

# Research on Cultivating Critical Thinking in High School English Reading Teaching

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## Abstract

With a focus on fostering core competencies, nurturing students' critical thinking has emerged as a crucial facet of English reading instruction. However, current English reading instruction in high schools tends to neglect the cultivation of critical thinking, leading to a widespread phenomenon of "absence of speculation" in teaching. Therefore, this study aims to explore effective strategies, including designing teaching objectives for critical thinking, utilizing visual aids, introducing cognitive level questioning, and implementing embedded evaluation for cultivating critical thinking in high school English reading instruction. The findings of the study provide insights for constructing a coherent framework for critical thinking teaching.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, English reading teaching, cultivation strategies

## 1. Introduction

As educational reform in China continues to deepen, the education system has undergone constant improvement. The 2020 revised edition of the General High School English Curriculum Standards has provided new guidelines for developing core competencies in English education. For the first time, this standard includes thinking qualities as part of the core competencies of the English subject, highlighting the importance of critical thinking in the development of core competencies. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020) Therefore, cultivating students' critical thinking should become a key focus of English subject (Jia and Guo, 2020). Reading, as an indispensable component of English subject, is the most critical and fundamental part of high school English teaching (Li, 2020). However, there is a common problem in current high school English reading instruction where teachers neglect the cultivation of students' critical thinking, leading to a widespread phenomenon of "absence of speculation" in teaching (Sun, 2015). In such cases, teachers focusing more on cultivating students' absorptive skills in reading texts, while neglecting the productive skills of expressing and communicating ideas in texts; placing more emphasis on using "intrinsic" reading materials from textbooks for teaching, while neglecting the use of "extrinsic" teaching resources, and so on. Therefore, English reading instruction must transcend the traditional cultivation mode of "basic skills + encyclopedic knowledge" and achieve a fundamental breakthrough in the cultivation of critical thinking. Therefore, this study attempts to explore effective strategies for cultivating critical thinking in high school students through English reading instruction, providing theoretical support and practical references for foreign language courses and teaching practices guided by the cultivation of critical thinking.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of Critical Thinking Defined

From a morphological perspective, "critical thinking" is a compound word consisting of "critical" and "thinking". "Critical" originates from two Greek roots, "kriticos" and "criterion", which imply using appropriate evaluation criteria to make well-founded judgments (Paul and Elder, 2006). Webster's New Dictionary defines "critical" as the effort to truthfully and fairly understand, judge, and assess something as a whole. "Thinking" refers to the mental process of conceptualizing and reasoning about a topic. (Webster's New Dictionary of Synonym, 1984) Therefore, "critical thinking" involves cognitive activities that utilize analytical, synthetic, judgmental, and

evaluative thinking skills to solve problems.

Scholars have presented various viewpoints on defining critical thinking. Some define it in terms of thinking modes, as a rational, purposeful, and introspective method of solving problems (Rudd et al., 2020). Others define it based on the thinking process, as a process of judgment, questioning, exploration, and evaluation of things (Ennis, 1993; Qian, 2018). Finally, some define it as a synthesis of attitudes and skills, involving reflection, monitoring, evaluating, skepticism, and a positive attitude towards new concepts (Ennis, 1987; American Philosophical Association, 1990).

In conclusion, critical thinking in this study is an advanced form of thinking that involves understanding, analysis, summarizing, reflection, exploration, and evaluation when faced with problems, propositions, or viewpoints. This cognitive process leads to rational and wise decisions.

### *2.2 Researches on Cultivating Critical Thinking in English Reading Teaching*

This research focuses on the cultivation of critical thinking in English reading teaching, specifically examining the current situation, strategies, and assessment.

The research has identified several issues, including a lack of attention to critical thinking, a transmission-based teaching approach resulting in passive students (Liu, 2023), and inadequate teaching design leading to poor results in cultivating critical reading ability (Yan, 2019). Additionally, there is a lack of awareness of the importance of critical thinking, and systematic training is lacking (Huang et al., 2014).

To address these issues, researchers suggest integrating cognitive skills, such as observation, questioning, analysis, evaluation, and argumentation, into teaching goals around specific thinking objectives (Lan, 2019). Questions should reflect different cognitive levels and thinking types (Ge and Hong, 2018), and teaching activities should follow students' cognitive development rules, respect individual differences, and have a contextualized teaching approach (Sun, 2018). An open and inclusive classroom environment should be created (Zhou, 2020), and the deconstructive reading method should be advocated to guide students to explore the meaning of the text based on their own knowledge framework and individual experience (Wang and Bai, 2011).

Regarding assessment, researchers suggest increasing assessment content related to academic and college entrance exams (Chen et al., 2019), adding assessment content that reflects task situation activities (Zhao, 2021), establishing specific thinking assessment criteria, and refining evaluation indicators, such as observation, questioning, analysis, evaluation, and argumentation (Zhang, 2020). Measurement tools for assessing students' critical thinking ability in English reading should also be developed (Zhou, 2018).

However, the research has some shortcomings, including a narrow perspective and a lack of a comprehensive and integrated system for cultivating critical thinking in English reading teaching. Additionally, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of critical thinking based on the characteristics of English reading and the key factors and mechanisms that restrict its development. A practical-based viewpoint is needed to form a critical thinking cultivation pathway for English reading teaching, considering factors such as teacher training, teaching goal design, and evaluation mechanisms.

## **3. Theoretical Foundations and Comprehensive Framework**

### *3.1 Theoretical Foundations*

The first is Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives. This theory posits that learning is a hierarchical process, with learners gradually developing and improving at different cognitive objective levels (Anderson, 2008). It outlines six levels of cognitive objectives, ranging from lower levels of remembering and understanding to higher levels of applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In English reading instruction, critical thinking is considered a high-level cognitive objective, requiring students to possess advanced abilities in analysis, evaluation, and creation. It also necessitates that teachers design appropriate instructional strategies based on students' cognitive levels and monitor their progress through assessment. Thus, Bloom's taxonomy provides a theoretical basis for designing strategies to cultivate critical thinking among high school students (Horváthová & Nad'ová, 2021).

The second is the Deep Learning theory. This theory emphasizes understanding-based learning and the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking. It suggests that students should explore and understand knowledge through deep thinking, critical thinking, and innovation, fostering abilities in autonomous learning and problem-solving. (Wu et al., 2014) In English reading instruction, teachers can design learning tasks that are challenging and deep, stimulating students' desire to think and explore. Through deep thinking, students are better able to understand and apply the knowledge they acquire, thereby enhancing their critical thinking

skills.

### *3.2 Comprehensive Framework*

The comprehensive framework establishes the foundation and guiding principles for integrating critical thinking into English reading instruction. This framework encompasses curriculum design, teacher training, and teaching assessment.

In terms of curriculum design, the primary focus is on infusing critical thinking skills into the English reading curriculum. This involves thoughtfully selecting reading materials that promote critical analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Additionally, it involves the structuring of learning activities and assignments aimed at prompting students to apply critical thinking skills while engaging with English texts. Furthermore, the curriculum design emphasizes incorporating diverse perspectives and thought-provoking content to stimulate students' critical thinking and broaden their understanding of the English language and literature.

Regarding teacher training, the emphasis is on providing professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' understanding of critical thinking and its integration into English reading instruction. This includes introducing effective strategies for guiding students to engage in deep thinking and analysis in the classroom, as well as posing open-ended questions to promote students' critical thinking. Teacher training also encompasses strategies for encouraging meaningful discussions and providing support and guidance to enable students to demonstrate critical thinking while reading English texts.

In teaching assessment, the focus is on developing specialized evaluation tools and grading criteria to measure students' critical thinking skills within the context of English reading. This involves designing assessment methods that go beyond traditional measures of comprehension and recall, and instead, focus on students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret English texts critically. Assessment methods may include activities such as group discussions, oral presentations, and reading journals, which require students to demonstrate their critical thinking abilities in the context of English reading. Additionally, the assessment process involves providing constructive feedback that encourages students to further develop their critical thinking skills, and to monitor students' progress in critical thinking development throughout the English reading instruction.

## **4. Cultivation Strategies of Critical Thinking in English Reading Instruction**

### *4.1 Designing Critical Thinking Teaching Objectives*

Designing critical thinking teaching objectives is crucial for enhancing students' critical thinking abilities and enabling them to complete critical thinking tasks and activities effectively. Teachers should develop critical thinking teaching objectives based on the critical thinking requirements of curriculum standards, unit objectives, and discourse content. For instance, in the reading lesson "The Amazon Rainforest: A Natural Treasure", critical thinking teaching objectives can be set as follows.

According to curriculum standards, students should grasp the linguistic features, perceive the logical structure and connotation of the text, comprehend the author's intentions, and form their own viewpoints. They should understand and appreciate discourse from multiple perspectives, enhancing their values of nature conservation. They should express their reading feelings from various angles and share their reading experiences with others.

Regarding unit objectives, students should master the structure and writing characteristics of documentary scripts, explore the rules of induction and omission in grammar, and apply them correctly in context. They should write a school newspaper article advocating for animal protection, understand the discourse of TV interview program scripts, learn to distinguish viewpoints and arguments, and work in groups to create booklets on environmental issues.

Finally, the discourse content requires students to classify and reason based on basic information about the Amazon rainforest, deepen their understanding of the discourse, internalize the learned content, reflect on the importance of the Amazon rainforest for maintaining the earth, and express their own viewpoints. Students must also master the characteristics of documentary scripts, learn to write summaries of the original text, and apply the knowledge they have learned to practical situations. By introducing the "Ant Forest" project, students' exploration of the theme's significance is elevated to a new level.

Therefore, based on the discourse requirements of curriculum standards, unit objectives, and discourse content, setting discourse teaching objectives aims to guide students in comprehensively understanding and thinking about the importance of the Amazon rainforest, the significance of environmental protection, and to cultivate their critical thinking abilities and reading strategy application abilities. The critical thinking teaching objectives for this reading lesson are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Design of Teaching Objectives for “The Amazon Rainforest: A Natural Treasure”

Critical thinking teaching objective	Requirements
Objective 1: Analyze discourse content, infer the author's main viewpoints, and identify paragraph topic sentences.	analyze, infer
Objective 2: Master the structure and writing characteristics of documentary scripts.	analyze
Objective 3: Summarize the natural and cultural features of the Amazon, and propose insightful perspectives and viewpoints.	summarize, evaluate
Objective 4: Understand the author's attitude and sentiments towards the Amazon forest, form correct life values and express an attitude of respect and protection towards nature.	evaluate, innovate
Objective 5: Utilize existing information to write an article for the school newspaper advocating for student participation in environmental protection.	innovate
Objective 6: Self-assess and reflect on the reading learning process and outcomes.	evaluate, innovate

#### 4.2 Utilizing Visual Aids

Visual aids are a powerful tool for helping students understand complex information quickly and easily (Meng, 2022). They can also help students develop critical thinking skills such as inference, analysis, and summarization during the reading process. One effective visual aid is the word cloud, which displays frequently occurring words in different font sizes or colors to reflect their importance and relevance. This study guided students to use word clouds to explore the text's theme and enhance their critical thinking skills.

Students were guided to explore the text's theme based on the keywords in the word cloud. They were encouraged to classify and summarize different parts of the article according to the theme, thereby better grasping the article's main idea and argument. During this process, prompts and guidance were provided, such as guiding students to determine the article's theme and central idea based on the content of the subheadings, reminding students to pay attention to the keywords and information in the article to help them better understand and classify the content, and encouraging students to brainstorm and think innovatively to discover the implicit information and themes in the article.

For example, in the reading lesson “Eating in China” in Unit 1 of the Senior High School English textbook published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, students were guided to use a word cloud (as shown in Figure 1) to summarize and generalize the knowledge points related to Sichuan hot pot, Nanjing salted duck, and Cantonese dim sum in the text. This was based on the four headings “7 March, Sichuan hot pot”, “12 August, Nanjing salted duck”, “8 December, Cantonese dim sum”, and colorful food pictures in the article. This helped students establish a deep interaction with the text, improve their preliminary understanding and perception of food culture, including the differences and connections between different food cultures, and thus engage in critical thinking and offer their own viewpoints and insights.

In conclusion, using visual aids such as word clouds can be an effective way to enhance students' critical thinking skills during the reading process. It enables students to better understand and classify intricate information, identify themes and central ideas, and articulate their own perspectives and insights.



Figure 1. Word clouds

#### 4.3 Introducing Cognitive Level Questioning

Designing questions with cognitive levels can facilitate students' rational judgment of the information conveyed in texts from a cross-cultural perspective, promoting independent thinking and rational speculation with a questioning attitude to develop critical thinking skills (Yu, 2017). Based on Bloom's cognitive objective classification theory, this study designed questions with cognitive levels, which were divided into four categories: fact and information-based questions, analysis and inference-based questions, integration and evaluation-based questions, and correlation and creation-based questions. Fact and information-based questions aimed to help students understand the facts of the text and extract explicit information, while analysis and inference-based questions led students to comprehend the connotations of the text, grasp the knowledge content, ideological connotation, and spiritual essence of the text. Integration and evaluation-based questions stimulated students to critically examine the content of the text, engage in thinking and evaluation, and form unique insights. Correlation and creation-based questions helped students expand their thinking, innovate their learned knowledge, and develop creative abilities.

Taking the lesson "Comfort Food" as an example, this study designed a question chain (as shown in Table 2). Questions 1-7 were fact and information-based questions. Through discussion, students deepened their understanding of traditional cuisine, actively pondered the literal and implied meanings of the article's title "comfort food," and enhanced their ability to make inferences based on the text. Questions 8-13 were analysis and inference-based questions. Students engaged in cognitive activities such as comparison, synthesis, and induction to comprehend the summary of the article, pay attention to explicit information and text details, and extract information related to healing foods. Questions 14-16 were integration and evaluation-based questions. Students combined their existing knowledge and experience to reflect and evaluate the three questions, forming unique insights. Question 17 was a correlation and creation-based question. Students were prompted to step out of the text and connect to reality, create new insights based on their learned knowledge, and develop their creative abilities.

In conclusion, designing questions with cognitive levels can effectively improve students' critical thinking skills and enhance their ability to understand and analyze texts from a cross-cultural perspective.

Table 2. Questions design

Types of questions	Example Questions
Fact and information-based questions	Q1: Which of the dishes in the video would you like to try most? Why? Q2: What do you think is the most typical Chinese food? Q3: What do you think the article will talk about? Q4: What does the word “comfort” probably mean? (Please use a mind map to present your ideas. Q5: What’s the topic sentence of each paragraph? Q6: What’s the structure of the passage? Q7: What’s the main idea of each part?
Analysis and inference-based questions	Q8: How does the author introduce the topic of comfort food? Q9: What is comfort food in its broadest sense? Q10: How does comfort food such as chicken soup cheer up, according to the 3rd paragraph? Q11: Why does the author mention the chicken soup in paragraph 3? Q12: What can we infer from the last sentence of the article “It’s food for the soul.”? Q13: What’s the author’s purpose for writing the article?
Integration and evaluation-based questions	Q14: In your opinion, is there any difference between one’s comfort food and favorite food? Give your reasons. Q15: Do you agree with the author’s opinion that one mouthful of comfort food takes us back to our cultural roots? Why or why not? Q16: Do you think comfort food must be good for our health? Why or why not?
Correlation and creation-based questions	Q17: Write a letter in about 80 words based on the following structure, and then conduct mutual evaluation.

#### 4.4 Conducting Embedded Evaluation

Embedded evaluation, a form of formative assessment, seamlessly integrates evaluation content and activities into teaching, organically combining them with teaching content and activities to assess students’ learning processes and outcomes (Li and Zhang, 2024). A reflection checklist serves as a tool for embedded evaluation, aiding students in understanding their learning progress and achievements, monitoring and adjusting their learning strategies and methods, and fostering critical thinking development. This study utilized a reflection checklist for embedded evaluation.

Firstly, students are guided to thoroughly read the reflection checklist, ensuring comprehension of all content, questions, and prompts. For instance, prior to the reading class of Unit 2 “Comfort Food”, a reflection checklist (Table 3) was devised based on learning content and objectives, comprising both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Students deliberate on each question, selecting from options like “completely achieved”, “partially achieved”, and “not achieved at all”. The open-ended questions prompt students to scrutinize their learning process, encompassing aspects such as participation, critical thinking, autonomous cooperation, communication, and self-expression, to identify weaknesses and formulate remedial strategies.

Secondly, students are guided to discern learning requirements. Employing their comprehension of the reflection checklist, students ascertain the aspects necessitating improvement in their studies. For instance, students may recognize the need to enhance their understanding of words, phrases, and sentences within the text, grasp its structure, evaluate the author's ideas, and proficiently articulate their viewpoints and opinions.

Lastly, students establish specific learning objectives. Building upon their identification of learning needs, students utilize the reflection checklist to delineate precise teaching objectives. For instance, students may set goals such as augmenting their vocabulary, enhancing their rational analysis of the text, and refining their skills

in reflection and summarization.

Through this process, embedded evaluation facilitates a comprehensive assessment of students' learning progress and enables targeted improvements in critical thinking skills within the context of English reading instruction.

Table 3. The reflection checklist of comfort food

Evaluation Content	Self-Evaluation		
	Completely Achieved	Partially Achieved	Not Achieved
1. I can extract phrases and sentences and point out facts.			
2. I can extract phrases and sentences as evidence for a certain argument.			
3. I can explain the surface meaning of words and sentences.			
4. I can clarify the context and summarize the main idea of a paragraph.			
5. I can extract specific information from a text and distinguish the differences between "healing things" and "favorite things."			
6. I am good at discovering the author's implied viewpoints in writing.			
7. I can infer the author's writing purpose.			
8. I can evaluate a text from multiple perspectives.			
9. I can express my personal insights.			
10. I can use the provided materials to solve problems.			
11. What are the reasons for "partially achieved" and "not achieved at all"?			
12. What are the improvement measures for "partially achieved" and "not achieved at all"?			

## 5. Teaching Case Study

This section presents a teaching case study of the first unit reading lesson "The Amazon Rainforest: A Natural Treasure" from the required English textbook for senior high school students to assess the effects of the suggested strategies on the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills in English reading instruction.

### 5.1 Teaching Objectives

- (1) Through text analysis, clarify the content of the discourse, infer the author's main points, and identify the topic sentences of paragraphs.
- (2) Master the structure and writing features of a documentary script.
- (3) Summarize the natural and cultural characteristics of the Amazon, and present unique insights and viewpoints.
- (4) Understand the author's attitude and sentiments towards the Amazon rainforest, form a correct outlook on life and values, and express a respectful and protective attitude towards nature.
- (5) Utilize existing information to write an article for the school newspaper calling for students to protect the school environment.

### 5.2 Teaching Content

- (1) The geographical location and ecological environment of the Amazon rainforest.
- (2) The biodiversity and ecological value of the Amazon rainforest.
- (3) The ecological issues and conservation measures of the Amazon rainforest.

### 5.3 Teaching Methods

- (1) Cooperative learning in groups. Organize students to engage in group discussions and cooperative learning activities to collectively explore the characteristics, ecological issues, and conservation measures of the Amazon rainforest, encouraging students to exchange and share viewpoints, and stimulating each other's thinking and

creativity.

(2) Problem-oriented learning. Pose thought-provoking questions, such as the consequences of deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and land development, to guide students to consider and explore the importance and conservation issues of the Amazon rainforest, actively engaging students in the learning process and cultivating their problem-solving abilities.

#### 5.4 Teaching Evaluation

(1) Classroom quizzes. Test students' grasp of basic knowledge about the Amazon rainforest and relevant vocabulary through classroom quizzes.

(2) Group discussions. Evaluate students' performance and abilities in exchanging and sharing ideas through group discussions.

(3) Reflection checklist. Utilize a reflection checklist to comprehensively understand the teaching situation and students' learning status, and promptly identify and address teaching issues.

(4) Electronic data assignments. Assign relevant electronic data assignments, allowing students to analyze and evaluate the ecological issues and conservation measures of the Amazon rainforest on electronic platforms.

#### 5.5 Teaching Procedure

##### Step 1 Leading

The teacher shows a video (the part of welcome to the unit). Then, students enjoy the video and talk about some related questions.

Q1: What can you learn from the video?

Q2: Humans have done much harm to the earth. How to take actions to change this situation?

##### Step 2 Prediction

Before reading, students skim the title of the article and the picture on Page 3, and then try to answer the following questions.

Q1: What do you think this script is about judging from the title and picture?

Q2: What does the word "comfort" probably mean? (Please use a mind map to present your ideas.)

##### Step 3 Skimming and scanning

After prediction, students are asked to skim the text, and try to conclude the main idea of the passage. The sub-questions are provided as follows. Use the mind map to present the main idea of each paragraph.

Q1: What's the topic sentence of each paragraph?

Q2: What's the structure of the passage?

Q3: What's the main idea of each part?

##### Step 4 Detailed reading I

Task 1: Reading for specific information.

Read the documentary script again and complete the missing information using a word cloud.

##### Task 2 Discussion

Q1: What makes the Amazon rainforest a natural treasure according to the script?

Q2: What is your answer to the question at the end of the script? Can we afford to damage the "lungs of the plant"?

Q3: Which word best summarizes the author's attitude to protect the "lungs of the plant"?

##### Step 5 Further thinking

Engage in a group discussion to explore the following questions:

Q1: In your opinion, is there any difference between one's comfort food and favorite food? Give your reasons.

Q2: Do you agree with the author's opinion that one mouthful of comfort food takes us back to our cultural roots? Why or why not?

Q3: Do you think comfort food must be good for our health? Why or why not?



### Step 6 Writing

Write an argumentative essay on whether the Amazon rainforest should be protected or exploited for economic development.

Task requirements: (1) Conduct research on the economic value and ecological significance of the Amazon rainforest; (2) Use evidence and examples to support your arguments; (3) Use appropriate vocabulary, sentence structures, and paragraph organization to present your ideas clearly and logically; (4) Provide a clear thesis statement and conclusion; (5) The essay should be about 100 words; (6) Submit the essay in both hard copy and electronic format.

Step 7 Reflect on what has been learned using the reflection checklist

### Step 8 Homework

- (1) Read the documentary script again and underline the difficult points that you cannot understand.
- (2) Are there any places in China with rich biodiversity like the Amazon rainforest? What are they? Go to the library or surf the Internet to collect some relevant information.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, this study emphasizes the significance of cultivating critical thinking in high school English reading instruction and proposes effective strategies, such as designing teaching objectives, utilizing visual aids, introducing cognitive level questioning, and implementing embedded evaluation. These strategies promote active learning, cognitive engagement, and evaluation skills, enhancing students' critical thinking abilities and reading comprehension for academic success and lifelong learning. It is important to note that the implementation of these strategies requires a shift in teaching philosophy and pedagogical practices. Teachers need to adopt a student-centered approach that emphasizes active learning and critical thinking, rather than a teacher-centered approach that relies on rote memorization and passive learning. Additionally, teachers need to receive adequate training and support to effectively implement these strategies in their classroom instruction. This study contributes to the literature on critical thinking and English reading instruction, and further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of these strategies in diverse contexts and develop a comprehensive framework for critical thinking teaching.

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