

Technology-empowered Blended Learning: A Case Study of Contemporary American Society and Culture Course

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ABSTRACT

Under the background of integration of technology and higher education, this paper probes the question whether technology can advance liberal education, especial the critical thinking capability required by liberal education, in English major. The paper first identifies English major as a part of the humanity and social science disciplines, in which liberal education is essential and indispensable. Since liberal education emphasizes the capability of critical thinking, the paper then asks whether the integration of technology can promote the student's critical thinking and therefore facilitate liberal education. The paper then applies the eight principles of critical thinking (TERRIFIC Principles) to evaluate the blended teaching of Contemporary American Culture and Society (CACS), a core course of English major at the Faculty of English Language and Culture, GDUFS. After examining the textbook, syllabus, program setting, teaching practice and assessment of CACS, it is found that blended online and offline teaching is better at developing the student's capability of critical thinking than traditional offline teaching. The paper concludes that technology-empowered learning is conducive to liberal education.

KEYWORDS

Liberal Education; Blended Learning; Critical Thinking; TERRIFIC Principles.

1. INTRODUCTION

The integration of technology in higher education has introduced novel educational methodologies, enhancing engagement and learning outcomes. Interactive science simulations have proven effective in boosting student engagement with scientific practices, while technology-supported language learning has enriched Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) programs with extensive resources and interconnected courses. Despite these advancements, skepticism remains among educators regarding the efficacy of these technologies. This paper evaluates technology-integrated teaching methods through a case study and discusses their implications for learner development in Chinese higher education contexts.

This study examines the Contemporary American Culture and Society Course (CACS) at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, which employs a blended learning model. Combining language acquisition with cultural studies, the course underscores the interdependence of language proficiency and cultural understanding. CACS offers an in-depth exploration of American culture across multiple dimensions including politics, economy, and social issues, structured into 15 comprehensive chapters. Blended learning in CACS involves an initial week of online activities followed by two weeks of classroom interactions, facilitating a dynamic learning environment that encourages critical engagement and discussion. The course design includes various interactive elements such as SPOC

(Small Private Online Courses) resources, class discussions, flipped classroom sessions, and group presentations, which enhance understanding and foster critical analysis of cultural phenomena.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. What is Liberal Education

Before exploring the CACS, it is crucial to define liberal education, a core element of the undergraduate curriculum. Liberal education differs significantly from vocational or professional training, focusing instead on providing students with a broad knowledge base and fostering independent thinking (Gan, 2006, 39). This type of education not only coexists with other educational forms but primarily addresses long-term intellectual benefits rather than immediate practical issues (Blitz, 45).

Liberal education encourages learners to expand their intellectual horizons and develop critical thinking skills through deep engagement with the humanities. This educational approach not only aids in personal growth-enhancing reason, judgment, and creativity-but also prepares individuals to contribute thoughtfully to society. Historically, liberal education has promoted values that support individual freedom and societal advancement, although these goals do not directly resolve practical, day-to-day problems (Blitz, 2004, 46).

Moreover, liberal education plays a vital role in fostering understanding and communication across diverse academic disciplines. It combats stereotypes and fosters mutual respect among scholars from different fields, thereby enriching both academic and broader community dialogues (Snow, 1998, 3). Despite its critical role, liberal education is often underestimated and underfunded in contemporary higher education debates, which tend to prioritize immediate job readiness over comprehensive intellectual development (Gan, 2006, 42).

In summary, liberal education is indispensable for a well-rounded higher education system. It should be the foundation upon which professional training is built, ensuring that students are not only prepared for their careers but also equipped to lead thoughtful and ethical lives. This paper underscores the pivotal role of liberal education in cultivating future talents who are capable of bridging diverse cultural and intellectual communities, thereby contributing to a more interconnected and understanding world.

2.2. Liberal Education in English

English majors have always been widely perceived in society as language professionals with relatively high language proficiency, largely because of the abundant language skill training courses organised by the English department. However, if not putting commercialism aside, there is great possibility that the English department in universities runs like a language training programme. Vocational education follows a different path from liberal education in that it focuses on the imperative preparation for future livelihood. Linguists and writers, who constitute a significant part of the English faculty members, are more likely to teach in a liberal way, and their inculcation tends to guide students into leading lives without the pressure of survival since most teachers are preoccupied with books and essays rather than the work from bosses in daily life. Commercialism is also the target to be eliminated in the English department. The last thing that the English faculty will do is to turn their department into an advanced English learning centre, which will jeopardise the academic reputation of the English department in the long term. (Francis, 1961, 351).

Liberal Education is not set in stone for all subjects. As a way out for development, the form, target, and content of liberal education will be tuned to suitable versions for every major. As for the English major, Faculty of English Language and Culture (FELC) at GDUFs offers a good example of what liberal education is like in the English major. Under the school motto of “Pursuit of Integrity, Practice

and Cross-cultural learning”, FELC (Faculty of English Language and Culture) cultivates talents who are equipped with high ideological quality and professional level as well as strong ability of intercultural communication, practice, and innovation. With an international outlook, social responsibility, and high language proficiency, graduates from FELC can not only utilise English communication skills with broad cultural understanding but also possess knowledge and skills about English and American literature, linguistics, translation and interpretation, English and American culture, etc. (FELC, 2019, 1) With the target above, FELC designs a mode to arrange courses for English majors. For freshman and sophomore students, language training courses are the focus, with the purpose to improve listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. In the meantime, limited content-based courses are also offered to students. After students build up a solid foundation for their English language proficiency, they can choose different branches of courses to enhance their knowledge (Interpreting and Translation Studies, English and American literature, Culture and Communication, Linguistics, and Information Management) and ability (related skills and capability developed from liberal education). (FELC, 2019, 1).

The curriculum design of English liberal education is not arbitrary. Sun Youzhong’s theory of Liberal English Education (LEE) underpins the importance of liberal education in the English major. According to Sun Youzhong’s idea, English teaching should be combined with liberal education. LEE attempts to establish a norm of English teaching, which is based on the belief that the skill training courses in the English major should adopt a blended learning of language and knowledge to construct a collaborative and exploratory learning community, leading to synchronous improvements in language ability, critical thinking, intercultural competence, and humanistic quality. (Sun, 2019, 826) Based on its content above, LEE can be extended to three principles: 1) English language skill training courses should combine with liberal English education. 2) English language proficiency should include critical thinking and intercultural competence. 3) English language teaching is a collaborative process of social and cultural construction. (Sun, 2017, 860).

2.2.1. The Following are Explanations on the Three Principles of LEE:

1) English language skill training courses should combine with liberal English education (LEE).

The English major in Chinese higher education has the dual mission of humanistic discipline and intercultural education. The English major in higher education is a branch of humanities, not just a basic language training. The essence of the English major decides that using English as a tool should not be the end for educating English talents. It has been in the official document that English major as an indispensable component of humanity and social science in higher education should cooperate with other related disciplines to match social development. There is no denying that the English major is born with missions as a member of humanities.

The English major is also affected by its intercultural attribute. English majors serve as cultural mediators and international ambassadors, building bridges between countries and cultures. For better communication throughout the world and multilateral development, the English talents should be professionals with an international perspective, a Chinese standpoint and cultural awareness, which contribute to a rational observation of the benefits and drawbacks of culture both at home and abroad, and provide effective cross-cultural communication. (Sun, 2017, 860).

In addition, English language skill training courses should be involved in the process of liberal English education as an integral part, not a preparation merely served beforehand. Until now, most of the English departments still maintain the curriculum structure of the *New National Teaching Syllabus for English Majors* (*Syllabus* hereafter) published by Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 2000. In the *Syllabus*, English courses fall into three categories: English language skill training course, English specialized knowledge course and relevant knowledge course, which take up the total learning hours by 65%, 15% and 20% separately. (NACTEM, 2000, 7) It is obvious and unreasonable that students devote 70% of the total learning period to polish their

language skill, leaving little time for them to explore professional knowledge and relevant knowledge which deserve more teacher's guidance, time, and effort.

To preserve the English major as a part of higher education, it is of necessity to embark on a curriculum reform to strike a balance between the pursuit of high language proficiency and the development of humanistic quality, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. What's more, it is a part of the reform that English language courses should embrace a core transition from communicative English to academic English, laying a solid foundation for higher academic competence and future studies of the students. English majors should be professionals in both daily communication and academic discussion and research. It is a recession for the English majors not to step out of their comfort zone to explore the world of academic English and content themselves with their current communication ability since they've got appropriate training throughout their English learning experience from childhood to adulthood. (Sun, 2017, 861).

2) English language proficiency should include critical thinking and intercultural competence.

English language competence (linguistic competence) by Chomsky refers to an underlying system of norms mastered by English language users. (Chomsky, 4) Many scholars had heated discussions on the comprehensiveness of the definition, finding out that linguistic competence is also related to communicative ability and cognitive ability. (Sun, 2017, 862).

But according to Sun's idea, the language ability demonstrated in academic occasions is of equal importance to be taken into consideration when talking about English language competence. (Sun, 2017, 862) Language proficiency cannot be assessed by a single dimension. Cummins had made a conceptual distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP), which recognizes the diverse aspects of one's language proficiency. BICS focuses on individual's conversational fluency in daily life. CALP refers to individual's capability to understand, express, and analyse in academic contexts. To compare, CALP has closer relations to the skills of reading, writing while BICS is more about accent, conversational fluency, and competence to communicate in society. (Cummins, 1980, 177) Under the education background in China, English education before college mainly deals with the practice and individual development of BICS. But in the case of LEE, it is CALP that set the tone of the cultivation target and teaching arrangement in the English departments.

Under the concept of BICS and CALP, Sun raised the model of Cross-Culture and Critical Thinking Integrated Language Competence (CTLC hereafter). (Sun, 2017, 863) With a pyramid structure, CTLC model ranks CALP as the advanced competence while BICS as the basis. In specific, the BICS basis includes grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence while CALP includes the advanced ability of critical thinking, the exertion of academic language and the possession of intercultural competence. The three competences in CALP together constitute CTLC, which is the final target of LEE. To explain, the idea of cross-culture skills in this article refers to a complex of six competences: 1) intercultural empathy and critical cultural awareness; 2) basic proficiency in theoretical knowledge and analytical methods of cross-cultural studies; 3) thorough knowledge of history and current situation about the country of the target language, and understanding of basic features, similarities, and differences between China and other countries; 4) the ability of interpretation of and commenting on phenomena, text and artifacts from diverse cultures; 5) the ability to conduct cross-cultural communication with decency and effectiveness; 6) the ability to help facilitate effective intercultural communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. (Sun, 2016, 1+17-18) The idea of critical thinking in this article refers to the grammatical, textual, and pragmatic knowledge in academic context and higher order thinking skills (including hypothesizing, evaluating, inferring, generalizing, predicting, classifying, and reflective ability) to understand and produce academic texts. (Cummins, 2008, 6) (See the explanation of critical thinking in 2.3 Critical Thinking and LEE).

According to Sun's model of CTLC, it is evident to acknowledge that the improvement of language proficiency lies in the solid basis of BICS and the potential growth of advanced ability in CALP. Traditional English teaching and learning have put too much efforts on the enhancement of BICS (e.g. expanding vocabulary, polishing sentence patterns and rhetorical skills, improving reading speed and understanding of sentence meaning on the surface). (Sun, 2017, 864) To further develop students' potential in language proficiency and thought, we must guide them to step out of what have been within their reach without difficulties. To encourage the growth of CALP, liberal English education (LEE) should move on from the phase of learning the form of the language to the stage where language is taught and used as tool or medium of social and cultural construction.

3) English language teaching is a collaborative process of social and cultural construction.

Language is not acquired by the mere functioning of brains behind closed doors. One of the Vygotsky's theories discovers that higher forms of human mental activity are mediated by symbolic means in a striking frequency and an enormous scope. The symbolic tools can be mnemonic devices, algebraic symbols, and language (the most important form). (Lantolf, 1994, 418) The zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with the support of individuals or cultural artifacts. (Lantolf, 1994, 419) The two theories above help understand that the learning activities in human brains are realized by the assistance of social communication and pre-existing cultural artifacts or symbolic tools (language). That is, learning is a process of social and cultural construction in which language skills, the ability of critical thinking, and intercultural competence are enhanced simultaneously. (Sun, 2017, 866).

Since traditional English language teaching in China has been discovered its shortcomings in pragmatic and communicative learning, language classes need renovations to build a collaborative and exploratory learning community based on the mentioned sociocultural theories of Second Language Acquisition. (Sun, 2017, 866).

The language class can be considered as a cognitive activity system, consisting of six elements: learning subject, learning object, learning community, medium of learning, division of learning, and regulation of learning. The subject refers to the learners in the learning activity. The object refers to the subject's cognitive outcome transformed from the learning content that learners will encounter in the activity or the learning task. For example. the development of language ability and thinking skills is one of the expected cognitive outcomes. The community refers to the learning group composed of the teacher and learning members. The medium refers to physical and mental tools such as language, textbooks, and computers which contribute to the learning activity. The division refers to the assignments of task and role among the community members. The regulation refers to the rules, standards, and contracts to restrict the learning activity. (Sun, 2017, 867).

With the orderly cooperation of the six elements, the learning community manages a language class like this: With the guidance of the teacher, learners use the language as a tool to take an active participation in the learning activity. During diverse interactive learning events, the community collaborate and explore knowledge about different disciplinary branches and English language, which brings constant improvement in language ability, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. (Sun, 2017, 867).

The three principles of LEE describe the main arrangement of liberal English education on a macro level. But for LEE, there is a core of language teaching-critical thinking, and through it we can find our solutions to evaluate the effectiveness of CACS.

2.3. Critical Thinking and Liberal English Education (LEE)

For further discussion, we must define what is critical thinking. The ability of critical thinking can be described in two aspects. On the aspect of attitude, the attributes of critical thinking refer to attributes including diligence, curiosity, trust in reason, respect for reality, prudent judgement, unbiased

assessment, sensitivity for exploration, and pursuit of truth. In the aspect of cognitive skills, critical thinking points to competence to elaborate, analyse, evaluate, infer, and generalize with the pre-existing evidence, concepts, methods, standards, and backgrounds. (Sun, 2015, 1).

As there is no perfect pedagogy suitable for all the learning occasions, LEE by Sun suggests that language teaching can absorb advantages from diverse pedagogy, so as to guarantee the development of CTLC. (Sun, 2017, 868) In this case, a teaching method that focuses on critical thinking is introduced as strategies to follow in teaching design. Since the learning content should be challenging for learners, it is actionable to design tasks with information gap, opinion gap, and reasoning gap for the growth of higher-order thinking skills. (Sun, 2017, 868).

On the way to pursue better solutions of LEE, Sun Youzhong figured out a series of principles for language and critical thinking integrated teaching. The TERRIFIC Principles are invented to develop language proficiency and critical thinking at the same time. (Sun, 2019, 959) In general, the eight principles are about the concepts of Target, Evaluate, Routinize, Reflect, Inquire, Fulfill, Integrate, and Content. (Sun, 2019, 826) The eight principles of language and critical thinking integrated teaching will be adopted as the standard.

In the next chapter, the TERRIFIC Principles will be used to examine whether blended learning in CACS (Contemporary American Culture and Society Course) can complete its mission to develop critical thinking and therefore boost the development of Liberal Education.

3. AN ANALYSIS OF BLENDED LEARNING IN CACS: STRENGTHENING OR WEAKENING THE ABILITY OF CRITICAL THINKING

3.1. Targeting: Whether CACS Incorporates Critical Thinking into its Teaching Target?

Language and critical thinking integrated teaching aims to develop critical thinking and create a mutual reinforcing cycle in language proficiency and critical thinking skills. (Sun, 2017, 868) As we have mentioned above, the ability of critical thinking is composed of two aspects, including quality and cognitive skills. For comprehensive growth of language proficiency, language and critical thinking integrated teaching should arrange the cultivation of those quality and skills above into the whole process of language teaching.

In the B. A. Programs of FELC, the syllabus of CACS claims its teaching objectives and requirements as follows: this course tries to present a relatively authentic America for learners by timely introduction to and analysis of social changes in America. The course aims to improve student's competence of objective analysis and encourage them to conduct a thorough cross-cultural comparison. Besides, CACS encourages student's insight as well as their distinctive analysis during the exploration of American cultural phenomena. (FELC, 2019, 41) It is obvious that critical thinking skills are incorporated into the teaching target, which requires student to practise analysing and judging in CACS.

The target of developing critical thinking can also be found in the textbook and the discussion section on the SPOC platform. In the textbook of CACS, activities of pair work and group work in Section B correspond to the target to enhance critical thinking. For example, in the B3 part of Chapter II, there is a group assignment to illustrate some key points about the checks and balances in the Constitutional system. For example. John Adams thought that 1) the states are balanced against the national government and 2) the House of Representatives is balanced against the Senate. Students need to list out some instances and explain the relation between the case and the statement of John Adams in the groupwork, during which the ability to elaborate, analyse, and infer are put under practice. Also, the topics in discussion sections are also the booster of critical thinking. On the discussion section of Chapter VII, for example, there is a question asking "How has the American

economic structure transformed since World War II? And how do you think it will change in the future”. It is a challenge for students to not only analyse the features and history of American economic structure, but also predict the future of American economic structure.

From the syllabus, textbook, and the discussion board on the SPOC platform, it is apparent that CACS has incorporated critical thinking into its teaching target.

3.2. Evaluating: Whether CACS Includes Critical Thinking Standards in its Evaluation System?

Evaluation plays a crucial role in guiding teaching activity. Apart from other targets to assess teaching quality, it should be a concern whether critical thinking has been involved in the teaching target, and that whether measures and effective events have been carried out to guarantee the development of learner’s advanced competence. (Sun, 2019, 828).

The course assessment of CACS matches the teaching target of critical thinking. Student’s performance in CACS is assessed by coursework and offline final exam, taking up 60% and 40% respectively of the final grade. Consisting of 2 parts (Online section 20% and Offline section 40%), the coursework activates critical thinking in topic discussion (6%) and classroom presentations & discussions (36%). In the offline final exam, there is a 30-point essay question evaluating on the ability of critical thinking (taking up 12% of the whole assessment). To add up, the ability of critical thinking is tested in 54% of the course assessment. Apparently, the ability of critical thinking is taken into the major consideration of CACS’s evaluation system.

The evaluation of critical thinking is also shown in the learning process. For example, on the online discussion section, each student’s answer will be commented by teaching assistants and teachers. Critical thinking about the issue is encouraged by teachers and teaching assistants; when students are taking offline classes, teachers will give suggestions and comments on their presentations and discussions in a comprehensive way (oral performance of the presenters, preparation of the topic, correctness about the concepts, facts, inferring, analysing and judgements etc.). The suggestions and comments will be offered to students in a continuous way so that they have a sense of direction to reach for stronger competence (including critical thinking) and excel themselves next time. From the above, CACS has included critical thinking standards in its evaluation system.

3.3. Routinizing: Whether CACS Takes Higher-order Thinking Ability into Regular Routinization?

Skills like swimming, driving, or playing a musical instrument consumes a considerable amount of time to practice before mastery. Mental skills like critical thinking are similar and even more demanding in the aspect of time. (Sun, 2019, 829).

There are some recommended routinizing activities raised by Ritchhart et al. which have been tested through considerable teaching practice. (Sun, 2019, 830) CACS has adopted some of them into the teaching practice. Think-Pair-Share activity by Frank Lyman is one of the routinizing events to develop the competence of inferring and elaborating, which consists of four steps. They are 1) the teacher raises a challenging question in need of analytical thinking; 2) students need to think independently; 3) students are asked in pair to express their own opinions; 4) students participate in the class discussion to share their discoveries from their previous discussions. (Sun, 2019, 830) In the textbook of CACS, Section B—Exploitation Activities are designed in each chapter for individual work, pair work, group discussions, essay writing, and research projects. For example, in chapter VIII—Social Welfare, when the lecture of Section A is finished by the teacher, students are required to accomplish individual work by themselves to work out the definitions of some key terms in social welfare. Students need to summarize the definitions of persistent poverty, temporary poverty, social insurance, public assistance, Social Security, and TANF. After independent thinking of brief ideas

about the definitions, students will start to discuss with partners, exchange ideas and find useful information in the textbook, and even do online research for more comprehensive and scientific definitions. After discussion with their partners, students will have to share their work with a group of students or the whole class. After group discussion, the definitions about those terms will be upon completion. The research projects in the textbook can be used to practice searching and prepare for pair work and group discussions about the health care system in both America and China. (Zhou, 2002, 150) There are also group work of summarizing the major goals in the new welfare reform legislation, that is, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. If time permitted, the teacher can assign essay topic to discuss the pros and cons of the 1996 welfare reform and predict the future situation of the social welfare in America. (Zhou, 2002, 151) During the classroom activities, students are encouraged to think independently, and then express and share their ideas with partners and other classmates. The idea of Think-Pair-Share method is integrated in those activities above.

From the above teaching events in one of the chapters, it is evident that efforts have been put in design of the activities to practice critical thinking. It is no doubt that CACS has taken higher-order thinking ability into regular routinization.

3.4. Reflecting: Whether CACS Fosters Metacognitive Ability and Self-regulation through Reflection?

Metacognition by Michael E. Martinez is the monitoring and control of thought. To briefly distinguish different usage of metacognitive skills, there are three categories of metacognition: metamemory and metacomprehension, problem solving, and critical thinking. (2006, 696) Metacognitive ability, especially critical thinking can be taught during the reflection section in CACS. The ability of reflecting is one of the basic elements to constitute critical thinking. Through reflecting, metacognitive ability and self-regulation competence developed. By the consensus in Delphi Report, reflecting refers to the self-check in reasoning process and cognitive skills, the objective and thorough self-assessment of own ideas and evidence in the way of metacognition, the judgement on self-limitation in face of restrictions of knowledge, bias, emotion, or other potential factors. Reflecting also includes the scrutiny of motivations, values, attitudes, and interests to guarantee future analysing, elaborating, assessing, inferring... In brief, reflecting is to find our limitations in habits and deficits of thinking, and to avoid fallacy in thoughts and arguments. (Sun, 2019, 830).

A rule of thumb to develop critical thinking is by asking questions on the comprehensiveness and weakness of the ideas. To activate student's learning initiative, the questions can be switched into forms that trigger reflection. When students have the opportunity to ponder whether their ideas are stated clearly, whether their ideas follow logically from previous statements, and whether their ideas are supported by adequate evidence and rigorous analysis, they can develop metacognitive skills and other sound qualities.

CACS offers online activities to foster a habit of reflecting. In class, the group presentations are commented and marked by the teacher. And after class, students are required to post the summary of their presentations on the discussion section. Before the final version of their summary, students will reflect on their ideas based on the teacher's suggestions, and then revise the details to make sure the summary of the presentation is closer to clarity, logicalness, rationality, and coherence. The revision part offers an opportunity for learners to reflect on their advantages and disadvantages. What's more, topic discussions in the discussion section are also set to help students reflect. For example, there is a question saying "Please share one question you have about American culture and society. It can be your query about stereotypes or an issue you would like to further explore in this course." The question challenges students to reflect on what they have learned and what they are still curious about or sceptical of. Students not only share ideas with their fellows, but also challenge their fellows' ideas. They will ask for further explanations on their ideas and even develop a counter-argument, which

triggers reflection on their own ideas and attempt to use critical thinking skills. In this case, CACS has done its job to foster metacognitive ability and self-regulation through reflection.

3.5. Inquiring: Whether CACS Creates Opportunities for Free Enquiry?

As we have mentioned about the system of a collaborative and exploratory learning community, language and critical thinking integrated teaching advocates a way of exploratory learning. The teacher in the learning community should be a guide or assistant rather than an origin of knowledge. As the teacher knows how to pose questions and encourage students to explore, mental growth will take place, fostering the competence of critical thinking. (Sun, 2019, 831).

Presentation and discussions in CACS are the fountain for student's enquiry and future exploration of truth. In fact, to encourage enquiry and exploration in CACS, students are given the freedom to choose their topic of the presentation. During their preparation, they are self-driven to research on the fields they care about and study what they think will be helpful to their research. After the presentation, classmates and teachers will ask the presenters about some key points in the content or their personal ideas about the presentation. The questions may include but are not limited to asking for clarification of some terms, and supplements to more convincing reasons and evidence. (Sun, 2019, 832) On the discussion of minimum wage and unemployment, a student may wonder why minimum wage is helpful for all the workers as he or she takes a standpoint that the existence of minimum wage will hurt minority groups. Then the teacher or students may ask for clarification of reasons behind unemployment and the relation between minimum wage and unemployment. Students can provide more reasons to answer the questions whenever necessary. It is in these ways that CACS creates opportunities for free enquiry.

3.6. Fulfilling: Whether CACS Promotes Student's Self-fulfilment and All-round Development?

It is a misunderstanding to compare critical thinking to the ability of wining debates by any means. Mere focus on the development of thinking skills may have an opposite effect on learner's values towards good and evil. CACS helps students broaden intellectual horizon and explore reasons behind different cultural phenomenon. With a certain ability to analyse cultural phenomenon, students can distinguish between falseness and truth, and tell good from evil. Cultural difference cannot be avoided and CACS helps students put themselves in others' shoes and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. In Chapter III- The Amendments, freedom of speech, the right to bear arms, and rights of criminal defendants are discussed based on the observation of American culture and Chinese culture. Due to different national conditions, especially historical and political background, those rights are significant in American society and in China other particular rights may be prioritized likewise. Through the discussion of the two cultures, students not only know about the cultural phenomenon on the surface, but also understand what it is in the deep. Besides, CACS serves as a mirror to understand our own culture, by looking into the mirror of American culture, we will figure out the reason behind the cultural difference and have a better understanding of Chinese culture and our cultural identity as a member of Chinese culture. By Maslow's theory of self-actualization, an individual who reaches self-actualization remains pure and innocent, and sensitive towards falseness and truth. He or she can also accept the true-self, other people, and the nature. (Sun, 2019, 833) Self-fulfilment and healthy development cannot live without a good understanding of self-identity (including cultural identity). In addition. CACS integrates value of justice and cultural sensitivity into teaching. Although the topics and content are all issues about American culture and society, the teacher and the textbook refuse culture assimilation and appropriation, and encourage students to have their own judgement and find their justice in face of chaotic events or unfamiliar cultural phenomenon. To develop both high ideological quality and professional capability, the CACS takes effort to promote student's self-fulfilment and all-round development in a nuanced way.

3.7. Integrating: Whether CACS Brings about Integration of Language Competence and the Ability of Critical Thinking?

CACS attaches great importance to both critical thinking and language proficiency. Part A-Exposition Texts in the textbook and massive video resources on the SPOC platform are designed for language input, offering a large amount of vocabulary and knowledge about American culture and society. Part B-Exploitation Activities in the textbook, offline presentations, group discussions, and the discussion section on the SPOC platform provides golden opportunities for mental exercise and socio-cultural exploration. In the discussion section of Chapter V- Immigration and Ethnicity, the topic is ‘What are the pros and cons of the Affirmative Action’. The discussion topic not only provides the text in English, but also gives students the chance to form opinions, discuss, and take their own sides using English. In addition, CACS uses the same controversial topic in each chapter for both online discussion and offline discussion. Throughout the teaching cycle, discussions of coherent topics can help improve language proficiency in oral and written way. If there is no need to take sides in a topic discussion, research and extensive reading of different English text facilitates language learning.

By these methods above, CACS can bring about integration of language competence and the ability of critical thinking.

3.8. Content: Whether CACS Adopts Cognitively Challenging Contents?

Good language teaching cannot be divorced from suitable language materials. CACS selects materials with the target of critical thinking. CACS chooses topics that are controversial or need people take effort to understand, which pose cognitive challenges for students. For example. Chapter II- The Constitution and the Government System is introduced due to the complexity of constitution and government structure. And in Chapter VI- Family and Personal Relationships, same-sex marriage is discussed for its controversy. When students are taking sides and arguing for the pros and cons of legalizing same-sex marriage, positive usage of language and critical thinking happens at the same time. What’s more, CACS adopts diverse contents to meet with more cognitively challenging contents. First, CACS’s topics cover most fields of life from politics, social welfare, to work, media, and recreation. The topics relate to real life and arouse interest in students. Second, CACS provides learners with diverse forms of learning materials. The language materials vary from written text, pictures to videos. The text includes essays and government documents. Third, CACS delves into topics from daily life, literature, government documents and legal text to implant liberal education in a comprehensive way. For example, the study on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are beneficial to enhance the student’s cognitive abilities. Fourth, CACS selects inspiring and hotly-discussed materials for exploratory learning. Amid the lecture on justice and the law, the overturn of abortion rights in the case of *Roe VS. Wade* had been brought into discussion. As an unprecedented case about civil rights, the real issue aroused learner’s interest in exploration and thinking.

From the four aspects of material selection, it is safe to say that CACS adopts cognitively challenging contents to develop learner’s language proficiency and competence of critical thinking.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the case analysis above, we can come to a better understanding of the role that the pattern of blended learning and the usage of technology (The SPOC platform) played in facilitating Liberal English Education. According to the theory of liberal English education (LEE) and the principles of language and critical thinking integrated teaching (TERRIFIC principles), the blended learning of Contemporary American Culture and Society (CACS) has an overall satisfying performance through a well-targeted syllabus, a standard for critical thinking, massive online and offline learning resources, and diverse well activities to develop all-round English talents. Besides, the theory of LEE and TERRIFIC principles lights a path towards a more comprehensive and up-to-date way of language

teaching. For example, it is suggested that current language teaching attempts to construct a learning community, offering opportunities for free inquiry and independent learning. However, this article is more of a theoretical-based analysis. Other indicating factors in relation to the effect of liberal English education like student's evaluation, examination analysis, and background data in SPOC platform have not been discussed. CACS, as well as other similar courses, still need to stand the test of time and make improvements to become a more advanced liberal English education course.

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