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Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Ability in College English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: This paper focuses on cultivating students' critical thinking ability in college English reading teaching. It begins by outlining the connotation of critical thinking ability and its significance in reading teaching, then analyzes core issues and their causes, such as deviations in educational philosophy, imperfections in the teaching system, and limitations in teacher competence. Subsequently, a cultivation system is constructed, clarifying principles and objectives, the overall framework, and phased pathways. Finally, specific implementation strategies are proposed, covering the optimization of teaching content, methodological innovation, evaluation reform, and teacher and resource support, providing theoretical and practical references for enhancing students' critical thinking ability.

Keywords: College English reading teaching; critical thinking ability; cultivation research

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the internationalization of higher education and the diversification of talent cultivation, the critical thinking ability of university students has garnered significant attention. College English reading, as a core channel for language input, increasingly demonstrates its value in cultivating critical thinking ability. Traditional reading teaching emphasizes the transmission of linguistic knowledge while neglecting the development of critical thinking. Currently, how to effectively cultivate students' critical thinking ability within college English reading teaching has become key to enhancing students' cross-cultural communication and problem-solving skills. Research on this topic holds significant practical importance and urgency.

1. An Overview of Critical Thinking in College English Reading Teaching

Critical thinking, synonymous with higher-order cognitive skills, refers to an individual's ability to analyze, evaluate, reason, and reconstruct information during the cognitive process. Its core elements encompass logical analysis, questioning and reflection, and argument evaluation. Within the context of college English reading teaching, critical thinking is not an abstract entity independent of language proficiency, but rather a comprehensive skill deeply integrated with vocabulary comprehension, discourse analysis, and cultural cognition. Traditional reading teaching often focuses predominantly on the transmission of linguistic

knowledge, positioning students as "information recipients." In contrast, cultivating critical thinking emphasizes guiding students to become "active inquirers." Through processes such as interpreting the main ideas of texts, discerning the author's stance, verifying argument logic, and connecting to real-world contexts, students achieve a transition from "understanding the words" to "understanding the logic" and "understanding the underlying meaning" [1]. Currently, the internationalization of higher education and the diversification of talent cultivation impose higher demands on the critical thinking abilities of university students. College English reading, serving as a core channel for language input, increasingly highlights its value in fostering critical thinking, making it a key vehicle for enhancing students' core literacy in cross-cultural communication and problem-solving skills.

2. Core Issues and Cause Analysis in Cultivating Critical Thinking in College English Reading Teaching

2.1 Deviations in Educational Philosophy

Deviation in educational philosophy is the root cause restricting the cultivation of critical thinking, manifesting as an imbalance in teaching orientation dominated by the "instrumental view of language." Universities often treat college English reading merely as a language skills training course, aiming primarily at the mastery of basics like vocabulary and grammar and the improvement of reading speed, while neglecting the implicit cultivation of critical thinking. Teachers, guided by "standard answers," weaken the exploration of textual logic and similar aspects. In terms of causes, the lingering influence of exam-oriented education and the orientation towards standardized testing have made teaching utilitarian, marginalizing critical thinking. Furthermore, some educators lack sufficient understanding of the connection between language teaching and critical thinking development, treating them as separate entities. They fail to recognize the synchronicity of language decoding and logical reasoning in reading, leading to a common teaching practice that emphasizes knowledge transmission over intellectual inspiration.

2.2 Imperfections in the Teaching System

Imperfections in the teaching system are reflected in the lack of systematicity in curriculum design, content selection, and the linkage of teaching stages. In terms of curriculum modules, textbooks are mostly structured around "thematic units," lacking specialized sections for critical thinking training and progressive design. Content selection suffers from a "dual imbalance": limited variety in text types, with a low proportion of argumentative essays, etc.; and limited cultural perspectives, with few texts from local cultures. Regarding the linkage of stages, there is a lack of critical thinking-oriented interconnected design for pre-class, in-class, and after-class activities, failing to form a closed-loop training system. Additionally, the objectives for cultivating critical thinking across different grade levels in reading courses lack progression. The content repetition rate between lower and upper grades is high, making it difficult to match the stage-specific needs of students' cognitive development.

2.3 Limitations in Teacher Competence

Limitations in teacher competence represent a critical bottleneck for the practical implementation of critical thinking cultivation, manifesting as dual deficiencies in both professional and teaching abilities. Professionally, some teachers lack adequate theoretical knowledge of critical thinking, have vague understandings of concepts like logical reasoning, and struggle to identify opportunities for critical thinking training and design questions that guide thinking. In terms of teaching ability, the "cramming" method dominates, with a lack of techniques to stimulate student thinking. When faced with student challenges, teachers often resort to "standard answers." Contributing factors include the scarcity of training provided by universities for English teachers specifically targeting the cultivation of critical thinking. Heavy research and teaching workloads leave teachers with insufficient time to develop practical resources like critical teaching cases, resulting in a teaching workforce whose competence in critical thinking instruction struggles to meet teaching demands [2].

3. Cultivating the Critical Thinking Ability System in College English Reading Teaching

3.1 System Construction Principles and Objectives

The system construction must adhere to four core

principles to ensure scientific rigor and practical applicability.

(1) Principle of Relevance: Persist in the coordinated cultivation of language ability and critical thinking ability. Integrate critical thinking training into language teaching components such as vocabulary interpretation and discourse analysis to achieve simultaneous improvement in both.

(2) Principle of Gradation: Design a critical thinking training path from lower-order to higher-order skills based on students' cognitive development patterns, aligning with the teaching needs of different grades.

(3) Principle of Student-Centeredness: Highlight students' primary role in inquiry. Stimulate active thinking through problem-driven approaches, task-oriented guidance, and other methods.

(4) Principle of Systematicity: Integrate multi-dimensional elements including curriculum, teaching staff, resources, and evaluation to form a closed-loop cultivation system.

The cultivation objectives are divided into three levels. The basic objective is to enable students to master core critical thinking skills such as logical analysis, questioning, and reflection, allowing them to identify argument structures and logical fallacies within texts. The intermediate objective is to cultivate students' cross-cultural critical thinking ability, enabling them to evaluate textual viewpoints considering both Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds. The advanced objective is to shape students' critical thinking disposition, fostering rigorous and pragmatic thinking habits and an innovative mindset, ultimately achieving the leap from "learning to read" to "learning to think through reading."

3.2 Overall Framework of the Cultivation System

The overall framework of the cultivation system centers on a core structure of "Three-Dimensional Linkage and Four-in-One Integration" to achieve synergistic effects from multiple elements. "Three-Dimensional Linkage" refers to the curriculum system as the core, supported by the teaching staff system, and guaranteed by the resource system, with the three forming a dynamic relationship of mutual promotion: the curriculum system defines the content and pathways for critical thinking cultivation, the teaching staff system provides implementation support, and the resource system supplies teaching materials and technical support. "Four-in-One Integration" encompasses four major components: curriculum modules, teaching methods, evaluation mechanisms, and support mechanisms. The curriculum modules consist of three sub-modules—basic reading, critical reading, and intercultural reading—corresponding respectively to foundational training, targeted enhancement, and integrative application of critical thinking skills. The instructional methods incorporate a variety of approaches such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and collaborative inquiry to reinforce cognitive engagement and thinking guidance. The evaluation mechanism establishes a diversified system that combines both process- and outcome-based assessment, balancing the evaluation of knowledge acquisition and thinking competencies. The support mechanism includes faculty development, resource construction, and instructional management to ensure effective implementation.The framework operates through a closed loop of "goal guidance – content support – method implementation – evaluation feedback – support reinforcement," ensuring that critical thinking cultivation permeates the entire process of reading teaching.

3.3 Phased Cultivation Pathway for Critical Thinking Ability

The phased cultivation pathway is designed according to the cognitive development characteristics of university students, structured into three stages: "Foundational Initiation – Specialized Enhancement – Comprehensive Application."

The first stage (Year 1) functions as the foundational initiation period, with the core goal of cultivating critical-thinking awareness. Key instructional pathways include selecting short texts that combine linguistic features with critical-thinking potential, and guiding students to develop an initial sense of argumentative logic through basic tasks such as "marking argumentative elements" and "distinguishing facts from opinions." A teaching model of "teacher guidance + group discussion" is adopted, with open-ended questions designed around textual details—for example, "Are the author’s arguments adequate?"—to stimulate an awareness of inquiry.

The second stage (First Semester of Year 2) serves

as the phase of targeted enhancement, focusing on the training of critical-thinking skills. Instructional pathways include introducing more complex genres such as argumentative essays and commentaries, and conducting specialized training such as "deconstructing argumentative structures" and "analyzing logical fallacies." Inquiry projects are designed in alignment with course themes—for instance, "comparing textual representations of environmental protection concepts in China and the West"—to foster cross-cultural critical thinking. A model of "student-led presentations + peer and teacher evaluation" is implemented to encourage students to articulate independent viewpoints and engage with challenges from others.

The third stage (Second Semester of Year 2) emphasizes comprehensive application and the transfer of critical-thinking skills. Through tasks embedded in capstone projects such as literature reviews, as well as problem analysis in workplace-oriented English reading contexts, this stage aligns critical-thinking development with practical needs.

4. Specific Implementation Strategies for Cultivating Critical Thinking in College English Reading Teaching

4.1 Optimization of Teaching Content: Excavating Critical Thinking Materials

The core of optimizing teaching content is to construct a "diverse and multi-dimensional" system of critical thinking materials, achieving precise alignment between material selection and critical thinking training.

First, broaden the range of genres, increasing the proportion of texts with strong critical thinking elements such as argumentative essays, speeches, and academic commentaries. Select materials containing clear arguments, multi-dimensional evidence, and complex reasoning processes, such as environmental commentaries from The New York Times or transcripts of TED Talks, to provide vehicles for critical thinking training.

Second, strengthen the development of cultural comparison materials. Select parallel texts related to Chinese and Western cultural themes, such as articles on "concepts of family education in China and the West" or "the modern significance of traditional festivals." Guide students to compare and analyze the expression of viewpoints from different cultural perspectives, thereby cultivating cross-cultural critical thinking ability [3].

Third, excavate the critical thinking value of existing textbook materials. Conduct in-depth development of traditional narrative texts by designing critical thinking tasks such as "analyzing the logical motivations behind characters' actions" or "evaluating the rationality of story outcomes." For expository texts, focus on questions like "the effectiveness of argumentation methods" or "the reliability of data support," guiding students to move beyond surface-level information and engage in deep thinking.

4.2 Teaching Method Innovation: Strengthening Critical Thinking Guidance

Innovation in teaching methods requires the construction of a "problem-driven + interactive inquiry" teaching model to strengthen precise guidance for students' thinking processes.

First, the implementation of problem-chain instruction is essential. Based on the logical structure of the text, a tiered problem chain should be designed: basic-level questions focus on "what the text says," such as "What is the author's central argument?"; intermediate-level questions focus on "how the text argues," such as "What evidence does the author use to support the viewpoint?"; higher-level questions focus on "why the text is expressed in this way," such as "Is the author's stance influenced by cultural background?" This structured questioning promotes progressively deeper thinking.

Second, collaborative inquiry-based learning should be adopted. Students are divided into groups to complete inquiry tasks centered on critical-thinking themes—for example, "conduct a debate within the group by taking pro and con positions on a controversial viewpoint in the text" or "co-author a critical evaluation report of the text." Through the collision of perspectives and exchange of ideas, students' critical thinking is stimulated.

Third, the flipped classroom model should be introduced. Students are assigned preview tasks before class, requiring them to use online resources to learn argumentation principles and identify critical thinking points in the text. During class, instruction focuses on addressing students' difficulties encountered in previewing, complemented by discussion, feedback,

and extended exploration, ensuring that class time is devoted primarily to thinking training.

Additionally, by incorporating mind-mapping tools, students can be guided to visually represent the text's argumentative structure, thereby clearly organizing logical relationships and enhancing their analytical abilities.

4.3 Teaching Evaluation Reform: Improving the Measurement of Critical Thinking

Teaching evaluation reform requires building a "multidimensional, process-oriented" assessment system to achieve a comprehensive measurement of critical thinking ability.

First, tiered evaluation criteria should be developed by refining indicators across three dimensions: "thinking awareness," "thinking skills," and "thinking quality." Thinking awareness focuses on whether students actively raise questions; thinking skills encompass specific competencies such as argument analysis and logical reasoning; thinking quality emphasizes the innovativeness of viewpoints and the rigor of argumentation. Each indicator is assigned three rating levels—"excellent," "good," and "pass"—to enhance operability.

Second, assessment methods should be diversified by adopting a combination of "formative assessment + summative assessment." Formative assessment accounts for 60% and includes classroom participation, group inquiry reports, text analysis assignments, and other tasks that primarily evaluate students' thinking processes. Summative assessment accounts for 40% and is conducted as an open-book exam featuring mainly subjective questions, such as "Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the text's argumentation and propose improvements" or "Evaluate the practical significance of the author's viewpoint using real-world examples," thereby assessing the comprehensive application of critical thinking.

Third, the feedback mechanism should be improved by establishing a "teacher–student co-evaluation and peer evaluation" system. Teachers provide targeted feedback on students' logical reasoning and offer suggestions for improvement, while peer evaluation enables students to learn from others' strengths in thinking, thereby promoting collective enhancement of thinking quality.

4.4 Faculty and Resource Support: Sustaining Critical Thinking Development

Faculty and resource support constitute the key foundations for implementing critical-thinking instruction, and improvements must be made in both faculty development and resource integration. In terms of faculty development, a training system combining specialized professional training and practice-based development should be established. Regular training sessions on critical-thinking theory and pedagogical methods should be offered, and experts in logic should be invited to deliver thematic lectures to strengthen teachers' theoretical competence. Cross-institutional teaching-research activities should also be organized, including observations of exemplary critical-thinking lessons, collaborative lesson planning, and reflective teaching workshops, so that theoretical knowledge can be effectively translated into instructional practice. Moreover, a mentoring mechanism should be established in which experienced teachers in critical-thinking instruction provide guidance to junior teachers, accelerating the growth of the teaching team.

Regarding resource support, a three-dimensional resource system should be developed. A text resource bank should include materials of various genres and themes related to critical thinking, together with corresponding instructional designs. A tool resource bank should provide auxiliary tools such as mind-mapping software and online debate platforms. A case resource bank should collect exemplary teaching cases and outstanding student work to serve as references for instruction. In addition, collaboration between schools and enterprises as well as international exchanges should be strengthened to introduce workplace-oriented English reading materials and high-quality overseas resources on critical-thinking pedagogy, thereby expanding resource channels. At the same time, teaching management should be optimized to reduce teachers' non-instructional workload and ensure that they have sufficient time and energy to innovate in critical-thinking instruction.

Conclusion

Cultivating students' critical thinking ability in college English reading teaching is a long-term and systematic endeavor. This paper, by analyzing existing problems,

has constructed a relatively comprehensive cultivation system and proposed specific implementation strategies. However, in practical teaching, continuous exploration and optimization are still required. In the future, sustained attention should be paid to the characteristics of students' cognitive development, strengthening the integration of theory and practice, and improving faculty and resource development to better promote the enhancement of students' critical thinking abilities and lay a solid foundation for their future development.

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