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Developing Critical Thinking: Experiences of Chinese International Students in a Post-1992 University in England

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Developing Critical Thinking: Experiences of Chinese International Students in a Post-1992 University in England

Critical thinking is a key attribute for students in British higher education, but there has been little research on how Chinese students develop critical thinking during their studies at British universities. Based on interviews with sixteen Chinese students at a university in England, this paper reports their experiences of developing critical thinking during their one-year Master's programmes. Developing critical thinking was not always an easy task for these students. In addition to cultural background, other factors that played important roles in influencing how these students developed critical thinking included the teachers' questioning approaches, group discussions in the classes, English language proficiency, and the teachers' guidelines. The findings suggest that it is time to shift the 'deficit' perspective on Chinese students and re-examine the ways that lecturers can facilitate the development of critical thinking of these students.

Keywords: critical thinking; Chinese students; postgraduate education; British university

Introduction

In Western higher education, encouraging students to critically appraise knowledge and values is considered as very important (Hammersley-Fletcher and Hanley 2016). Postgraduate students in particular are required to learn critical thinking and employ these skills to their learning and writing practices in order to acquire a higher education qualification in the UK (Quality Assurance Agency 2014). This standard is equally applied to international students at UK universities.

Chinese students are often regarded as lacking critical thinking abilities because they come from the Confucian culture where respecting authority and maintaining harmony are highly valued (Turner 2006). These views have been questioned because they essentialise culture and assign a homogeneous identity to Chinese students (Clark and Gieve 2006). In addition, Tian and Low (2011) claimed that cultural background cannot be the sole explanation for the critical thinking performances of Chinese students at universities abroad, and noted that there little empirical evidence that Chinese students cannot think critically.

Despite widespread discussion of the perception that Chinese students have limited capacities to be

critical, what remains unknown is these students' perspectives and their experiences of critical thinking in universities abroad. This article investigates the experiences of Chinese students as they encounter critical thinking during their studies in the UK, with the goal of discovering and clarifying the factors that affect how they develop critical thinking skills.

Literature review

Definitions of critical thinking

Critical thinking is a concept that has been defined and constructed in many different ways. One widely-used definition is from Ennis (1993) who argued that critical thinking is set of cognitive skills needed to make reasoned judgments, and that it is “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (180). He regarded the highest three levels of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives – analysis, synthesis and evaluation – as connected to critical thinking. Ennis (1993) also pointed out that these three concepts are still too vague for critical thinking assessment. In order to provide some specificity to critical thinking as a concept, he listed some abilities and dispositions that critical thinkers should have, such as to “judge the credibility of sources” and “judge the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions, and evidence” (Ennis 1993, 180).

A slightly different view was given by Mulnix (2012), which is that critical thinking is not merely a set of information processing skills, but also a disposition or habit of mind that involves a set of intellectual virtues owned by critical thinkers. Mulnix stated that people with critical spirit tend to have metacognitive awareness and are more disposed to using cognitive skills to make reasoned judgement. In an earlier and similar definition, Facione (1998, 10) defined the intellectual virtues possessed by critical thinkers as critical thinking dispositions, which include “a probing inquisitiveness, a keenness of mind, a zealous dedication to reason, and a hunger or eagerness for reliable information.” The suggestion that critical thinking is a habit of mind was also given by Brookfield (1987), whose definition of critical thinking included “identifying and challenging assumptions and exploring and imagining alternatives” (15).

Critical thinking was seen as a social practice and a culturally-based concept by Atkinson (1997), who argued that critical thinking is learned via living life in a particular cultural context where individualism, self-expression and using language as a tool for learning are highly valued and promoted. Unlike the scholars (e.g.

Ennis 1993) who defined critical thinking as a set of thinking skills, Atkinson raised questions about whether it is possible to teach critical thinking to students, because in his view, critical thinking is not a well-defined concrete skill to be learned, but a social practice that one either grows up with or not.

Vandermensbrughe (2004) also pointed to the vagueness of the meaning of critical thinking, stating that contemporary definitions of critical thinking could be classified into two categories: “the ability to develop a capacity to reason logically and cohesively” or “the ability to question and challenge existing knowledge and the social order” (Vandermensbrughe 2004, 419). She supported Atkinson’s (1997) view that critical thinking is a socially constructed concept that is essentially embedded in Western culture.

But is critical thinking a merely Western concept? Does the concept of critical thinking exist in non-Western cultures? Kim (2003) argued that traditional Chinese cultures (e.g. Confucian cultures) also emphasise inquiry and reflexivity in learning, which are two concepts thought to be essential to the critical thinking concept. She pointed out that Confucianism advocates reflection about the materials of knowledge and about oneself in the process of learning.

It is not our intention here to debate whether critical thinking as a concept exists in non-Western cultures or not, but to point out that critical thinking as understood by Western universities is a culturally situated concept, and what counts as critical thinking may vary across different cultural contexts. On this issue, Ege and Kutieleh (2004, 79) argued that “what Western academics recognise as evidence of reasoning, the tools used to reason with, the language and structure of the argument, actually represent a cultural, rather than a universal, method.” This statement provides a useful starting point for us to think about critical thinking and acknowledge that it is not an easily understood universal concept, but rather one that must be understood in the specific context where it is used.

Studies on international and Chinese students in Western universities

In this section, we review five empirical studies that explored international and Chinese students’ experiences of developing critical thinking in the higher education context. Firstly, Shaheen’s (2016) study reported on fourteen teachers’ views of the critical thinking-related difficulties encountered by international students at two UK universities. The findings suggested that international students coming from various cultural backgrounds may not have had critical thinking training and practice in their previous educational

experiences. Shaheen found that international students' cultural backgrounds, previous learning experiences, and English language capabilities could all influence how these students engaged with critical analysis in academic writing tasks.

Secondly, Durkin (2008) interviewed 41 East Asian Master's students at two UK universities to explore their experiences of adapting to the Western norms of critique and argumentation. She found that the willingness of international students to engage in reflexivity, their competence in English, and the guidance and encouragement of their teachers were the probable factors influencing how far they adapted to Western norms of critical thinking. The findings suggested that most student participants were not willing to completely accept Western academic conventions, and instead they choose a different learning approach that accommodated their own cultural norms and values.

Thirdly, Turner (2006) conducted a small-scale longitudinal study which explored the learning experiences of nine Chinese students who studied for a Master's degree at a British university. She found that these participants had a difficult time adjusting to the UK educational system as they struggled to make sense of implicit culturally-based academic conventions as well as the expectations of their teachers. She argued that that the assessment of critical thinking in the university tends to focus on the forms of expression in students' essays (e.g. the use of evidence and the argumentative style), which puts Chinese students (who use English as a second language) at a disadvantage.

Fourthly, Ku and Ho's (2009) study examined the relative effects of cognitive and dispositional factors on the critical thinking performance of a group of 137 Chinese undergraduate students at a comprehensive university in Hong Kong. Their study results revealed that both cognitive ability and thinking dispositions affected students' critical thinking performances. Unlike the studies that focused on Western students and identified thinking dispositions (such as the need for cognition, openness, conscientiousness and truth-seeking) as important traits of critical thinkers, Ku and Ho only found a link between Chinese students' critical thinking performances and their concern for truth-seeking. Their findings indicate that critical thinking is perceived and exercised differently in Western and Chinese societies. They argued that the reason that the truth-seeking disposition (more than other thinking dispositions) becomes the salient factor that predicts the critical thinking performance of Chinese students is partly because other thinking dispositions may be less compatible with the dominant ethos in a Chinese society that emphasises respect for authority

and social harmony.

Finally, Chen (2017) interviewed 46 Chinese students at a university in Guangzhou to explore their understandings of critical thinking. Her study revealed three key definitions of critical thinking suggested by Chinese students, including cognitive thinking skills, intellectual autonomy, and the omnipresence of opposing points of views. She pointed out that students' social, cultural and educational backgrounds can influence and shape their understandings and conceptualisations of critical thinking.

In reviewing the studies above, we found that culture is not the only reason for the difficulties that international and Chinese students face when trying to develop critical thinking at universities abroad. We argue that there is a need to shift away from the 'deficit' perspective of international and Chinese students and towards thinking about their learning experiences in a more critical and nuanced way.

Methodology

Participants

This study involves 16 Chinese students at a post-1992 university in England. All participants are from the People's Republic of China and of Han ethnicity (the largest ethnic group in China). Among the 16 student participants, six students are male and ten students are female. The programmes that the participants were registered in were one-year, full-time Master's programmes.

Purposive sampling (Denscombe 2007) was used to select the participants. Three Schools including Arts, Business, and Education were selected because they recruited more Chinese students than other Schools at this university. In the three selected Schools, approximately 50 Chinese students were contacted for the purpose of recruitment. In the end, 16 students from three different disciplines agreed to take part in the study, including three in Art and Design, nine in Business and Management, and four in Education. It is worth noting that all the participants had a Bachelor's degree in Chinese universities before they came to study in the UK, and none of them had any prior experience of studying abroad.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews (Denscombe 2007) were the main method of data collection. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the mother tongue of the participants, and carefully transcribed and

translated. Each interview lasted around thirty to forty minutes and interviews took place either in the group study room in the library or the dining hall of the participant's student accommodations to make sure that the setting was quiet enough for recording and that participants felt comfortable talking. The names of the participants were replaced by pseudonyms in order to protect the participants' identities and information.

During the interviews, the participants were first invited to recall their overall learning experiences at both Chinese and British universities and what differences they spotted, and they were then asked to comment on specific issues related to critical thinking, such as their understandings of the concept of critical thinking, how their programmes and teachers asked or helped them to develop critical thinking, and what difficulties they encountered while developing critical thinking during their studies in the UK.

The collected data were analysed through the method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts, coding the data, and categorising the codes into key themes. The challenges that the participants faced in developing critical thinking and the types of support they expected from the university and academic staff were identified. The interviews were structured around two research questions:

- (1) How do Chinese international students understand the concept of critical thinking?
- (2) What are Chinese international students' experiences of developing critical thinking during studies in the UK?

Students' definitions of critical thinking

Similar to Chen's (2017) research findings about Chinese students, we found that the Chinese student participants being interviewed did not have difficulties in defining critical thinking. Most participants stated that they heard the term critical thinking repeatedly from their lecturers since they started their study in the UK. The participants' definitions of critical thinking were slightly different from each other and can be classified into three key themes, including information processing skills, consideration of multiple perspectives, and questioning existing knowledge.

It is important to note that these three themes are not mutually exclusive and each participant's conceptualisation of critical thinking may cover more than one theme. To illustrate students' different definitions of critical thinking, three participants' accounts (Li, Zhou and Feng) were selected and are

discussed in this section. They were selected not because they represent every student's understanding of critical thinking, but because their accounts illustrate the typical features of students' different definitions. Li, a student in Education, referred to her understandings of critical thinking as follows:

My teacher in the UK requires me to have knowledge of critical thinking and apply that in lectures and my writing process. Critical thinking to me is the way of understanding how to process information, analyse information, and transfer the information I read into writing essays. To me, critical thinking is probably the process of how we think and how we synthesise all information into one. (Li, Female, Education)

Li interpreted critical thinking as a set of information processing skills. She was aware of the importance of analysing the credibility of information that she used for writing essays. Her definition is similar to the definition developed by scholars like Ennis (1993) which conceptualised critical thinking as higher-order thinking skills used to help make reasoned judgement.

Another definition of critical thinking from the participants is the consideration of multiple perspectives when learning a subject or making a judgement. Zhou, a student studying Business and Management, stated that:

In the lectures, teacher always asks questions and let us discuss them in small groups. When listening to my fellows' views, I try to pick up the differences between their views. So, critical thinking from my view is looking at one issue from different perspectives. It can help me understand the limitation of my own views and learn more about other people's views. (Zhou, Male, Business and Management)

Zhou's definition of critical thinking indicated that he was self-reflective in the process of learning. He considered critical thinking not only as an information processing skill, but also as an awareness of using such skills to make reasoned judgement. He intended to seek and understand diverse perspectives before making a judgement. For Zhou, critical thinking means being reflective and open to alternative views, which is in line with the dispositions towards critical thinking raised by scholars like Facione (1998) and Mulnix (2012).

For other participants, critical thinking means questioning existing knowledge. For example, Feng, a

student in Art and Design, articulated his definition of critical thinking as follows:

I think critical thinking is about developing your own ideas rather than copying other people's theory. The most important thing I think is how you can develop your own theory. If you want to have your own ideas, you have to go back to your cultural background and personal experiences.

(Feng, Male, Art and Design)

Feng conveyed a sense that it is important to develop one's own ideas rather than memorising other people's ideas. He emphasised not treating other people's theories as given, and not following a theory without reflection. From his point of view, critical thinking is about questioning and re-examining our assumptions about what we already know and searching for new knowledge.

It is worth noting that more than half of the participants emphasised that they did not get too much critical thinking training and practice from their previous educational experiences in Chinese universities. They expressed the desire to learn more about critical thinking skills and how to employ critical thinking skills in reviewing literature and writing essays. Through interviewing the Chinese student participants and listening to their experiences of developing critical thinking, we identified the teaching strategies that they found helpful and the challenges that they faced in developing critical thinking. These points will be discussed in the following sections.

Teaching strategies that facilitate the development of critical thinking

Teacher's questioning approaches

More than half of the participants said that they doubted themselves when they held opinions different from their teacher. They stated that the reason might be that they were asked to show respect and be obedient to teachers in primary and tertiary education in China, accepting their instructions without question. They treated their teacher as the authority and this approach to learning did not vanish when they started to study in the UK. Wu, a student in Business and Management, said that:

I think teacher and student should be like friends and they can share their ideas with each other. If students want to practise critical thinking, they should be treated as equal so that they can feel free to express their opinions and ideas. Teachers should listen to students' ideas and guide them to

think critically. (Wu, Male, Business and Management)

Wu's quote suggested that he felt that an unequal relationship between teacher and student in the classroom: teachers seemed to be more powerful than students, and students' opinions were not as important as the opinions of teachers, which undermined critical thinking. Like Wu, many participants expressed that if they felt teachers welcomed and valued their opinions, they would be more willing to think critically in the process of learning. This suggested that participants expected a more friendly relationship between teacher and student in postgraduate study in the West and that teachers play an indispensable role in facilitating the development of critical thinking.

Some participants shared the view that questioning approaches taken by teachers created learning opportunities for them to think critically, in particular when the questions were open-ended. For instance, Qian, a student in Education, stated that:

The teacher can ask questions like 'Do you think this is right?' and the students will say yes or no but then you can ask 'Why do you think it is right?' and 'Why do you think it is wrong?' I think the latter ones are good for students to develop critical thinking because they need to think more in that process. (Qian, Female, Education)

Qian's quote indicated that the questions asked by a teacher can affect what level of cognition that students engage in. From Qian's point of view, open-ended questions encourage students to think more about 'why' and 'how'. Like Qian, many participants found that the way teachers asked questions influenced how they thought about the questions. This echoes Golding's (2011) view that the thought-encouraging questions asked by teachers can help immerse students in the practice of making critical judgements and push them to become critical thinkers.

Group discussion in the class

Encouraging students to discuss issues in small groups was highlighted by the participants and was thought to be another teaching strategy that facilitated students to develop critical thinking. The majority of the participants said that they found it helpful to discuss issues in small groups because then they heard many different answers and ideas. For example, Chen, a student in Education, shared her view on the benefits of

joining group discussions:

Classmates are the best people I learn knowledge from. When teacher asks a question and my fellows and I hold different opinions, we will discuss them and ask each other more questions.

This helps me rethink my thoughts and my thinking process. (Chen, Female, Education)

Chen conveyed a sense that group discussion offered her a chance to listen to different ideas and reflect on the reasonableness of her own thoughts. Chen thought that discussing her ideas with other people helped her critically appraise her own knowledge and understandings of the subject. The idea that group discussions can help enhance students' critical thinking skills is also supported by scholars like Ladyshevsky (2006) who believed that debate and disagreement within an environment of trust and support encourages deeper reflection and learning.

Zheng, a student in Business and Management, gave another reason for the importance of organised group discussion activities in the class:

If students don't feel they belong, they will sit there and are not motivated to learn and participate in the class. So, if teachers can create a good classroom culture to make students get involved more, that will ultimately stimulate their motivation to learn and engage in critical thinking. (Zheng, Female, Business and Management)

From Zheng's point of view, engaging students in the process of teaching and learning is essential for them to develop critical thinking. In order to motivate students to think critically, she suggested that teachers should employ a more student-centred teaching approach rather than the top-down style of teaching which only focuses on transmitting knowledge to students. This idea echoes the view of Kwan and Wong (2015) that when students are actively engaged in course content for reasons like interest, mastery and challenge, they tend to use more higher-order thinking skills during their learning, and also to critically reflect on what they have learnt.

Challenges that students faced in developing critical thinking

English language barrier

More than half of the participants thought that their English language proficiency influenced the extent to

which they understood the curriculum content and their teachers' perspectives in class. They shared the view that in order to look at an issue or topic critically, they needed to gather and read relevant materials to improve their understandings of the subject. But they found it difficult and time consuming to do this due to their lack of proficiency in English.

Some participants stated that the English language barrier caused difficulties in understanding the course content, which meant they felt unable to give critical comments on other people's views simply because they did not understand them. For instance, Shen, a student studying Art and Design, said that:

I think English language is one barrier for me to develop critical thinking. Sometimes I do not fully understand the information that I am looking at. It is quite hard for me to critique something when I don't even understand what it is about. (Shen, Female, Art and Design)

Even when basic understanding was not an issue, participants felt that concerns about fluency impeded joining group discussions and sharing views with teachers and fellow students. Worries about making mistakes in spoken English meant that Chinese students often felt intimidated when there were opportunities to share opinions in the class. For example, Jiang, a student in Business and Management, stated that:

When teachers ask questions, some of my Chinese friends know the answer but they do not put up their hands. They find speaking English in public is difficult and they feel embarrassed if they say anything wrong. (Jiang, Male, Business and Management)

The accounts of Shen and Jiang revealed that the English language barrier creates some extra challenges for the Chinese student participants in understanding course content and in joining group discussion activities in the class. As a consequence, the participants might miss opportunities for developing critical thinking through debating different points of view and being challenged; because they did not want to speak English, they had to privately reflect on their own understanding about the issue being discussed in the class.

Unclear guideline from teachers

Another barrier that participants identified for developing critical thinking was that they were not always very clear about how to employ critical thinking in writing essays. Some participants pointed out that they were aware that critical thinking is a major criterion for assessing the quality of their written assignments,

and that their teachers repeated the term in the class often and they saw the term used in their module handbook a lot. But they expressed that they found the evaluation criteria for assessing the quality of their essays in terms of critical thinking were not explicit, and they were not sure what is actually required of them from their teacher. For example, Zhao, a student in Education, shared her concerns about writing essays:

I always heard the term from my teachers but I don't know how to show critical thinking in my essays. I don't know how my teachers decide whether my writing is critical or not. (Zhao, Female, Education)

Zhao's quote indicated that although she heard the term 'critical thinking' from her teachers, the meaning of critical thinking and what counts as evidence of critical thinking in writing practices were not clear to her. Like Zhao, many participants recognised the importance of employing critical thinking in their learning and writing but were unable to demonstrate critical thinking in their written work because of a lack of clear guidelines. This finding suggests that the evaluation criteria for assessing critical thinking in a piece of work may be implicit or hidden for the Chinese student participants. As a result, their lack of knowledge about new academic conventions can become a barrier for them to develop critical thinking.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that critical thinking was by no means an alien concept to the Chinese student participants. Like the multiple definitions raised by scholars (Ennis 1993; Facione 1998; Atkinson 1997), the participants defined critical thinking differently. For some participants, critical thinking refers to a set of information processing skills which can be taught and learnt; for others, critical thinking is more of a habit and disposition which is about consciously taking multiple perspectives into account before making a judgement, or it is the motive for challenging people's assumptions and searching for new knowledge. It is worth noting that the participants' definitions of critical thinking were similar to those of Chen's (2017) study. Unlike that study, which found that some Chinese students' understanding of critical thinking is influenced by indigenous Chinese philosophy, we found no obvious influence of Chinese culture on students' conceptualisation of critical thinking.

While most of the participants were able to give their own definition of critical thinking, they stated that they did not quite understand how to employ critical thinking in reviewing literature and writing essays.

Students also expressed a desire to learn more about critical thinking skills. They were disappointed that their lecturers highlighted the importance of critical thinking, but rarely taught students how to employ critical thinking in practice. This observation suggests that it should not be assumed that Chinese students will be able to immediately adapt to academic staff's implicit expectations about critical thinking. To have these expectations without providing training puts Chinese students at a disadvantage.

How can this situation be improved? One proposal is to introduce critical thinking as a working concept to Chinese students at the beginning of their studies. Academic staff need to make students aware of what is expected from them, and also how they can fulfil these expectations (Vandermensbrugge 2004). For example, academic staff could offer students an introduction to what critical thinking entails and how to demonstrate critical thinking in writing. Teachers could show examples of different written pieces, compare them, and ask students to identify which one engage more successfully with critical analysis. This type of practical approach would help new Chinese students understand the academic conventions of UK universities and teacher expectations.

Another proposal is to combine English language support service with critical thinking training. Similar to some previous studies (Shaheen 2016; Durkin 2008; Turner 2006), this study found that a student's low English proficiency could inhibit them from developing critical thinking. It is worth noting that many UK universities offer English language support to students whose first language is not English. But most of time this type of service is mainly focused on improving students' English language capabilities. What is suggested here is that university could integrate critical thinking training into the English language support they provide, so that international students not only improve their English language skills but also enhance their understanding of how to employ critical thinking in their study.

Teachers were thought to play a vital part in helping Chinese students develop critical thinking. The participants expressed that they are more likely to share and discuss their ideas when they feel their opinions are welcomed and valued by teachers. It is worth noting that a number of pedagogical approaches to facilitating the development of critical thinking emerge from the experiences of Chinese students, such as asking open-ended questions and organising group discussion activities in the class. Because Chinese students may be hesitant to join group discussions due to their (perceived) shortcomings in English, teachers need to be culturally sensitive to their learning behaviours. For example, teachers should emphasise that

students' opinions are key to discussions and let all students know that their voices are important.

Conclusion

This study explores Chinese students' experiences of developing critical thinking during their one-year Master's studies in the UK. Our findings emphasise that the presumption that Chinese students are not willing or able to think critically is inappropriate, and that cultural background is not the only reason that Chinese students may face difficulties in developing critical thinking. Other factors that inhibit the development of critical thinking skills include the barrier that the English language can create, and lack of clarity about the meaning of critical thinking.

Although there has been little research examining Chinese international students' experiences of developing critical thinking in British universities, we can draw a few general conclusions from our work and the few prior studies. For example, both our study and previous studies recommend that interactive teaching approaches be used in classes because these clearly help students develop critical thinking. Our study further suggests that academic staff need to be more interculturally competent when teaching critical thinking to international students. Not surprisingly, our findings also argue that teachers play a significant role in helping Chinese students to develop critical thinking. Teachers need to impart to students a concrete meaning of critical thinking, keep asking questions and encouraging answers in class, and design more interactive learning activities.

This study gives a snapshot understanding of how Chinese students develop critical thinking during studies in the UK. Its findings have important implications for academic staff who teach Chinese students at British universities and other English-language, Western-tradition institutions of higher learning. This research was conducted on a small scale and the sampled students were mainly from the Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines, so further research is recommended with a larger number of participants including the experiences of students in Science disciplines as well. It is our hope that this research can help teachers at UK universities better understand Chinese students as learners and better understand how to support them as they develop their critical thinking.