

# An Empirical Study of the Effect of “Model United Nations” Activities on the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability among College Students

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## ABSTRACT

With the deepening of globalization, cultivating college students' critical thinking ability has become the core goal of foreign language education in China. On the basis of clarifying the theoretical connotation of critical thinking ability, this paper attempts to construct the evaluation criteria of its core elements and expounds the internal relationship between Model United Nations (MUN) activities and its cultivation in line with this evaluation criteria. Then, through questionnaire and individual interview, this paper conducts an empirical research on the effect of MUN on the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability. The results show that MUN activities have a positive effect on the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability.

## 1. Introduction

Traditional college English teaching in China emphasizes the learning of basic English knowledge and the training of language skills, which highlights the instrumental nature of language. In the new era, China's higher foreign language education shoulders the heavy responsibility of cultivating outstanding foreign language talents who can participate in global governance, and critical thinking ability is an indispensable ability for excellent foreign language talents (Sun Youzhong 2017). The *Guide to College English Teaching* (2020 edition) includes critical thinking ability as the core training goal of foreign language teaching, and jointly promotes the development of multiple abilities of foreign language talents together with language application ability, cross-cultural ability and self-learning ability. In short, critical thinking is of

great significance to personal growth and development, academic research and learning, career development and competitiveness, improvement of civic literacy, and expansion of global vision.

Model United Nations (MUN), an educational activity that highly simulates the international political scene, has become an indispensable and effective means to cultivate the critical thinking ability of contemporary college students with its unique operating mechanism and rich agenda setting.

## 2. The connotation and evaluation criteria of critical thinking ability

### 2.1 Definition and connotation

It has been widely recognized that critical thinking

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ability is not only one of the deep-seated goals of language learning, but also a necessary quality for students to adapt to the complex and changeable social environment in the future. Foreign scholars have been studying critical thinking ability for a long time and have achieved fruitful results. In 1987, the American Philosophical Union commissioned Peter Facione to convene 45 famous philosophers, scientists and experts from the United States and Canada for the “Delphi” Project (APA 1990). The “Delphi” project finally defined critical thinking ability as two dimensions of cognitive ability and affective trait, and proposed a double-cone model. The cognitive dimension can be broken down into six abilities: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, interpretation, and self-regulation. Among them, analysis, evaluation and reasoning are the core skills. The affective traits include curiosity, confidence, openness, flexibility, fairness, honesty, prudence, studiousness, and understanding. Paul and Elder (2006) constructed a ternary structure model, which covers three components: thinking elements, thinking criteria and intelligence characteristics.

Domestic scholars put forward their own model of critical thinking ability based on the actual situation of foreign language education in China. Lin Chongde (2006) proposed a three-prism structure model, which includes six factors: thinking purpose, thinking process, thinking materials, thinking self-monitoring, thinking quality, and cognitive and non-cognitive factors in thinking. Wen Qiufang (2009) proposed a hierarchical model on the basis of the two-dimensional model, the three-dimensional model and the three-dimensional model. The hierarchical model proposes to divide critical thinking ability into two levels: meta-critical thinking ability and critical thinking ability. The first level of meta-critical ability refers to the ability to plan, check, adjust and evaluate one’s own critical thinking. The second level includes cognitive skills and criteria as well as emotional traits associated with critical qualities. Sun Youzhong (2015; 2016; 2017; 2019), repeatedly emphasizes the integration of critical thinking ability into foreign language teaching, pointing out that advanced language ability includes critical thinking ability, that is, the ability to interpret, analyze and evaluate input information, as well as the ability to reason and explain based on indirect or directly acquired information. In this sense, language ability includes critical thinking ability; A language ability without critical thinking is a poor language ability that neither understands nor produces text/discourse rich in meaning and logical rigor.

To sum up, based on aforementioned analysis, this paper attempts to define the critical thinking ability as six cognitive skills (interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, explanation, self-regulation) and six dispositions

(curiosity, openness, confidence, humility, integrity, perseverance).

## **2.2 Evaluation criteria**

In order to explore the way to cultivate college students’ critical thinking ability and carry out empirical research to test its effectiveness, this paper attempts to construct evaluation criteria for critical thinking ability on the basis of clarifying the core components of critical thinking ability. Table 1 lists the evaluation criteria of six critical thinking skills and six emotional qualities. It is worth noting that although there are differences in the specific evaluation criteria for different cognitive skills, they should all follow several basic principles, namely clarity, relevance, logic, profundity and flexibility. Specifically, clarity emphasizes the need for precision in the critical thinking process; relevance requires that the content of speculation must be closely related to the core topic and clearly structured. In addition, the principle of logic ensures that the thinking is well organized, the argument is reasonable and persuasive; profundity means that reflective activities should have both breadth and depth; flexibility, on the other hand, requires the ability to be flexible and changeable, and properly examine problems from different angles (Wen Qiufang 2009). Together, these principles form the basic framework for evaluating cognitive skills.

## **3. The role of MUN activities in cultivating critical thinking ability**

### **3.1 The promoting effect of “MUN” on improving six cognitive skills**

Interpretation ability: participation in MUN activities requires participants to deeply understand and accurately explain the historical background, current situation, national interests involved and international laws and regulations of the conference topics. This process exercises the students’ ability of information integration and expression, enabling them to accurately convey complex information and lay the foundation for subsequent discussions.

Analytical skills: in the face of complex international issues, students need to use critical thinking to analyze the cause, impact and possible trend of the problem from different perspectives. This multi-level analysis training greatly enhances the students’ logical analysis ability and problem identification ability.

Evaluation ability: in the MUN conference, students need to objectively evaluate the positions and proposals of various parties to judge their rationality and feasibility. This process promotes students to form independent value judgments, learn to weigh pros and cons, and make wise

decisions.

**Reasoning skills:** during discussion, students need to build arguments based on facts and use logical reasoning to refute the other side’s views. This logical and rigorous reasoning training will help students develop rigorous thinking and improve the effectiveness and persuasiveness of arguments.

**Explanation ability:** when elaborating a country’s position or proposal, students need to explain their own views and reasons logically and reasonably, and ensure that the information is accurately transmitted to other delegations. This process develops the students’ expression-related skills, enabling them to accurately convey their ideas and promote consensus formation.

**Self-regulation ability:** in MUN activities, students

need to face challenges such as time pressure and conflict of views, learn emotional management, and master pressure adjustment strategies. The cultivation of self-regulation ability will help students stay calm under high pressure, respond flexibly to difficulties and challenges.

To sum up, MUN provides a comprehensive and multi-level training platform for students’ critical thinking ability through which participants can not only deepen their understanding of international affairs, but also significantly improve their cognitive skills such as explanation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, explanation and self-regulation, laying a solid foundation for becoming future leaders with an international perspective and higher-order thinking ability.

**Table 1.** Evaluation criteria of core elements of critical thinking ability

Cognition		Disposition	
Skills	Standard	Quality	Attitude
Interpretation	Understand meaning accurately and categorize correctly	Curious	Be interested in new things and good at asking questions
Analysis	Identify arguments and analyze the process of argument	Openness	Respect different opinions and improve your own
Evaluation	Evaluate ideas and arguments rationally	Self-confidence	Be confident in your own reasoning and dare to challenge authority
Reasoning	Challenge evidence and propose alternative hypotheses	Humility	Evaluate yourself and others objectively and have a strong sense of empathy
Explanation	Explain and draw conclusions based on reasoning	Integrity	Pursue truth and stand for justice
Self-regulation	Assess and adjust yourself flexibly and appropriately	Perseverance	Strong tenacity and never give up easily

**3.2 The promoting effect of “MUN” on cultivating six dispositions**

**Curiosity:** MUN’s activities cover a wide range of topics, from global climate change to regional conflicts. During the preparation process, participants need to actively collect information and understand the positions of countries, which greatly excites their curiosity and desire to explore.

**Openness:** in the multicultural exchange of MUN activities, students need to listen to the views and voices of different countries, learn to respect differences and tolerate diversity. Such an open attitude not only contributes to international understanding, but also broadens the participants’ personal horizons and changes their way of thinking.

**Confidence:** by simulating the role play of a diplomat, the trainees gave speeches and held debates in public, which greatly exercised their expression skills and self-confidence. The experience of successfully coping with challenges and winning recognition makes the trainees more confident in their own abilities and worth.

**Humility:** in heated debates, participants come to

realize the limitations of their own knowledge and the one-sidedness of their perspectives. In the face of refutation and questioning from others, students learn to reflect and be self-critical, developing the quality of humility and an attitude of constant learning.

**Integrity:** MUN activities emphasize the principles of integrity and impartiality, requiring participants to follow international law and ethical norms while representing national interests.

**Perseverance:** In the face of intense preparation work and intense conference process, participants need to overcome various difficulties and challenges and persevere to the end. This experience not only exercises the trainees’ willpower, but also cultivates tenacity and courage in the face of adversity.

**3.3 An empirical study on MUN ’s effect on the cultivation of critical thinking ability**

In order to fully understand the actual impact of MUN activities on the training of college students’ critical thinking ability, the author selected 50 students who often participate in MUN activities in our university as the research

objects. According to the aforementioned definition of critical thinking ability and evaluation criteria, questionnaire and individual interview were conducted.

A total of 46 valid questionnaires were collected, and the data showed that all participants believed that participating in MUN activities could promote the cultivation of critical thinking ability. Among them, 87.0% of the participants strongly agreed that MUN activities can effectively improve the ability to elucidate cross-cultural issues; 84.8% agreed that MUN activities could effectively improve their ability to analyze cross-cultural problems; 82.6% of the participants strongly agreed that MUN activities can effectively improve the ability to evaluate cross-cultural problems; 84.8% agreed that MUN activities could effectively improve their ability to reason cross-cultural problems; 87.0% of them agreed that MUN activities could effectively improve their ability to explain cross-cultural problems; 82.6% of the participants strongly agreed that MUN activities could effectively improve their self-regulation ability. The vast majority of the participants also strongly agreed with the role of MUN activities in cultivating the six core dispositions: among which “curiosity, openness, confidence, humility, integ-

rity and perseverance”, the proportion of the participants who “strongly agreed” was 95.7%; 87.0%; 91.3%; 87.0%; 87.0%; 84.8% respectively.

Considering the disparity in students’ original critical thinking ability and in the frequency of participating in MUN activities, the author selected 3 representative students to conduct individual interviews. The interviews show that although the starting point of critical thinking ability is different, the interviewees all agree that MUN activities have played a positive role in cultivating their critical thinking ability. They said that they were “proud to express their insights and display their youthful style at the venue” and that MUN activities “not only improved their English expression skills, but also improved their negotiation skills and negotiation ability.” Some students said with emotion, “What I gained is not only the award, but also the improvement of my ability and the precious friendship.” Participants at different levels can experience “the difficulty of safeguarding national interests in international negotiations, and the importance of cooperation and consultation in solving global problems” through participating in MUN activities.

**Table 2.** Results of questionnaire about the effect of MUN activities on the training of students’ critical thinking ability

Questions/Options	Disagree	Ambiguous	Agree	Highly agree
It can effectively improve my ability to elucidate cross-cultural issues.	0	2	4	40
It can effectively improve my ability to analyze cross-cultural issues.	0	2	5	39
It can effectively improve my ability to evaluate cross-cultural issues.	0	3	5	38
It can effectively improve my ability to reason cross-cultural issues.	0	2	5	39
It can effectively improve my ability to explain cross-cultural issues.	0	3	3	40
It can effectively improve my self-regulation ability.	0	2	6	38
It enhances my desire to explore.	0	1	1	44
It teaches me to respect difference and embrace diversity.	0	2	4	40
It enhances my expression and self-confidence.	0	1	3	42
It enhances my reflective ability and promotes self-growth.	0	2	4	40
It strengthens my pursuit of truth, justice and noble sentiments.	0	1	5	40
It steels my willpower.	0	2	5	39

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, on the basis of clarifying the connotation of critical thinking ability, this paper constructs the evaluation criteria of its core elements, and then explains the internal logical correlation between participation in MUN activities and cultivation of critical thinking ability with an empirically study on its actual effects through questionnaire and individual interview. The results show that “MUN” not only provides a platform for students to reach international affairs, but also stimulates their ability of active exploration, critical thinking and effective commu-

nication. In the process of participation, the students not only enhanced their comprehensive language application ability and broadened their vision, but more importantly, their critical thinking ability was substantially improved. Therefore, MUN activities should be regarded as an effective means in the cultivation of critical thinking ability to promote students’ all-round development.

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