Another researcher collected and analyzed 117 college English teachers' opinions on English teaching for critical thinking through questionnaires, and found that teachers all believed that critical thinking should be integrated into English major courses. However, in the concrete implementation process, there are constraints from students, environment and teachers themselves. Teachers generally call for teacher training, relevant resources and environmental support [23]. Teachers are the designers and practitioners of teaching activities, and the improvement of their critical thinking is a necessary condition for the improvement of students' critical thinking. In the future, more attention should be paid to teachers.

2.4. Research methods

Gao Yihong et al. divided the research methods of applied linguistics into quantitative research, qualitative research and non-material research, and classified the former two as empirical research [24]. Based on this classification method, this paper divides the research methods on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China into two categories: empirical research and non-empirical research. Empirical research is based on systematic material collection and analysis, including qualitative research, quantitative research and quantitative research combined with qualitative research. Non-empirical research includes theoretical analysis and application, operation description, personal experience and opinions, etc., which are not based on systematically collected materials.

In this paper, researches on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in the past 10 years are divided into empirical researches and non-empirical researches. Its distribution is shown in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1. The distribution of research methods for the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	percentage
empirical research	2	4	1	5	8	8	11	17	16	26	27	79.62%
non-empirical research	1	2	2	0	3	1	2	3	4	6	8	20.38%

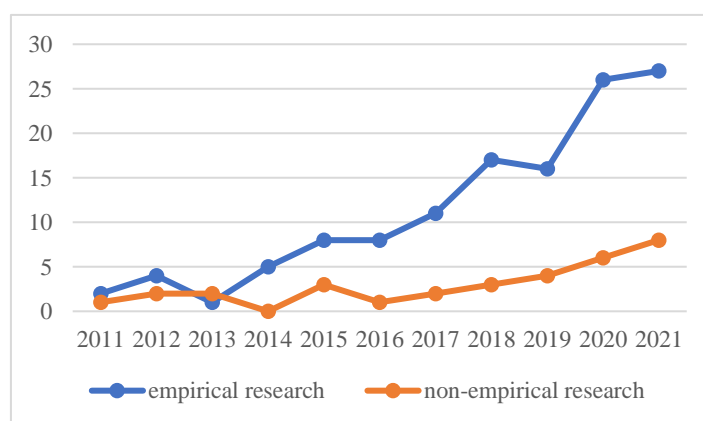


Figure. 2 Comparison of research methods of critical thinking in English teaching in China

As can be seen from Table 1 and Figure 2, empirical studies (79.62%, 125 papers) are still in the mainstream, and the number is much larger than non-empirical studies (20.38%, 32 papers). The empirical researches in this field mostly discuss the influence of classroom teaching methods on the cultivation of students' critical thinking, which reflects the attention of Chinese scholars to practical teaching application, and there is an obvious trend of growth in recent years. Non-empirical researches, or discursive researches in this field, whose main contents are discussions, reflections and framings, have been in a small number, but their importance to future research and teaching should not be ignored. And the summary of research methods of literature in recent 10 years inspires us a lot. After a large number of empirical studies, it is necessary for researchers to review and summarize the previous research results, so as to reflect on the problems existing in previous studies and discover research gaps. Researchers should also integrate the theoretical framework and general rules of English teaching for critical thinking to promote the further development of related research.

3. Problems in researches on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China

(1) The research objects of the cultivation of critical thinking are centralized. The research objects of the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching in China focus on college students, and a few involve middle school students. Therefore, in future studies, researchers should pay more attention to this group of neglected primary and secondary school students. Whether their thinking ability measurement and cultivation will be different? What are the challenges of research?

(2) There are more researches on students and less researches on teachers. At present, not only in the field of foreign language but also in the field of education, researches on the critical thinking of students are mainly focused on the status quo of students' critical thinking, while researches on teachers' critical thinking are very little. Teaching activity is a very complex cognitive activity, requiring teachers to formulate curriculum objectives, carry out teaching planning, guide classroom interaction, diagnose learning problems and evaluate teaching activities, all of which require teachers to use their own critical skills. Only with strong critical thinking, teachers can make judgments and adjust teaching strategies for students to promote the development of students' critical thinking. Therefore, it is worthy of research to investigate the present situation of college English teachers' critical thinking and improve the development of teachers critical thinking.

(3) The research fields of critical thinking cultivation are limited. At present, researches on the cultivation of students' critical thinking pay more attention to English skills courses, such as reading, writing and speaking, and seldom involve professional knowledge courses such as literature and linguistics. Based on the professional knowledge course of disciplines, can the cultivation of critical thinking be more conveniently integrated into the course design and actual teaching? Does it make a difference? Will there be new discoveries in language development and thinking cultivation?

(4) There are more traditional classroom studies but less technology application studies. With the reduction of college English course hours and the convenience brought by mobile Internet technology to education, the cultivation of critical thinking can be separated from the classroom. Researchers can try to explore a hybrid learning model that combines traditional learning methods with network learning methods in the form of flipped classroom, MOOCs and other digital technologies. This mode encourages students to find problems, solve problems, use logical thinking to collect information and analyze it, so as to promote the development of critical thinking. Researchers can use empirical methods to prove whether it is scientifically valid.

(5) In the field of critical thinking cultivation in English teaching, empirical researches are more than non-empirical researches. Empirical researches mainly focus on the case studies of students in a class of a certain grade in a certain school, and they have a trend of continuous increase. Based on the above researches, the author believes that the future research on the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching should try to summarize the commonalities from a large number of case studies, pay attention to the output of argumentative essays, and further explore the framework for the cultivation of critical thinking in English teaching based on empirical evidence, as well as teaching laws with universal value. In terms of future empirical research, on the one hand, scholars should pay more attention to the critical thinking of English teachers, and on the other hand, they should further study the cultivation of the critical thinking of students in other stages and majors.

(6) Researches on the cultivation of critical thinking are too idealized. First, the teaching methods lack theoretical support and universality. Secondly, textbook compilation lacks authority. Finally, the test reform lacks operability. In researches of training strategies, some scholars focus on the idealized design of training strategy, ignoring the theoretical support, universality and operation of the strategy. If future researchers can make their own cultivation strategies start with theoretical support and end with theoretical implementation, will the cultivation strategies be more effective? Could the strategy benefit more students if it were applied to a slightly wider group?

4. Conclusion

Critical thinking is one of the essential factors for innovative talents in the 21st century, and the cultivation of students' thinking is one of the important goals of talents training in China. Therefore, researches on the cultivation of critical thinking can not only broaden the research scope by carrying out multi-angle researches, but also develop to depth. Researches on the cultivation of critical thinking are still in progress in the field of foreign language in China. The future research can be carried out in the following aspects :(1) the standard of the embodiment of critical thinking in specific foreign language skills; (2) the diachronic research on the development of critical thinking by the cultivation methods and strategies; (3) large-scale standardized language test and critical thinking measurement; (4) the influence of modern technology development on the cultivation of critical thinking. It can be predicted that with the change of research perspective and the expansion of research fields, the research on the cultivation of critical thinking in foreign language world in China will continue to develop in depth in the future. It is expected that more foreign language teachers and researchers will devote themselves to this field and produce more valuable research results.

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