

# A Case Study of Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking in High School English Reading Teaching

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**Abstract:** Critical reading is a crucial tool for enhancing the self-reading ability and critical thinking ability of high school students. In the context of high school English reading teaching, the cultivation of critical thinking skills is not only essential but also urgent. This is because critical thinking allows students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information presented in texts, enabling them to develop a deeper understanding of the content and its underlying meanings. In this paper, a reading lesson in Unit 17 of Book 6 of the Selective (2019 Edition) in High School English Teaching from Beijing Normal University is analyzed to understand the design intention and analyze how the teacher cultivates students' critical thinking ability, strengthens the critical thinking training for students, improves students' reading ability, and ultimately improves students' critical thinking ability and reading ability, in terms of the various teaching links as well as the teaching activities .

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking; High School English; Reading Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standard for General High Schools (2017 edition) suggests that teachers should design English learning activities that are comprehensive, relevant and practical, so that students can acquire, interpret and judge the meaning of texts, express their personal views, intentions and emotional attitudes, analyze the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, and develop a pluralistic approach to reading through a series of activities integrating language, culture and thinking. analyze the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, and develop pluralistic and critical thinking.<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, in the process of English reading teaching, teachers should change the traditional teaching mode of reading class, deal with the text at a deeper level, let students really participate in comprehension of the discourse, analyze the discourse, differentiate the primary and secondary information, understand the relationship between the part and the whole as well as between the part and the part, be able to make judgments based on the norms and standards, and be able to re-organize the elements into a new structure.

However, in the reality of high school English classroom teaching, the difficulty in the implementation of critical reading classroom teaching is: how to design questions that are moderately difficult and can lead students to a deeper understanding of the text? High school students are just beginning to think critically, and questions that are not well-prepared or that require too much thinking ability will make them feel intimidated by reading, or they may express their opinions arbitrarily out of the context of the text. If teachers can design reading questions on the basis of students' full reading of the content of the text, it will not only allow students to further familiarize themselves with the text, in-depth understanding of the text, but also naturally trigger the desire of students to evaluate and cultivate students' critical awareness and thinking skills.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Critical Reading Strategies for High School English Reading Teaching

The more common strategies for critical reading include Previewing, Annotating, Summarizing, Analyzing, Questioning, Predicting and Evaluating. Previewing refers to students' familiarization and understanding of the content and structure of the text before reading, which can help students quickly understand the content of the text, the author's writing intention and the framework structure of the text. Commentary refers to students' annotation and evaluation of the content and words of the text during the reading process. Overview refers to summarizing the theme of the original text in simple language that students can use without subjective comments and interpretations. Analyzing is to identify hidden meanings between the lines. Questioning is about encouraging students to ask thoughtful questions of their own as they read. Predicting, on the other hand, is for students to make guesses about what might be discussed in the text before and during reading.<sup>[3]</sup> Evaluation is when students evaluate various aspects of the author's point of view, the content of the text, the author's purpose, the author's

wording, and the structure of the chapter. The appropriate use of these strategies enables students to analyze, question, identify, speculate, sift and evaluate the author and content of a text on the basis of knowing, understanding and remembering the information in the text, to explore the hidden meanings or implications of the text (read between and beyond lines), to understand the techniques of word formation and layout in the text, to pay attention to the author's point of view, emotional attitude and writing intention, etc. And they pay attention to the author's point of view, emotional attitude and writing intention. They also pay attention to the author's point of view, emotional attitude and writing intention, so as to achieve a deep understanding of the text and form active reading habits such as questioning and analyzing.

### **3. Teaching Practices of Critical Reading Strategies in High School English Reading Teaching**

The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior Secondary Schools (2017 Edition) puts forward a view of English learning activities that point to the core literacy of the discipline, making it clear that activities are the basic form of English learning and the main way for learners to learn and try to use the language to understand and express their meanings, to cultivate cultural awareness, to develop multifaceted thinking, and to form learning abilities. The design of English learning activities should aim at promoting the development of students' core literacy in the English subject, centering on thematic contexts, based on multi-modal forms of discourse, such as oral and written, and guiding students to deepen their understanding of the meaning of the theme through the integration of language, thinking and culture through learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation, etc., and helping students to acquire linguistic knowledge, use language skills, interpret cultural connotations, and compare cultural differences. It helps students acquire language knowledge, use language skills, interpret cultural connotations, compare cultural similarities and differences, evaluate the meaning of the discourse, form positive affective attitudes and values, and then try to analyze and solve problems and express their personal views, feelings and attitudes creatively by using the language and cultural knowledge they have learned in new contexts.<sup>[4]</sup>

This paper takes a reading class in Unit 17 of Book 6 of the Selective (2019 Edition) of the English Language in High School of Beijing Normal University Edition as a case to understand the design intention and analyze how the teacher develops students' critical thinking ability, strengthens the training of critical thinking for students, improves students' reading ability, and ultimately improves students' critical thinking ability and reading ability, in the context of the various teaching links as well as the teaching activities.

#### **3.1 Analysis of Teaching Materials**

This passage is Mr. Bean's funny story in a movie taken from Unit 17 Lesson 3, Book 6, Beijing Normal University Press. In this reading lesson, let students not only know six elements and develop their interest in narrations, but also learn how to find detailed information. Therefore, this lesson plays an important role in this unit. If the Ss can master it well, it will be helpful for them to analyze a narration.

#### **3.2 Analysis of the Target Students**

The students in senior grade 2 have already had some basic reading skills, and they are eager to learn more about it. However, they know little about the structure of an English story. So, it's necessary for them to learn it. Different study tasks are designed for students of different levels so as for them to learn and share the fun and attraction of English stories in cooperative work.

#### **3.3 Teaching Objectives**

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- (1) To create their own word bank with hints from the pictures displayed;
- (2) To narrate how Mr. Bean behaves in the fancy restaurant;
- (3) To make inferences about Mr. Bean's behavior.

#### **3.4 Teaching Important and Difficult Points**

1) Important Points

Learn some important words and phrases such as awkward, astonished, concern and so on.

## 2)Difficult Points

How to write a short story and a story should include what, for example character, time, place, plot, ending and climax.

### 3.5 Teaching Activities

#### 1)Pre-reading

##### Step1:

1. Students look at the photos displayed, think about the common features of the people in the photos and then discuss it in pairs (Slide 1 & Slide 2). The teacher leads students to read the new words.

2. Students work in pairs to discuss the questions listed in Task 1 on Page 24 (Slide 3). The teacher invites 2 or 3 students to talk about their favorite comedy.

Step2: The teacher introduces the topic and leads students to read the objectives (Slide 4).

Step3: Read the reading strategies on P24 with the students before they read the text.

[Design intention]: During the lead-in stage, the teacher tends to trigger students' interest in the lesson through "What's your Favorite Comedy?". This kind of introduction makes students feel that the upcoming students' text is simple and enhances their self-confidence. Students will have a strong curiosity and stimulate their interest in wanting to know more, thus paving the way for the next reading activity. During the pre-reading stage, before reading the text, let students learn the vocabulary related to the content of the text in order to clear the obstacles of the students' reading process.

#### 2)While-reading

##### Step4:

1. Students read text 1 and try to match the main idea for each paragraph (Exercise2, Learning Sheet)

2. Students read Paragraph 1, compare the original text with the text given on their learning sheet, then underline the different parts, and discuss whether the two texts express similar meanings. The teacher directs students attention to the key words and phrases in this part. (Exercise 3, Learning Sheet)

3. The teacher leads students to think about awkward situations they know and then skim the rest of the text to see what awkward situation Mr. Bean is in. Students are required to complete the table after their skimming. (Exercise4)

4. Read P2-3. Students try to find out how Mr. Bean behaves in the restaurant, write down the verbs and reason why he behaves that way (Exercise 5)).

[Design intention]: During the While-reading stage, students need to quickly skim through the text and identify the author of the article and the author's purpose in writing it. And they also need to find out the topic of each paragraph. How to find the topic sentence of a passage accurately and quickly is an important reading skill. This part requires students to skim the article quickly and find the topic sentences of the paragraphs within the time limit. The purpose of this part is to guide students to use skimming skills to find the topic sentences of the paragraphs and then summarize the topics of the paragraphs. Students read carefully to deepen the understanding of the text by way of group discussion. This session requires students to read the text carefully, capture the details of the text and complete the detailed comprehension practice questions on the chart. Through this part, students understand the text more deeply. This part reflects that the reading activities start from the whole, from easy to difficult, step by step and layer by layer.

#### 3) Post-reading

##### Step5:

1. Students watch the film. Using the Table, students work in pairs: both act as Mr. Bean. One narrates what he does on his birthday while the other does the actions and then exchanges roles.

\*Option: The teacher invites one pair to the front to act out.

Step6: Students reflect on whether they have achieved the objectives (Slide 15).

[Design intention]: The post-reading stage takes the form of a conversation between students. Students are asked to make up dialogues

and role-play activities based on the content of the text. The purpose is to guide students how to apply what they have learned in class to real life, and at the same time to strengthen and stimulate students' interest in English learning. In the summary of the text, the teacher asks the students what they have learned in this lesson by asking questions, so that the students can summarize by themselves.

### **3.6 Teaching Evaluation**

Based on the students' characteristics, this teacher assigns students to preview the text and read it before class. In the classroom, students are encouraged to have a sense of independent thinking by focusing on individual inquiry when completing simpler and more intuitive tasks. When faced with more difficult tasks, students are encouraged to work in small groups because "collaborative learning" facilitates the exchange and experience of English, helps to cultivate students' ability to cooperate with others, and stimulates students' innovative thinking through differences in information.

## **4. Issues to Note in a Reading Classroom Focused on Cultivating Critical Thinking**

In a reading classroom that focuses on developing critical thinking, teachers should pay attention to the following three points:

### **4.1 Designing Multi-level Activities to Develop Critical Thinking Skills**

Bloom ranked the cognitive goals of education from simple to complex: memorization, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and these layers reveal the nature of knowledge and the levels of thinking in learning. Memorization, comprehension and application belong to the low-order thinking. While analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating belong to the higher-order thinking. Teachers should follow the law of reading when designing classroom activities, consider the hierarchy of problems and the relationship between them, design hierarchical teaching activities, from low-order thinking activities to higher-order thinking activities, step by step, so that students' cognitive hierarchies can be gradually raised, and guide students to dig into the connotations of the text, think independently, and learn to ask questions and questioning, so as to pave the way for the development of critical thinking skills in the final output session.

### **4.2 Multi-dimensional Interpretation of the Text to Explore the Space for Critical Thinking**

To tap into the space of critical thinking, teachers need to interpret the text in multiple dimensions, which can be in-depth in terms of language, strategy, clues, thinking, rhetoric, structure, genre, emotion, culture and so on. Reading is a process in which the reader actively receives information and makes reasoning and judgment, a never-ending process of interaction between the human brain and the text, and a process of continuous negotiation of meaning between the reader and the author.<sup>[5]</sup> Interpreting a text is a process of dialogue with the text. Only by actively interacting with the text can teachers find the relevance of the author's thinking, and can they lead students to examine the text with an inquiring and critical attitude, explore the space for critical thinking, and analyze, evaluate, and apply the information conveyed by the text.

### **4.3 Encouraging Individualized Reading and Developing a Sense of Critical Thinking**

Reading is a personalized behavior of students, and teachers cannot replace students' personal reading practice with their own analysis. Therefore, in the process of reading teaching, teachers should return the right of independent reading to students, and actively encourage and guide students to personalized reading, so that they can feel and think, deepen their understanding and experience in active thinking and emotional activities. Teachers should also guide students in the process of personalized reading in connection with real life, improve their ability to obtain, analyze, evaluate and use information, so that they can mobilize their thinking in the process of reading, to express their own unique insights, to form a sense of critical thinking.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

Critical thinking is not innate, it needs to be cultivated through training. In high school English reading teaching, it is imperative to cultivate critical thinking ability. The critical thinking of high school students is still in its infancy, and attempting to carry out critical reading in the practice of reading classroom teaching is challenging for both students and teachers. Therefore, in reading classroom teaching, teachers

should break the conventionalized and stereotyped English reading teaching mode, look at the article with a new critical reading thinking and reading perspective, harvest high-level thinking skills from multi-perspective backgrounds, carefully organize the teaching process, and put the training of critical thinking skills through every link in the teaching, by means of prediction, multiple forms of questioning, extending and expanding the subject matter, questioning and evaluating the author's viewpoints, and other means. Through the means of prediction, multi-form questioning, extending and expanding the theme, questioning and evaluating the author's point of view, etc. Students are guided to divergent and diversified thinking, and their critical thinking is developed while their English language knowledge and skills are improved.

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