

# Study on Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability in College English Reading Course

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**Abstract:** *Critical thinking ability is one of the core competencies of college students. Cultivation of college students' critical thinking ability is the key to cultivation of their innovative talents. English reading is one of the important ways for college students to learn English language and get in touch with western ideas and cultures. Improving students' ability to understand and evaluate western culture through reading English is of great significance for the improvement of college students' critical reading ability. The cultivation of critical reading ability can be done from encouraging students in raising questions, optimizing teaching procedures and improving assessment methods.*

**Keywords:** *Critical thinking ability; Critical reading; College English teaching*

## 1. Introduction

Many scholars believe that creative thinking and critical thinking abilities are of great importance to cultivate innovative talents. That's why education in all countries emphasizes the cultivation of student' creative thinking and critical thinking abilities<sup>[1]</sup>. However, in the actual college English teaching in China, it is often seen that some students blindly accept the views from textbooks and foreign media, and regard the information as conclusive, trustworthy and objective facts. In addition, learners' critical reading ability will not improve with the accumulation of basic language knowledge<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, it is very necessary to cultivate college students' critical thinking ability consciously through college English teaching so as to cultivate their creative thinking ability.

## 2. Critical Thinking

The word "critical" in "critical thinking" has two Greek etymologies: "kriticos" (meaning "judgment" and "discernment") and "kriterion" (meaning "criterion"). Critical thinking is a thinking process in which individuals conduct self-adjustment, reflection and logical analysis on their behaviors or others' behaviors, so as to draw rational conclusions<sup>[3]</sup>. Critical thinking is a process of active thinking, because a truly creative self never passively accepts the stimuli from the environment and "accept" the ideas of others without any criticism<sup>[4]</sup>.

The critical thinking can be reflected in English reading course by the following aspects: students make personal judgments on the authenticity, accuracy and value of the materials they read through analysis, induction and summary, evaluate others' viewpoints, thinking modes and behaviors, and give exploratory answers to challenging questions. Critical thinking emphasizes reflection, logicity, discernment.

English reading is an important part of college English teaching because one can contact a wide range of topics and rich sentence structures through reading. However, there may be hidden ideologies which may directly or indirectly affect and control people's thinking and guide people's cognition and judgment. Therefore, through critical reading, students can better understand the theme and details conveyed by the reading materials, and promote students to develop their logical thinking and critical thinking abilities.

## 3. Current Situation of English Reading Teaching in China

With the deepening reform of higher education in China and upgrading of modern educational technology, the college English teaching has been undergoing a constant reform, and the teaching mode

of the course has experienced great changes, such as the emergence of MOOC(massive open online courses) and “Flipped Classroom”, the integration of teaching resources and “online + offline” teaching methods. However, there are still some problems in China’s college English teaching. Taking college English reading course as an example, teachers still focus on linguistic knowledge, that is, reading is regarded as a process in which readers accept the message of words and symbols through vision, make use of their vocabulary and grammar knowledge to decode and process those words and symbols by using their brains to understand the literal meaning of reading materials.

There are four levels of reading, namely literal, interpretive, critical, and creative reading. Literal level involves acquiring information that is directly stated. Interpretive level involves “reading between lines” of making inference. Critical level involves evaluating of written material. Creative level involves formulating and rethinking ideas<sup>[5]</sup>. Critical and creative reading are the advanced levels of understanding reading materials, which can cultivate students’ creativity and critical thinking ability. However, as what have been mentioned above, most college English reading teaching in China still stays at the first level, that is, the recognition of words, the understanding of syntactic structures and literal meaning of words, without really understanding the essence of reading. Teachers pay too much attention to the explanation of linguistic points which is sometimes completely divorced from the text content. In addition, this teaching method will adversely affect the understanding of integrity and logic of the whole English text, and students can only understand the superficial meaning conveyed by the reading materials, but they can’t understand and appreciate the language aesthetics and emotional attitude expressed by the authors, especially the internal logic and hidden meaning.

As can be seen from the analysis above, the current situation of college English reading teaching in China is not optimistic, and there are many problems that affect the improvement of college English teaching efficiency and are not conducive to the comprehensive development of college students’ English listening, speaking, reading and writing ability, let alone the improvement of their critical ability.

#### **4. Necessity of Critical Reading**

For one thing, advocacy of critical thinking ability and critical reading is the requirements of China’s college English. According “College English Teaching Guidelines” designated by the Ministry of Education of China in 2020, college students are required to be able to “fully understand” English newspaper articles and other English materials with familiar subjects and medium language difficulty, and to discern the facts and relevant details. “Critical reading” is a must if one has to “fully understand” the facts and details of a certain article. With the deepening of college English reform, teachers are required to strengthen students’ ability to use English, improve their ability to discern and process information and boost their analytical and problem-solving abilities. Guiding students to have critical reading enables them not only to gain more linguistic knowledge and improve their reading skills, but also to gradually form critical thinking ability. In this way, students can improve their comprehensive ability effectively, and grow into high-quality talents needed for the development of contemporary society.

For another, it is beneficial to students’ future growth and development. By critical reading, college students can improve their practical skills in using English and critical thinking ability both of which are helpful if they further their studies for pursuing Master’s or Doctor’s degrees or if they want to get promoted in their future careers or if they want to study abroad since English is the most widely used language across the globe, and is an important tool for international exchanges, scientific and cultural exchanges.

#### **5. Strategies for Developing Critical Thinking Ability in English Reading Course**

What is closely related to critical thinking ability is critical reading. Critical reading has two levels: the first one is reading in which the reader reacts critically to what he or she is reading, through relating the content of the reading material to personal standards, values, attitudes or beliefs, i.e. going beyond what is given in the text and critically evaluating the relevancy and value of what is read. The second one is a level of reading in which the reader seeks to identify the underlying ideology of a text, which is realized not so much by what the writer writes about but by how people, events and places are talked about. Critical reading focuses on the analysis of textual ideologies and cultural messages, and an understanding of the linguistic and discourse techniques with which texts represent social reality<sup>[6]</sup>.

However, critical reading is a challenge for China students. First, most Chinese students are used to accepting ideas from teachers or textbooks. Second, they are used to rote learning, and not good at

analysis and reasoning. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers cultivate students' critical thinking ability through reading course so as to promote the improvement of their creativity. Specifically, the following three aspects are suggested.

### ***5.1 Encouraging students In Raising Questions***

He (2000) believes that "questioning itself is a form of critical thinking". Critical thinking is a process of asking questions. Through asking different questions, one can gradually put forwards and expounds his own new ideas. Therefore, teachers should encourage students to ask questions instead of just raising questions and asking students answer them. Even if it is the teacher to raise questions, the questions raised should involve different levels.

Teachers should not only ask "yes" or "no" questions, but also ask more questions that students should give specific reasons. The questions are not only about linguistic levels such as words or sentence structures, but about the macro- and chapter-related questions.

Specifically, in actual teaching, teachers should not only help students solve language difficulties, but also guide students to pay attention to the "stories" behind the articles, such as the background of the author, events and opinions mentioned in the articles, and connect these macro historical situations, social and cultural environments with micro language symbols in texts to fully understand the whole articles.

For example, when reading English news reports, the following questions which can inspire students to think and discuss can be raised:

What are the facts and opinions mentioned in this English news report?

Where is the source of facts in this news report? Is the source reliable?

What is the author's positioning? Is there any evidence to support this positioning? Is the source of evidence credible? Is there any prejudice against someone or something?

Do you agree with the author's point of view and why?

Teachers can cultivate students' problem-oriented consciousness during the whole process of teaching. Specifically, teachers can cultivate students' problem-oriented consciousness from three aspects: before class, during class and after class. First of all, preview thinking questions are arranged before class, so that students can develop the habit of active thinking and autonomous inquiry. Teachers should be good at designing questions to encourage students in expressing their own ideas and having lively debates on various topics. Secondly, students should be given opportunities and learning atmosphere to give their comments. When students answer questions, teachers should be good listeners. As long as the answers are given, be it reasonable or not, students should be given encouragement, praise and feedback. After class, theme of the text can explored and questions related to real life can be raised, so that students can explore the practical significance behind the text. In this way, their critical thinking ability can be developed gradually.

In addition, students can also write some reading notes. They can be encouraged to write down the questions, and comments in their minds while reading an article. The discussion of thinking process is also very helpful to the cultivation of critical thinking. What should be discussed is not only the conclusion, but also why such a conclusion is reached.

### ***5.2 Optimizing Teaching Procedures***

It is very necessary to design a rational teaching procedure and guide students to read critically. Such teaching procedure is usually designed around three stages: before reading, during reading and after reading.

The main purpose of the pre-reading stage is to stimulate students' interest in reading, mobilize their existing knowledge and prepare for reading. Therefore, teachers can guide students to predict and think critically according to the title or subtitle. In the reading stage, students are mainly guided to grasp the gist and details conveyed through the context of the article. Some teaching-learning activities can be designed in this stage, for example, such as T or F questions and outline filling, so that students can understand the whole article through completing the activities. In this process, it is especially necessary to guide students to have an in-depth understanding, such as what is the moral implication or implied meaning contained in the article and how it connects or guides the real life, so that students can make a critical evaluation. In the post-reading stage, students should be encouraged to express their views and

opinions critically, and the theme of the text can be expounded, so that students can explore the moral implication and practical significance contained in the text or talk about their personal views in combination with their real life. The most important thing is to encourage students to read more, think actively, accumulate more knowledge through reading. During the whole teaching procedure, students should be encouraged to ask questions as mentioned in Section 5.1, so as to get rid of the psychological stereotype of obedience to authority, to teachers and to textbooks.

### 5.3 Improving assessment methods

With the reform of China's college English teaching, China's colleges and universities have correspondingly undergone reform of assessment methods. Therefore, many college students have changed from the simple final written examination to include students' attendance, classroom participation, homework, autonomous off-class learning and routine tests with different proportions all of which contribute to the final score. In this way, the evaluation of students' performance depends on the learning process, not the cramming for the final exam. Only in this way can students be strict with themselves in their learning process. Then, the design of assessment should also pay attention to evaluate students' learning skills and thinking ability. Finally, tasks such as class presentation, reading notes as mentioned in Section 5.1, investigation report should also be encouraged to be included as parts of assessed targets since it is of great importance to cultivate students' critical thinking ability.

## 6. Conclusion

This study discusses the necessity of critical thinking ability for English reading and how to cultivate students' critical reading so as to improve their creative ability. Through the analysis of the current situation of college English reading teaching in China, this study proposes that the cultivation of critical reading can be improved through encouraging students in raising questions, optimizing teaching procedures and improving assessment methods. Methods of cultivating critical thinking ability need to be further explored, and more scholars are expected to study this field and make more contributions.

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