

Research on Strategies for Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Skills in English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: Under the core literacy education orientation of the new curriculum standards, English reading teaching is no longer merely about imparting language knowledge; instead, it has taken the cultivation of critical thinking skills as one of its core teaching goals. Currently, there is a phenomenon in primary and secondary school English reading teaching that emphasizes text interpretation but neglects thinking training. The phenomenon of students reading passively and thinking superficially is quite common, and the development of critical analysis and logical reasoning skills is restricted. Based on the core characteristics of English reading teaching and the laws of students' thinking development, this paper analyzes the problems existing in the cultivation of critical thinking skills in teaching, and proposes corresponding cultivation strategies from four aspects: classroom questioning, text exploration, activity design, and evaluation system, in order to stimulate students' deep reading thinking and promote the comprehensive implementation of students' English core literacy.

Keywords: English reading teaching; Critical thinking skills; Core literacy; Teaching strategies; Deep reading

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1. Introduction

With the continuous deepening of the English curriculum reform in basic education, the core literacy concept has permeated into English teaching in primary and secondary schools. Critical thinking ability is an important component of thinking quality and is the key guarantee for the improvement of students' comprehensive English abilities. English reading is the main way of language input and thinking training, which has the dual functions of consolidating language foundation and cultivating thinking ability. Currently, most English classrooms still rely mainly on exam-oriented teaching, with fixed teaching models and a lack of thinking training, resulting in students' reading remaining at the superficial level of translation and memorization, lacking the abilities of independent judgment, dialectical analysis, and innovative thinking.

Therefore, based on the actual situation of English reading teaching, exploring scientific and feasible strategies for cultivating critical thinking ability has important practical significance for optimizing classroom teaching and promoting students' long-term development.

2. Definition and theoretical basis of related concepts

2.1. Core connotation of critical thinking ability

Critical thinking ability, also known as critical thinking, is the comprehensive thinking ability of an individual when facing information, independently thinking, logically analyzing, dialectically judging, and rationally reflecting, screening, interpreting, evaluating, and reconstructing information. It mainly includes five aspects: analysis, reasoning, judgment, reflection, and innovation. Critical thinking ability in the English subject refers to the ability of students, in the reading process, to break through the surface information of the text, independently sort out the logical structure of the text, distinguish the correctness of viewpoints, explore the deep connotations, question the existing expressions, and form individualized cognition. It is a high-level thinking ability different from shallow mechanical reading. Unlike conventional thinking, critical thinking ability has four characteristics: independence, logic, criticism, and innovation. Independence means that students do not rely on the teacher's standard answers to interpret the text and can independently interpret the text; logic requires that students use the evidence of the text as the basis to infer viewpoints, with a clear and organized thinking; criticism is to dare to question the details of the text and the author's viewpoints, not blindly following the existing understanding; innovation is based on the interpretation of the text to generate new thinking and expression. The cultivation of critical thinking ability in English reading teaching is essentially to guide students to transform from "understanding the text" to "reading through the text, understanding the logic, and understanding the value"^[1-2].

2.2. The compatibility of English reading teaching and critical thinking ability

English reading is a process of decoding language symbols, processing information, and constructing thoughts. It inherently contains numerous opportunities for thinking training and is in harmony with the cultivation of critical thinking ability. English texts cover a wide range of topics, including narrative, argumentative, expository, and applied texts, as well as various aspects of culture, society, life, and science, providing students with rich materials for multi-angle and deep-level thinking. The essence of reading is not simply language translation and vocabulary memorization, but a process that involves information extraction, logical organization, content interpretation, and value judgment, which has a natural compatibility with the cultivation of critical thinking ability. At the same time, critical thinking ability is the main support for improving the quality of English reading. Students with strong critical thinking ability can quickly clarify the structure of the text and accurately grasp the author's writing intention, dialectically analyze the differences in text viewpoints, and effectively avoid shallow reading and one-sided interpretation. Conversely, students lacking critical thinking ability only understand words and phrases and cannot explore the deep value of the text or achieve long-term improvement in reading ability. The two promote and assist each other, jointly promoting the improvement of students' core literacy in the English subject^[3].

2.3. Theoretical support

This article mainly relies on the constructivist learning theory and the Bloom cognitive goal classification

theory. These two theories provide solid theoretical support for integrating critical thinking ability into English reading teaching. The constructivist learning theory holds that learning is not a passive process of accepting knowledge, but a process in which learners, based on their existing knowledge and cognitive reserves, actively process information, construct knowledge, and generate new cognitive systems. This theory completely overturns the traditional transmission-style teaching logic and values the students' subjectivity. In English reading teaching, teachers cannot adopt a one-way transmission method and reduce the direct output of standard answers. They should guide students to actively explore the text context, sort out logical connections, and independently think and analyze, gradually cultivating independent thinking, bold questioning, and critical thinking in the process of actively constructing knowledge. The Bloom cognitive goal classification theory divides cognitive levels from low to high into memory, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation, which are clearly structured and in line with the development laws of students' thinking. Among them, analysis, evaluation, and creation belong to high-order cognitive categories and are highly compatible with the core requirements of critical thinking ability, serving as an important theoretical basis for cultivating students' critical, logical, and innovative thinking. Currently, most English reading teaching only focuses on low-order cognitive goals such as memory and understanding, with a focus on word recognition and text translation, neglecting higher-order thinking training, resulting in the lagging development of students' critical thinking ability. Optimizing reading teaching based on this theory can accurately identify the target points for cultivating critical thinking ability and design higher-order reading tasks in a targeted manner, enabling students' cognitive thinking to shift from shallow passive memorization to deep active exploration ^[4].

3. Current situation and problems of cultivating students' critical thinking ability in English reading teaching

3.1. Fixed teaching concepts and insufficient focus on thinking cultivation

Influenced by the traditional exam-oriented education concept, current English reading teaching in primary and secondary schools still has a tendency to focus on scores and neglect thinking cultivation. Most teachers focus their teaching goals on vocabulary explanations, grammar analysis, sentence translations, and exercise solutions, taking students' ability to understand the text and answer questions as the core teaching standards, neglecting the cultivation of core competencies such as critical thinking and thinking quality. In the teaching process, teachers overly emphasize their own dominance, firmly grasping the direction of text interpretation in their own hands, directly telling students the main ideas, paragraph meanings, core viewpoints, and other standard answers, depriving students of the opportunity to think independently and autonomously. The long-term teaching concept has led students to develop a passive reading mindset, accustomed to being interpreted by teachers, lacking the awareness of active exploration, bold questioning, and dialectical thinking. Students only focus on the surface language information of the text, cannot sort out the logic of the text, cannot distinguish the merits and demerits of viewpoints, cannot explore cultural connotations, ultimately resulting in the problem of "being able to do exercises but not reading, understanding language but lacking thinking," and the development of critical thinking ability has been in a stagnant state for a long time ^[5].

3.2. Shallow classroom questions and lack of higher-order thinking guidance

Classroom questioning is the main way to stimulate students' thinking and cultivate critical thinking ability.

However, current English reading classroom questioning has the problems of shallowness and singularity. The majority of teachers' classroom questioning is mainly composed of low-order cognitive questions such as "What is the meaning of the word?", "How to translate the sentence?", "What content does the text tell?" The answers are fixed and do not require in-depth thinking, and can only test students' memory and basic understanding ability. However, the proportion of higher-order thinking questions such as text logic, author attitude, rationality of viewpoints, text loopholes, and multiple interpretations is very low. Classroom questioning lacks hierarchy and inspiration. Most teachers adopt the fixed form of "one question, one answer." After asking the question, they do not give students enough time to think, and for students' individualized answers and questioning of viewpoints, there is no targeted guidance and expansion, which cannot enable students to conduct in-depth reasoning and dialectical analysis. The shallow questioning system causes a serious lack of thinking training in the classroom and cannot cultivate students' critical thinking ability well ^[6].

3.3. One-sided text interpretation and ignoring deep exploration and multilateral dialectics

Text is the main carrier of reading teaching and critical thinking training. However, current English reading teaching's text interpretation has the phenomenon of one-sidedness and superficiality. On the one hand, teachers overly rely on the standard answers provided in textbooks and teaching aids when interpreting texts, resulting in a single perspective and focusing only on the core themes and basic knowledge points of the text. They ignore the deeper aspects such as the logical structure, writing techniques, emotional attitudes, and cultural connotations of the text, thus failing to provide students with materials for critical thinking. On the other hand, there is a lack of guidance for multiple interpretations in teaching, and teachers assume that the text's viewpoints are absolutely correct, not encouraging students to question the details of the text, to dialectically view the author's viewpoints, or to expand their thinking based on real-life situations. Teachers do not guide students to analyze the positive and negative viewpoints in argumentative texts, nor do they encourage them to verify the logical coherence of the arguments in opinion-based texts. The one-sided and rigid interpretation mode of the text limits the breadth and depth of students' thinking and fails to effectively cultivate their ability to think critically and dialectically.

3.4. The teaching mode is monotonous, and critical thinking training activities are lacking

Most English reading classes currently adopt a single and rigid mode of teacher explanation, student memorization, and exercise training. There is a lack of targeted critical thinking training activities. Classroom teaching is mainly a one-way output from the teacher, with students passively accepting knowledge. The proportion of autonomous exploration, cooperative analysis, and in-depth discussion in the classroom is very low. The majority of regular classroom activities are basic forms such as reading aloud, recitation, filling in, and multiple-choice training, lacking high-level thinking activities such as debate, text analysis, questioning of viewpoints, rewriting and creation, and case analysis. The expansion of extracurricular reading is insufficient, and students' reading materials are limited to short texts in the textbook and exam practice texts. Their reading horizons are narrow, and they lack opportunities for comparative reading of diverse texts and in-depth exploration of themes. The monotonous teaching mode and the lack of critical thinking activities have fragmented and formalized students' thinking training, preventing the formation of a systematic critical

thinking system, and making it difficult for students' critical thinking ability to steadily improve ^[7].

3.5. The evaluation system is incomplete, and the assessment of critical thinking ability is absent

Teaching evaluation is an important means to guide teaching direction and promote ability cultivation. However, the current English reading teaching evaluation system has obvious deficiencies, and the assessment of critical thinking ability is seriously lacking. In terms of evaluation content, the current evaluation mainly focuses on students' mastery of language knowledge, the accuracy of exercise answers, and the accuracy of text translation, without including the core indicators of critical thinking ability such as the logicity of thinking, the uniqueness of viewpoints, the rationality of analysis, and the innovation of questioning in the evaluation system. In terms of evaluation methods, final written tests dominate, and process-based evaluation is lacking. Teachers cannot promptly understand the display of students' thinking during the reading process and cannot provide targeted thinking guidance. At the same time, the evaluation standards are rigid and singular, using standard answers as the sole criterion, negating students' individualized interpretation and innovative thinking, suppressing students' critical thinking enthusiasm, and hindering the long-term cultivation of students' critical thinking ability.

4. Optimization strategies for cultivating students' critical thinking ability in English reading teaching

4.1. Update teaching concepts and establish the goal of cultivating critical thinking

To cultivate students' critical thinking ability, teachers must update their teaching concepts and break away from the mindset of exam-oriented teaching. They should establish a teaching concept that emphasizes both language learning and thinking cultivation. Teachers should deeply study the core requirements of the new curriculum standards and clearly identify the core position of critical thinking ability in English reading teaching. They should abandon the traditional teaching cognition that emphasizes knowledge and neglects thinking, and incorporate the cultivation of critical thinking ability throughout the entire reading teaching process. In the teaching design stage, teachers should determine the differentiated critical thinking teaching goals based on the text theme and students' cognitive levels. For lower-grade students, the focus is on cultivating independent thinking, information analysis, and simple reasoning abilities, while for higher-grade students, it is on cultivating logical analysis, dialectical judgment, and innovative questioning abilities. At the same time, educators should fully respect the students' dominant position in the classroom, reduce one-way knowledge transmission, and leave sufficient space for independent reading, independent thinking, and bold questioning, so that students can break free from the constraints of standard answers and form personalized text cognition, laying a foundation for the cultivation of critical thinking skills ^[8].

4.2. Optimize classroom questioning and build a higher-order thinking questioning system

Classroom questioning is a means to stimulate critical thinking. Teachers should break away from the shallow questioning mode and establish a hierarchical, suggestive, and critical questioning system. By relying on high-quality questions, students can conduct in-depth thinking. First, design progressive questions based on Bloom's cognitive goal theory, combining basic questions and higher-order questions. Basic

questions focus on the surface information of the text, enabling students to organize the content of the text; higher-order questions target the logic, viewpoints, attitudes, value connotations, and details of the text, prompting students to engage in critical thinking activities such as analysis, evaluation, and reasoning. Secondly, strengthen suggestive questioning and design more open-ended, exploratory, and controversial questions, discarding closed questions with fixed answers. For argumentative texts, questions such as “Is the author’s core argument rigorous?” and “Is the evidence sufficient to support the viewpoint?” can be asked. For narrative texts, questions that can be asked include: “Was the protagonist’s behavior reasonable? What would be the outcome if it were done in another way?” At the same time, optimize the questioning process, give students sufficient time to think, ask follow-up questions to expand on their answers, guide students to deeply analyze the problems step by step, and gradually cultivate their logical reasoning ability^[9].

4.3. Deepen the connotation of the text and conduct multi-dimensional in-depth interpretation teaching

The text is the main carrier for critical thinking training. Teachers should break through the single and standardized interpretation mode of the text, guide students to explore the connotation of the text, and carry out multi-angle, deep-level, and diversified interpretations to comprehensively cultivate critical thinking skills. Firstly, start from the text structure, guide students to independently analyze the logical structure, paragraph relationships, and writing ideas of the text, cultivate students’ logical thinking ability, and enable them to understand the argumentation logic and narrative framework through the process of organizing the framework. Secondly, conduct in-depth interpretation of the text, go beyond the superficial interpretation of word translation and main idea summary, guide students to explore the emotional attitude, cultural connotation, and writing intention of the text, compare and analyze the cultural differences between China and the West, and distinguish the values conveyed by the text. At the same time, encourage students to question the text, explore the loopholes in the text’s expression, the one-sidedness of viewpoints, and the insufficiency of evidence, and not blindly accept the interpretations of the textbook and authorities. Additionally, carry out multi-text comparison interpretation, select texts with the same theme but different positions and styles for comparative reading, guide students to distinguish differences in viewpoints, evaluate the quality of the content, and improve dialectical critical thinking ability.

4.4. Innovate teaching models and design targeted critical thinking training activities

Rich classroom activities are the main way to implement the cultivation of critical thinking skills. Teachers should innovate teaching models, abandon the single explanation mode, and design diversified and high-level critical thinking training classroom activities, allowing students to exercise critical thinking skills in practice. Firstly, carry out group debate activities, select controversial viewpoints or topics in the text as the debate themes, organize students to form groups for debate, and improve students’ logical reasoning, dialectical analysis, and critical expression abilities in the process of collecting evidence, logical expression, and positive and negative debate. Secondly, carry out text analysis and rewriting activities, guide students to independently evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the text after reading, judge the rationality of the author’s viewpoints, and supplement and rewrite the text, reconstruct the viewpoints, and cultivate innovative critical thinking ability. Thirdly, carry out theme exploration activities; based on the core theme of the text, guide students to expand and explore through connections with real-life situations and social phenomena,

independently collect materials, organize viewpoints, form personal cognition, break through the limitations of the text, and broaden the breadth of thinking. At the same time, expand extracurricular reading resources, incorporate current affairs news, English essays, and science popularization articles, etc., and use group reading and in-depth exploration to achieve regular training of critical thinking skills^[10].

4.5. Improve the evaluation system and strengthen the process evaluation of critical thinking ability

A scientific and complete evaluation system is an important guarantee for the cultivation of critical thinking skills. It is necessary to restructure the English reading teaching evaluation system, incorporate critical thinking ability into the core evaluation category, and achieve the transformation from “knowledge evaluation” to “thinking evaluation.” In terms of evaluation content, add evaluation indicators of critical thinking ability, mainly examining students’ depth of text interpretation, logical analysis ability, viewpoint judgment ability, questioning and innovative consciousness, and multi-level thinking ability, taking into account both knowledge mastery and thinking development. In terms of evaluation methods, create a multi-dimensional evaluation system that integrates process evaluation and final evaluation. Process evaluation focuses on the thinking, questioning, discussion, and expression shown by students during the reading process, and records the development and changes of students’ thinking in real time; final evaluation adds oral analysis, viewpoint presentation, and text exploration assessment forms on the basis of written tests. At the same time, improve the evaluation standards, abandon the sole criterion of standard answers, respect students’ individualized and reasonable interpretations, encourage innovative thinking, and give positive evaluations to students’ unique insights, rigorous logic, and reasonable questioning, fully mobilizing students’ enthusiasm for critical thinking.

5. Teaching practice notes

In English reading teaching, to cultivate students’ critical thinking skills, one should follow the laws of students’ cognitive development, grasp the teaching boundaries, avoid teaching pitfalls, and ensure that the critical thinking training is carried out scientifically, efficiently, and on a regular basis. First, adhere to the principle of gradual progress. The cultivation of critical thinking skills is a long-term and progressive process; one should not rush for success or blindly raise the difficulty level of the training. Teachers should precisely align with the cognitive characteristics and thinking development levels of students in different grades of primary, junior high, and senior high schools, and design gradient thinking training tasks that progress from simple to complex and layer by layer. Starting from basic text information analysis and paragraph logical organization, gradually transitioning to viewpoint dialectical evaluation, questioning text loopholes, and innovative thinking reconstruction, which fully conforms to the rhythm of students’ thinking growth and avoids exceeding their cognitive load. Secondly, balance the relationship between language teaching and thinking cultivation. One should not emphasize critical thinking training alone while neglecting the accumulation of language knowledge, nor should one adhere to traditional language teaching and weaken the cultivation of thinking. Instead, it should be based on language learning and aim at cultivating critical thinking as the core goal, achieving the two-way improvement of language application ability and critical thinking literacy. Finally, adhere to individualized teaching and respect students’ individual thinking

differences. Implement teaching training at different levels. For students with weak thinking abilities, focus on basic thinking training to lay a solid foundation for critical thinking; for students with strong thinking abilities, design advanced exploration, viewpoint innovation, and other expansion tasks, so that students at different levels can all obtain suitable growth space and steadily improve their critical thinking abilities. Secondly, balance the relationship between language teaching and thinking cultivation. One should not overly emphasize critical thinking training while neglecting the accumulation of language knowledge; instead, it should be based on language learning and aim at promoting the common development of language ability and critical thinking ability. Finally, adhere to individualized teaching and respect students' thinking differences. For students with weak thinking abilities, focus on basic critical thinking training; for students with strong thinking abilities, design advanced exploration tasks. This allows students at different levels to improve their critical thinking abilities on the basis of their original levels.

6. Conclusion

Critical thinking ability is an important component of students' core English literacy and a key thinking skill for their lifelong development. Cultivating critical thinking ability in English reading teaching is an inevitable requirement for deepening English teaching reform and implementing the educational goal of fostering moral character. This article analyzes the existing problems in the cultivation of critical thinking in current English reading teaching, combines relevant theoretical foundations, and proposes optimization strategies from five aspects: teaching philosophy, classroom questioning, text interpretation, activity design, and teaching evaluation. In future teaching, educators will continue to base it on classroom teaching practice, continuously improve the training mode of critical thinking, refine teaching strategies, and make the cultivation of critical thinking regular and systematic, promoting the dual improvement of students' language ability and thinking quality.

Disclosure statement

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