

An Exploration of a CLIL Teaching Model Empowered by Critical Thinking Strategies

—A Case Study of the “Comprehensive Business English” Course

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Abstract

This study addresses the challenges in teaching the “Comprehensive Business English” course, a core program integrating language, culture, and business knowledge. Current practices face difficulties, including textbooks whose topic depth and text complexity exceed the cognitive level of students from tier-three universities, and traditional teaching models that struggle to synergistically develop language proficiency, subject content mastery, and critical thinking skills. Based on the teaching philosophy of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and incorporating strategies for cultivating critical thinking skills, this study constructs a teaching model suitable for the “Comprehensive Business English” course. By introducing localized teaching content, designing teaching sessions that incorporate higher-order thinking activities such as application, analysis, evaluation, and creativity, and employing diversified output tasks, the study achieves the coordinated development of language skills, subject content, and critical thinking skills, proposing a “content-language-critical thinking” pedagogical concept.

Keywords

CLIL, Critical Thinking Skills, Teaching Model for “Comprehensive Business English”, Localized Content

1. Introduction

“Comprehensive Business English”, as a core course in the Business English major, emphasizes the organic integration of language, culture, and business knowledge. According to the National Standards for Undergraduate Teaching Quality of Business English Majors in Higher Education Institutions, this course covers a multi-

dimensional knowledge system encompassing business, economics, management, law, and culture, and is dedicated to cultivating students' thinking, innovation, and independent learning abilities. However, the current teaching practices face numerous challenges. For example, existing textbooks (such as "Comprehensive Business English Course" edited by Wang Lifei) exceed the cognitive level of students in tier-three universities, where English majors in their sophomore year demonstrate significantly lower English proficiency compared to their counterparts in public undergraduate institutions, as indicated by an approximate 95% pass rate for CET-4 and 60% for CET-6, in terms of topic depth and text difficulty. Traditional teaching models, which primarily focus on language skills training, struggle to achieve the coordinated development of language, content, and critical thinking. Huang (2020) and Wen *et al.* (2010) point out that the language skills-focused curriculum for English majors hinders the development of students' cognitive abilities [1] [2]. The underlying mechanism for this hindrance is that over-emphasizing linguistic elements compresses the space for cultivating higher-order thinking, reducing instruction to rote memorization and stifling skills like analytical reasoning and critical thinking. Therefore, exploring a teaching model that effectively integrates language learning, subject content, and critical thinking becomes imperative.

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) model offers a potential solution to this problem. CLIL emphasizes acquiring target language proficiency through learning subject knowledge and deepening subject knowledge through the use of the target language [3]. In recent years, the question of how to naturally integrate subject content into foreign language learning and synergize language learning with the cultivation of critical thinking and critical narrative expression, among other language-related skills, has become a hot topic in domestic education [4] [5]. This study, based on Wen *et al.*'s (2009) model of thinking skills and Short's (2002) language-content-task framework, constructs a CLIL teaching model that empowers critical thinking strategies [6] [7]. Through authentic classroom contexts, active interactive communication, and diverse presentations of learning outcomes, this study aims to promote the effective integration of language and content in students' learning, ultimately fostering cross-cultural critical thinking awareness and achieving a triple focus on content, language, and critical thinking.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to CLIL Theory

CLIL emerged in Europe in the mid-1990s. Proposed by Marsh (2002), this model emphasizes that foreign language learners acquire target language proficiency through subject knowledge acquisition and deepen their mastery of subject knowledge through the use of the target language [3] [8]. In recent years, CLIL has come to refer to any teaching model that integrates content and a second language. Related research suggests that, by incorporating subject content into lan-

guage learning, the CLIL model fosters a deep integration of learners' language and cognitive abilities (particularly higher-order thinking skills), promoting their coordinated development [9] [10]. How to organically integrate language learning, critical thinking skills, and subject content to achieve synergy among these three has become a hot topic of discussion among scholars both domestically and internationally.

In the United States and Canada, content-based instruction (CBI) is considered a language teaching philosophy or approach [11] [12]. It organizes instruction around the "content or information" students need to acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other formal syllabus [13]. CBI encompasses a variety of teaching approaches, such as thematic, protective, and supplementary approaches. In the European Union, CBI has evolved into CLIL, which advocates the integration of foreign language and non-language content. Early domestic research focused on content-based language acquisition [14], but more recently, the focus has shifted to content and language integration [5]. Furthermore, based on their research on CBI and CLIL, Chang & Zhao (2020) proposed the localized concept of CLI in 2020. This concept aims to use foreign languages to teach or learn content and language to achieve multiple educational objectives.

Regarding the integration of knowledge and content, domestic and international scholars have primarily explored the organic integration of content knowledge from three perspectives: theoretical exploration (exploring definitions, advantages and disadvantages, and implications), implementation effectiveness, and classroom teaching research (setting teaching objectives, analyzing classroom discourse, and developing teaching improvement strategies).

First, in terms of theoretical exploration, Dalton-Puffer (2008) argues that content-language integration education focuses on differences in student abilities [15]. Coyle (1999) proposed the 4C principles of CLIL classroom instruction: content, communication, cognition, and culture [16]. Short (2002) proposed the Language-Content-Task Framework (LCT Framework) [7]. Liu (2013) explored the feasibility of CLIL in various English courses in Chinese universities, and Tai & Chang (2022) constructed a content-language integration assessment framework [17] [18].

Second, in terms of implementation effectiveness, Lyster (2007) argues that repeated learning of language knowledge can continuously promote the deepening of subject content [19]. Studies have shown that the knowledge-content integrated model can effectively improve foreign language learners' learning motivation and reduce students' boredom in class [20]-[24], and can also improve learners' foreign language proficiency [25] [26].

Thirdly, in terms of teaching practice, Walker & Vom Brocke (2008) verified the positive effects of this model through online mutual learning group teaching [27]. Coyle *et al.* (2010) believe that content-language integrated education emphasizes the construction of foreign language curriculum systems and the design of foreign language teaching materials based on different subject backgrounds to

ensure the system of content and language input [28]. Zhang and Li (2019)'s research shows that the language knowledge integrated teaching model promotes the coordinated development of students' language, cognitive and critical thinking abilities [29]. Other scholars have explored hybrid teaching models based on the integration of knowledge and content [30]-[32]. Among them, Zhang (2021) based on German classroom teaching practice, identifies four localized CLIL teaching strategies (knowledge teaching strategies, language teaching strategies, cross-cultural teaching strategies, and native language use strategies) [33].

All these studies demonstrate the positive effects of the knowledge-language integration model in practical teaching. However, some scholars [34]-[36] have suggested that, compared with traditional language-centered foreign language instruction, CLIL may have negative effects on both language and content learning. The divergent results suggest that the CLIL teaching model remains worthy of further exploration. Furthermore, quantitative research in related studies primarily focuses on the assessment of language proficiency. Given the relative complexity of subject matter, the assessment and evaluation of subject matter knowledge is a pressing issue for scholars and a new research topic that should be explored in Business English, Legal English, and ESP testing.

2.2. Current Research Status and Focus on Critical Thinking

Critical thinking in higher education refers to the ability to think abstractly, logically, effectively, and evaluate arguments [37]. Over the past two decades, scholars at home and abroad have attached increasing importance to the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability. Their research can be roughly divided into three categories: defining the sub-skills of critical thinking ability, such as Paul's (1995) ternary structure model and Sun's (2019) cross-cultural critical thinking ability model [4] [38]; constructing critical thinking ability measurement tools, such as Cambridge Thinking Skills Assessment (CTSA) and Wen *et al.*'s (2009) critical thinking ability measurement tools [6]; and exploring the ways and strategies to cultivate critical thinking ability in higher education. Pithers and Soden (2000) summarized many problems in teaching in this field in the British higher education community [39]. Wen *et al.* (2010) believed that the curriculum setting of English majors, which focuses on language skills training, has to some extent hindered the further improvement of students' cognitive ability and thinking level [2]. Critical thinking strategy empowerment focuses on whether the cultivation of critical thinking ability is included in teaching objectives and whether effective tasks or activities are designed to promote the integrated development of critical thinking ability and language ability [4]. To this end, the "Intensive Reading of College English Critical Thinking Course" published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing constructs a new language teaching model that integrates cross-culture, critical thinking and education. Although the text of this textbook is somewhat difficult, the activity design based on cultivating critical thinking ability is worth learning from.

3. Necessity and Feasibility Analysis of the Critical Thinking-Empowered CLIL Teaching Model for “Comprehensive Business English” Course

“Comprehensive Business English” is a core course that runs through the two-year foundational phase of the Business English major. The Business English Teaching Guide defines it as a course organically integrating language, culture, and business. Its content encompasses a multi-dimensional knowledge system encompassing business, economics, management, law, and culture, and is dedicated to cultivating thinking skills, innovation, and independent learning abilities.

For this course, in the university where the author works, the “Comprehensive Course in Business English” (4 books in total), a national planning textbook for undergraduates in the “Twelfth Five-Year Plan” for general higher education, edited by Wang Kefei, was selected as the textbook. Although this series of textbooks focuses on the reasonable distribution of different proportions of language, culture and business (Book 1 is 70% language, 30% business and culture; Book 2 is 60% language, 40% business and culture; Book 3 is 50% language, 50% business and culture; and Book 4 is 40% language, 60% business and culture). Although it reflects the gradual integration of business and cultural knowledge into the curriculum, the depth of the topic and the difficulty of the text are somewhat difficult for our students.

Taking “Comprehensive Course in Business English Book 4” as an example, there are two problems with the use of the textbook: 1) The topic selection exceeds the cognitive scope of students, and there are few case studies. The eight unit themes of this volume are brand building, intellectual property, national prejudice, market monopoly, trade war, economic sanctions, trade agreements and economic inequality, all of which belong to highly professional fields and exceed the cognitive scope of students. In addition, there are few case studies, all of which are foreign cases. This situation presents significant challenges for students during the learning process, leading to a tendency to develop fear and a significant decrease in learning motivation. 2) The texts are also overly difficult, with long sentences and a high number of long and difficult words. Based on the Flesch Reading Ease index, three of the eight main texts in this volume are rated “Very Difficult”, four “Very Difficult”, and one “Fairly Difficult”. The average sentence length is 22 words, and the index for the text with the lowest difficulty, the Gunning Fog, is 14.71, meaning that readers would need the equivalent of 14.71 years of formal mother tongue education to fully comprehend them. Consequently, students generally experience difficulty understanding these texts.

Furthermore, Wen *et al.* (2010) argue that the English major’s curriculum, which primarily focuses on language skills training, has, to a certain extent, hindered the further development of students’ cognitive abilities and thinking skills [2]. Critical thinking strategy empowerment focuses on whether the cultivation of critical thinking skills is incorporated into teaching objectives and whether effective tasks or activities are designed to promote the integrated development of crit-

ical thinking and language skills [4].

One of the key reasons why the CLIL model has attracted attention in both domestic and international language communities is that it prioritizes teaching materials that are cognitively relevant and stimulating. In recent years, how to naturally integrate subject content into foreign language learning and achieve the coordinated development of language learning and critical thinking skills, such as critical narrative expression, has become a hot topic in the domestic education community [4] [5].

Three common construction activities in CLIL classrooms are: information chunking, scaffolding, and information repackaging. Information chunking refers to the use of mental maps, tables, and graphs to facilitate the transformation between verbal and visual information, involving cognitive activities such as comparison and contrast. Scaffolding provides learners with support to enable them to complete tasks beyond their capabilities. This approach involves a variety of methods, such as media and visual aids, brainstorming and example descriptions, information jigsaws, and leading questions. Information repackaging is a higher-level thinking activity based on information chunking, requiring analysis and organization based on comparison, identifying similarities and differences, and providing an effective way to incorporate critical thinking strategies into this teaching model.

The “Comprehensive Business English” course focuses on the deep integration of language, culture, and business knowledge. However, a current literature review reveals a lack of systematic academic research on the differences between the business-text-based “Comprehensive Business English” and the traditional “Comprehensive English” teaching model for English majors. Existing textbooks (such as “Comprehensive Business English Courses Book 1 - 4”, edited by Wang Lifei) exceed students’ cognitive level and comprehension capabilities in terms of topic depth and reading difficulty. To address this challenge, appropriate localized reading materials should be supplemented with critical thinking instructional activities to reduce learning difficulty and stimulate students’ interest and effectiveness. Given the systematic nature of the “Comprehensive Business English” course’s knowledge system, comprehensive skill requirements, and diverse capabilities, adopting a critical thinking-enabled CLIL teaching model may more effectively promote language acquisition and knowledge internalization, thereby enhancing students’ overall learning outcomes.

4. Constructing a Comprehensive Business English Teaching Model for CLIL Empowered by Critical Thinking Strategies

This study builds on Wen *et al.* (2009)’s three-tier model of critical thinking (analysis, reasoning, and evaluation) and Short’s (2002) language-content-task framework (LCT framework) to develop a CLIL teaching model empowered by critical thinking strategies [6] [7]. This model uses topic-based instruction, carefully incorporating locally relevant content, and designing teaching sessions that incor-

porate higher-order thinking activities such as application, analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Through authentic classroom contexts, active interactive communication, and diverse after-class language production activities, it guides students to hone their language skills, build subject content knowledge, and improve their critical thinking abilities. This is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

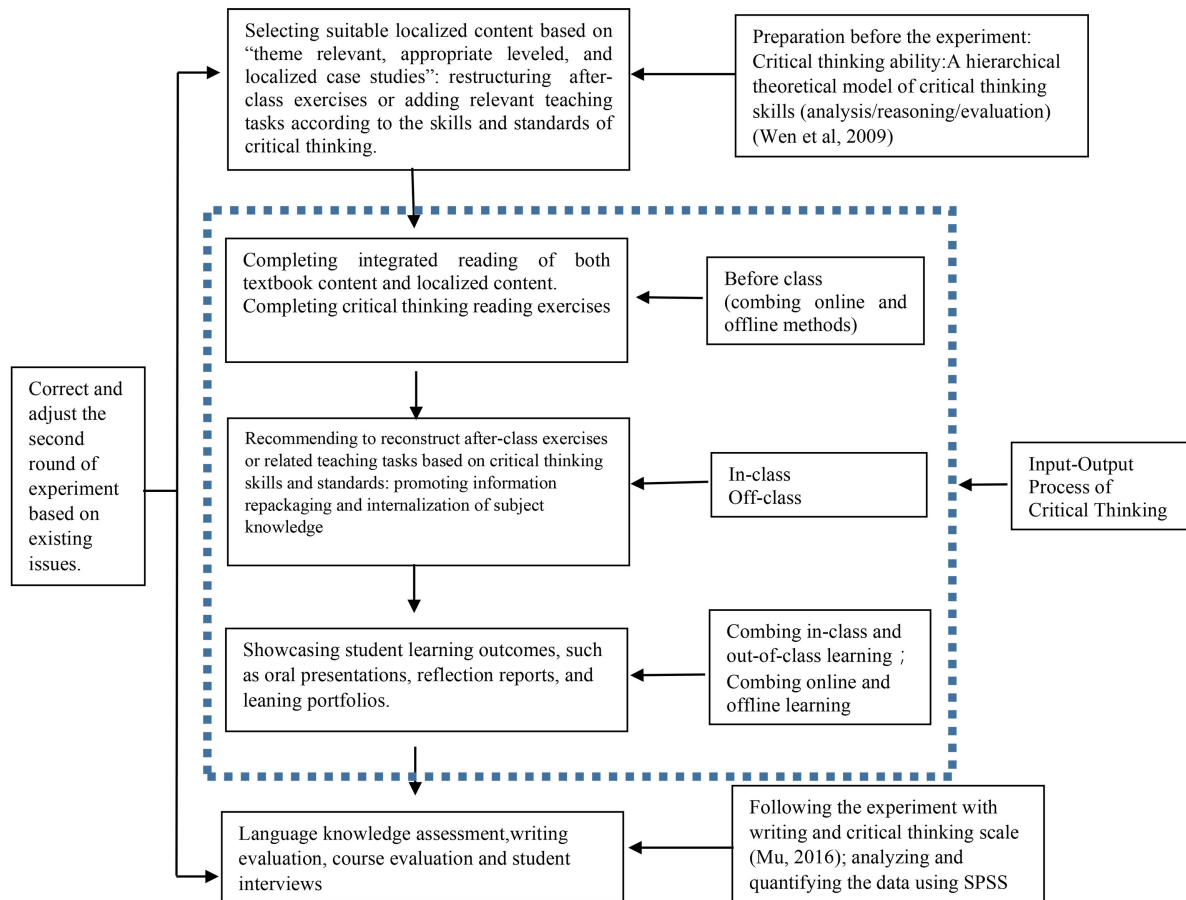


Figure 1. An exploration of the CLIL teaching model for integrated business English empowered by critical thinking strategies.

The core of this model is to achieve three focuses: 1) Content focus: by supplementing localized teaching content, reducing learning difficulty and stimulating students’ learning interest; 2) Language focus: improving students’ language ability through diversified language input and output activities; 3) Critical thinking focus: improving students’ higher-order thinking ability through training activities of critical thinking ability sub-items.

4.1. Restructuring Teaching Content

Based on “topic relevance, appropriate difficulty, and localized cases”, localized reading texts suitable for our students were selected. The current textbooks used by students in the university where the author works generally exceed the students’ cognitive development level and comprehension ability in terms of the

depth of the topics and the complexity of the texts. This will lead to a decrease in their learning enthusiasm due to frustration. In view of this, a series of articles were carefully selected from authoritative and rich English resources such as China Daily as supplementary reading materials. When selecting articles, two important readability assessment tools were strictly followed: the Flesch Reading Ease Index and the Gunning Fog Index. Articles that match the English proficiency of our students were chosen, with consideration for the timeliness, interest, and practicality of the articles, so as to stimulate students' learning interest and promote their motivation to actively explore and learn. They will compare and read articles on related topics in the textbook and complete the critical reading question training table for the required reading texts, as shown in **Figure 2**.

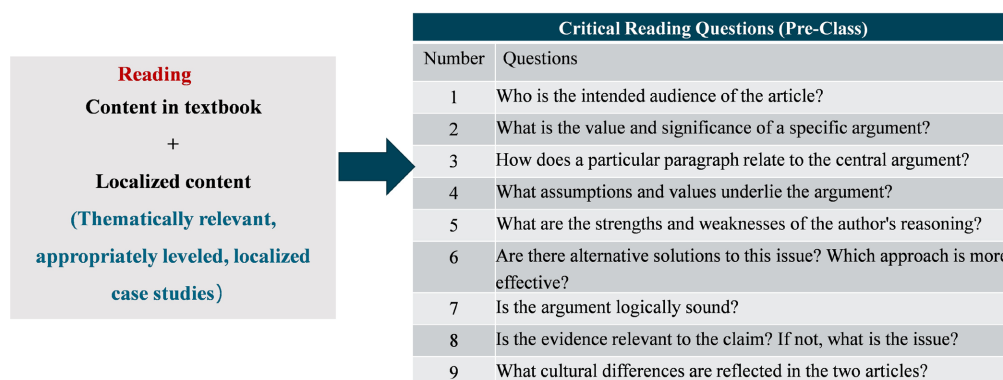


Figure 2. Integrated reading of textbook content and localized content.

The selection of localized content must demonstrate strong thematic congruence with the core curriculum. A pertinent example involves augmenting a module on positive life construction (“You Can Make Your Life a Bed of Roses”) with a report detailing post-disaster psychological interventions during the Sichuan earthquake recovery. Guiding students to read from multiple perspectives and across cultures and to understand relevant content can enhance their language and knowledge input and improve their critical thinking skills. Because understanding text structure and the writer’s intentions are closely related to writing and critical thinking skills [40], this can invisibly strengthen their cross-cultural communication and critical thinking abilities.

4.2. Reconstructing Teaching Tasks

Based on the three dimensions of critical thinking, in-class and out-of-class exercises were adapted. The hierarchical critical thinking model (as shown in **Table 1**) mainly includes three basic dimensions: analysis, reasoning, and evaluation.

Text-based reading comprehension in teaching mainly focuses on paragraph division, correctness judgment, and conciseness. It mainly tests students’ ability to identify and understand information, but cannot effectively improve students’ critical thinking ability. Therefore, based on the sub-skills and standard requirements of critical thinking ability, some exercises and teaching tasks in the textbook

were reconstructed to integrate critical thinking strategies into students’ input (such as reading and listening) and output (such as writing, discussion, speech, and debate) activities (as shown in **Figure 3**).

Table 1. Scales of critical thinking skills [6].

The Meta-critical Thinking Skills (Self-regulating Ability)—The Higher Level		
The Critical Thinking Skills—The Lower Level		
Cognitive Component		Affective Component
Cognitive skills	The Standards	
<p>Analysis (Categorizing, identifying, comparing, elucidating, differentiating, explaining, etc.)</p> <p>Inference (Querying, hypothesizing, inferring, elaborating, argumentating, etc.)</p> <p>Evaluation (Assessing presuppositions, assumptions, arguments, evidence, conclusions, etc.)</p>	<p>Clarity (Clear and precise)</p> <p>Relevance (On-topic, with proportional emphasis and clear prioritization)</p> <p>Logic (Logical coherence and evidence-based reasoning)</p> <p>Depth (Broad and deep perspective)</p> <p>Flexibility (Swiftly shifting perspectives and skillfully alternating between different critical thinking skills)</p>	<p>Curiosity (Inquisitive, questioning, and eager to learn)</p> <p>Open-mindedness (Tolerant, respectful of differing opinions, and willing to revise one’s own inadequate views)</p> <p>Self-confidence (Trust in one’s own judgment and the courage to challenge authority)</p> <p>Integrity (Pursuit of truth and the upholding of justice)</p> <p>Perseverance (Determination, persistence, and tenacity)</p>

Textbook Exercise Formats	Restructured Exercise or Teaching Task	Critical Thinking Skills
Text Segmentation	Outline completion, Mind mapping	Identification, Analysis, Inference
Short Answer Questions	Evaluate viewpoints or writing techniques	Analysis, Interpretation, Evaluation
Paraphrasing & Elaboration	Discussions, Debates, Writing tasks	Analysis, Interpretation, Application, Creation

Figure 3. Reconstructing teaching tasks based on critical thinking skills.

By designing challenging and open-ended questions, teachers can guide students to delve into the text, uncovering hidden information and deeper meanings, and cultivating their analytical and evaluative abilities. Teachers also encourage students to apply their knowledge to solve practical problems and demonstrate their personal insights. Through input of language and professional knowledge, as well as output activities, teachers can guide students to gradually improve their abilities in comprehension, application, analysis, and evaluation, internalizing their knowledge through critical thinking strategies.

4.3. Reconstructing Teaching Modes

It is imperative to adjust the teaching model to empower critical thinking and implement the CLIL integrated business English teaching model. Based on Shorts (2002)’s language-content-task framework, through theme-driven textbook content learning and integrated reading of localized content, supplemented by teaching activities designed to enhance critical thinking skills, students’ information

repackaging and knowledge internalization processes are improved, allowing critical thinking strategies to continuously cycle through the input-output process [7]. The specific teaching process is as **Figure 4**:

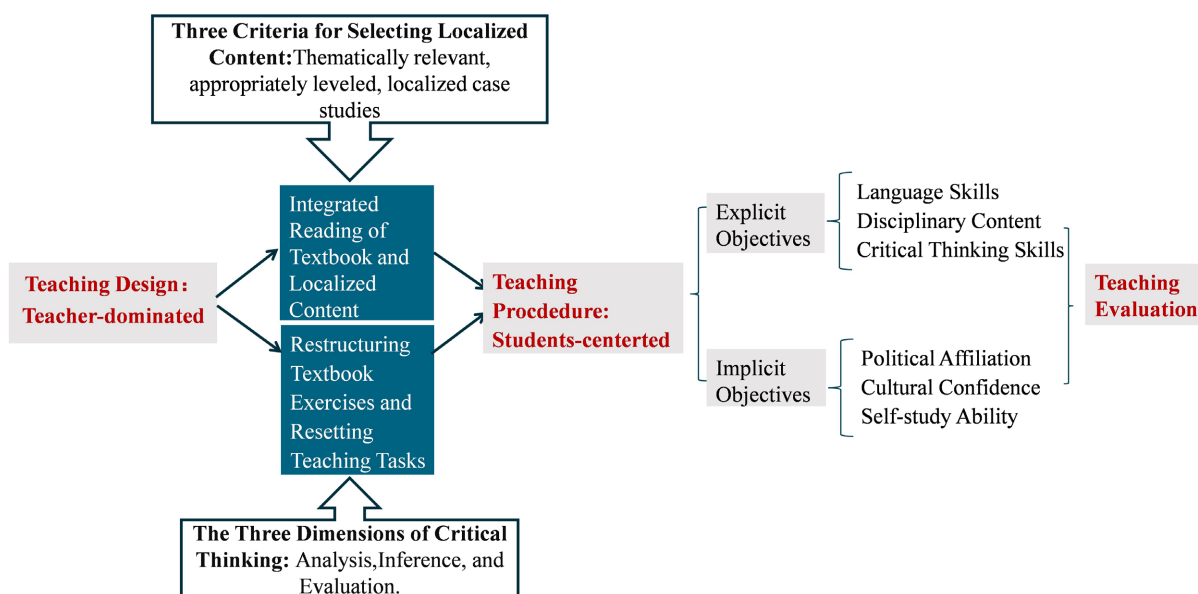


Figure 4. CLIL teaching model empowered by critical thinking.

Localized content is supplemented in a unit-themed manner to achieve integrated reading of textbook content and localized content, and a critical reading training question sheet is completed. Critical reading is carried out through specific critical thinking activities in class, and cultural differences in materials are compared and evaluated. After class, students present what they have learned in the form of reflection reports, learning archives, and public account sharing. In this teaching model, critical thinking strategies guide students to construct subject content knowledge, train language skills, and improve critical thinking ability through the real context of the classroom, active interactive communication, and diverse learning outcomes. To a certain extent, it improves students' self-study ability and enhances their political identity and cultural confidence.

4.4. Optimizing Assessment Forms

It is imperative to improve the curriculum evaluation system, focusing on language, subject content, and critical thinking skills. Students' learning outcomes should be assessed through a variety of methods, with the results factored into formative assessment. Formative assessment should be based on specific teaching activities, such as flexible scoring based on the completion of critical thinking activities, discussions, presentations, and reflections, both in and out of class. It should also assess students' mastery of content and knowledge, integrating content and language through a "point, line, and surface" approach. "Points" refer to individual assessments of subject knowledge points; "lines" refer to the presenta-

tion and assessment of the interconnectedness of several knowledge points; and “surfaces” refer to the application and assessment of knowledge points. “Points” are foundational, focusing on understanding and memorizing knowledge points; “lines” extend knowledge, emphasizing the interpretation of knowledge; and “surfaces” integrate knowledge and language for comprehensive assessment. For example, presenting one argument followed by supporting examples; whereas the “plane” represents the interweaving of multiple logical threads, for instance, presenting both supporting and opposing arguments or building up ideas layer by layer.

Students complete the critical reading practice question sheets before class, participate in the teaching activities during class, and complete the post-class learning outcomes presentations after class, all of which should be included in process assessments. In addition, students, based on a period of study, create WeChat public accounts as a class. They explain business knowledge in text, audio, and video formats, and design activities related to the topic to develop critical thinking skills. This helps students grow from “material users” to “material analysts” and even “material writers”. This helps students strengthen their cross-cultural abilities and multicultural tolerance in the process of improving knowledge internalization.

5. Conclusions

This study addresses the current challenges of teaching the “Comprehensive Business English” course. Using the concept of CLIL as a framework, and integrating Wen *et al.* (2009)’s three-tier model of critical thinking with Short (2002)’s Language-Content-Task (LCT) framework, the current study has developed a CLIL teaching model empowered by critical thinking strategies [6] [7]. This model aims to achieve the coordinated development of language proficiency, subject content, and critical thinking skills. This model forms a practical teaching implementation plan by restructuring teaching content, reconstructing teaching tasks, adjusting the teaching process, and optimizing the evaluation system.

Research has shown that this model offers three significant advantages: First, at the instructional level, by introducing localized and appropriately challenging supplementary reading materials, it effectively reduces the cognitive load of the original textbook text, enhancing student motivation and classroom engagement. Second, at the ability-building level, the systematic design of critical thinking tasks (such as comparative analysis, evaluative writing, and cross-cultural reflection) significantly promotes the development of students’ higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, reasoning, and evaluation, while also strengthening their awareness and confidence in cross-cultural communication. Third, at the educational ecosystem level, the emphasis on student-centered and autonomous learning and the diverse presentation of learning outcomes (such as creating public accounts, reflective reports, and case studies) stimulates students’ learning agency and creativity.

Theoretically, this study organically integrates the critical thinking dimension

into the traditional content-language binary structure of CLIL, proposing a pedagogical concept of “content-language-critical thinking”. This expands the theoretical scope of CLIL’s localized application and offers a new perspective for the reform of foreign language curriculum teaching. Furthermore, the proposed “point-line-surface” multidimensional evaluation system and critical thinking quality assessment criteria also provide methodological support for the effectiveness evaluation of integrated courses.

However, this study still has certain limitations. The evaluation of critical thinking ability has not yet been fully objectively quantified and relies heavily on qualitative analysis and formative assessment. Its long-term retention and transfer effects require further verification. Furthermore, this model entails a high level of teacher competency in areas including subject knowledge, critical thinking facilitation, and CLIL instructional design, which can be cultivated through engaging with critical reading literature, attending relevant workshops, and critically examining activities in speculative teaching materials. Its large-scale implementation requires systematic teacher development support.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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