

A Comparative Analysis of Critical Thinking Cultivation in the Reading Sections of Old and New Senior High School English Textbooks Published by People's Education Press

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Abstract: Based on the Curriculum Standard for Senior High School English (2017 Edition, Revised 2025) and the critical thinking skills analytical framework proposed by Chen Zehang, Zou Min, and Su Xiaoli, this study conducts a comparative analysis of critical thinking in the reading sections of the old and new senior high school English textbooks published by People's Education Press. The research adopts textual analysis for quantitative and data analysis. The findings reveal that compared with the old textbooks, the new textbooks pay more attention to the cultivation of critical thinking in the reading sections, especially making remarkable progress in the design of reasoning and evaluation tasks. Although the new textbooks have achieved breakthroughs in cultivating critical thinking, it is still necessary to further improve students' critical thinking and comprehensive literacy by optimizing task structure, strengthening grade cohesion, and deepening the design of evaluation tasks.

Keywords: High School English Textbooks; Textbook Comparison; English Language Teaching Materials; Textual Analysis

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of educational modernization, the education sector has put forward higher requirements for the cultivation of core competencies. The Curriculum Standard for Senior High School English (2017 Edition, Revised 2025) clearly lists thinking quality as an important dimension of the core competencies of English as a subject, emphasizing the development of students' critical, creative, and logical thinking through English teaching. As the core component of thinking quality, critical thinking is not only a key tool for students to understand and analyze texts, but also a basic ability for them to cope with complex problems

and make rational decisions. However, for a long time, there has been a tendency in senior high school English teaching practice in China to "emphasize language skills while neglecting thinking cultivation". As the main carrier of teaching content, whether the task design of the reading sections of textbooks meets the needs of critical thinking development directly affects the achievement of teaching objectives. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to explore the implementation paths of critical thinking cultivation in textbooks.

With the implementation of the concept of core competencies for English as a subject, the emphasis on critical thinking cultivation in textbook compilation has gradually increased, but the differences between old and new textbooks in task design still need systematic investigation. As the most widely used textbooks, the changes in the reading section task design of senior high school English textbooks published by People's Education Press can directly reflect the evolution of English education concepts. At present, most studies on critical thinking task design focus on single-version analysis or theoretical discussion, lacking systematic and comparative empirical research on old and new textbooks. This study takes the reading sections of the old and new compulsory senior high school English textbooks (Compulsory 1 to Compulsory 3) published by People's Education Press as the research objects, adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to compare the differences between the two versions in cultivating critical thinking, aiming to reveal the effectiveness and problems of textbook compilation in cultivating critical thinking, and provide a basis for subsequent textbook optimization and teaching practice improvement.

2. Literature Review

Critical thinking refers to the thinking process in

which individuals discover problems through questioning and curiosity, conduct in-depth analysis of problems using advanced cognitive skills such as analysis, reasoning, and evaluation, and exert emotional traits such as openness, self-confidence, and perseverance to make self-regulatory judgments or reasonable decisions. Critical thinking was first proposed by the American educator John [1], who defined it as reflective thinking, emphasizing the active pursuit and verification of beliefs in a state of doubt. Robert [2] defined critical thinking as “reasonable, reflective thinking that focuses on deciding what to believe or do”, highlighting its practical and reflective characteristics. Domestic research on critical thinking began with reflections on the phenomenon of “absence of critical thinking” in China’s teaching. Huang [3] first put forward the concept of “critical thinking deficiency”, pointing out that many students lack depth in thinking and real critical thinking. Sun [4] divided the definition of critical thinking from two perspectives but failed to put forward specific measurement standards. With the deepening of research, the understanding of critical thinking has gradually evolved from a single skill to a more complex integration of cognition and affection. Hao [5] argues that critical thinking, as a crucial component of “thinking quality”, not only helps enhance students’ ability to analyze and solve problems but also enables them to observe, perceive and understand the world from a cross-cultural perspective, thereby making accurate value judgments on things. Li [6] points out that there is still room for improvement in the coherence and connection between curriculum standards and teaching guidelines across different school stages. Xia Yan and Zhang [7] suggest that teachers should integrate critical thinking elements into in-depth and progressive questions, fully stimulate students’ cognitive skills, and thus systematically guide students to move across different cognitive levels. Zhang [8] maintains that teaching with new textbooks compels teachers to abandon some of their past successful teaching experiences and step out of their comfort zone of familiar teaching practices. An authoritative definition of critical thinking comes from the Delphi Report. Facione [9], the main leader of the *Delphi Report*, summarized scholars’ concepts of critical thinking, dividing the cognitive skills of critical thinking into interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference,

and self-regulation, and enabling individuals to make reasonable explanations based on their own inferences. Based on this, scholars such as Wen [10] constructed a hierarchical theoretical model of critical thinking for foreign language majors in China. The first level of the model is “meta-critical thinking”, namely the planning, inspection, adjustment, and evaluation of the critical thinking process; the second level is specific critical thinking abilities, covering the combination of cognitive skills and affective traits.

In addition, reading, as an important cognitive activity, is also a key process for the application and development of critical thinking. Elder and Paul [11] pointed out that reading is not only a process of acquiring information but also a crucial way to cultivate critical thinking. However, in the current literature, there is a lack of a critical thinking framework that can systematically analyze reading activities and has practical operability. In response, Chen [12] constructed a critical thinking skills framework suitable for analyzing textbook reading tasks. The construction of this framework provides a new perspective and method for the application of critical thinking in foreign language teaching, enriching the theory and practice of critical thinking in actual teaching.

Therefore, critical thinking refers to people’s ability to think and discriminate, specifically including the abilities of analysis, reasoning, judgment, and evaluation. In senior high school English teaching, although the improvement of language skills is placed at the core of teaching, teachers often ignore the cultivation of critical thinking. Developing students’ critical thinking can promote their comprehensive cognitive development and the formation of critical thinking, thereby improving their ability to solve complex problems.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

This study aims to compare the gaps between old and new textbooks in cultivating critical thinking and answer the following questions:

(1) What are the differences in the overall design of critical thinking tasks in the reading sections of old and new textbooks?

(2) What are the differences between old and new textbooks in specific types of critical thinking tasks such as analysis, reasoning, and

evaluation?

the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

3.2 Research Objects

This study focuses on the reading sections of the old and new versions of compulsory senior high school English textbooks(Compulsory 1 to Compulsory 3)published by People’s Education Press ,specifically including the Reading and Using Language reading parts of each unit in the old textbooks ,as well as the Reading and Thinking ,Reading for Writing ,and reading sections in the Workbook of the new textbooks. In addition, the scattered texts containing reading materials such as Text and Accessing your Process in each unit of the new textbooks are also included in the research scope to ensure

3.3 Research Procedures

This study adopts textual analysis to systematically analyze the activities and question design of the reading sections in textbooks. In the specific operation process ,the reading tasks in the textbooks are first sorted out one by one and coded and classified according to the critical thinking skills framework proposed by Chen [12].The framework divides critical thinking tasks into three core dimensions: analysis ,reasoning ,and evaluation ,and further refines them into the following specific categories(Table 1):

Table 1. Analysis Framework: Critical Thinking Skills and Reading Activities/Question Design

Core Skills of Critical Thinking	Specific Reflections in Reading Activities/Question Design
Analysis Tasks	Identify and clarify the central argument ,main ideas, and social and cultural values of the article
	Compare the similarities and differences between characters ,things ,or viewpoints ,and distinguish facts from opinions
	Analyze text features ,writing techniques ,writing purposes, and author’s attitudes Analyze phenomena, characters, or behaviors in the text
Reasoning Tasks	Infer the author’s implied meaning, characters’ psychology and attitudes between the lines, and provide reasons or evidence
	Make reasonable inferences, predictions, or explanations about the development of text content
	Conduct in-depth inquiries, question beliefs, viewpoints, explanations, and put forward appropriate questions Put forward different hypotheses, plans, or results, and provide reasons, evidence, or facts
Evaluation Tasks	Evaluate the credibility of information or sources of information
	Evaluate the writing techniques, author’s viewpoints and attitudes of the text, and provide explanations
	Evaluate the text content, relevant characters, events, or plans, and provide reasons or evidence

After coding and classifying the reading tasks of old and new textbooks, Excel software is used for statistical analysis. The proportion of each type of critical thinking task in different versions of textbooks is calculated, and the characteristics and changing trends of critical thinking task design are revealed through horizontal comparison between old and new versions and vertical comparison of task distribution in each grade. At the same time, qualitative analysis is combined with specific unit cases to interpret the design intention and practical effect of textbook compilers in cultivating critical thinking, so as to provide both quantitative and qualitative support for the research conclusions.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Overall Increase in the Proportion of Critical Thinking Tasks

From Compulsory 1 to Compulsory 3, the new textbooks have a significantly higher frequency and proportion of critical thinking tasks than the old textbooks, showing an obvious upward trend on the whole(Table 2). Specifically, critical thinking tasks have increased in all grades, especially in Compulsory 1 and Compulsory 2, reflecting the significant strengthening of critical thinking cultivation in the basic stage of the new textbooks. In contrast, although Compulsory 3 is

still higher than the old version, the increase has slowed down.

From the overall structure, the new textbooks have increased the proportion of critical thinking tasks in all grades, reflecting a significantly higher emphasis on the cultivation of critical thinking. From a vertical comparison, the proportion of critical thinking tasks does not continue to rise with the progress of grades and declines to a certain extent in senior grades, indicating that the task arrangement between

different grades still has the problem of unbalanced gradient.

Overall, the new textbooks have achieved significant optimization in critical thinking task design compared with the old ones, laying a more solid foundation for critical thinking cultivation especially in the lower grades. However, how to further optimize the cohesion between grades and build a more continuous and hierarchical task system is still a key direction for subsequent textbook revision.

Table 2. Frequency and Proportion of Overall Critical Thinking Tasks in the Two Sets of Textbooks

Version/Textbook	Old Version		New Version	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Compulsory 1	32	11.00%	52	13.58%
Compulsory 2	30	10.31%	60	15.67%
Compulsory 3	24	8.25%	44	11.49%

4.2 Optimization of the Structure of Critical Thinking Task Types

There are notable differences in the structure of critical thinking tasks between the old and new versions of the textbooks. The overall trend has shifted from being dominated by a single type to a more diversified development pattern.

In the old version of the textbooks, analytical tasks held a relatively dominant position, with a higher proportion than reasoning and evaluation tasks. The overall feature was centered on information comprehension. The proportions of reasoning and evaluation tasks were relatively

low, especially in the evaluation dimension. In contrast, the new version of the textbooks has a more balanced task structure: the proportion of analytical tasks has decreased but still maintains an important foundational position; the proportion of reasoning tasks has further increased, becoming the most prevalent type; and the proportion of evaluation tasks has also significantly increased, narrowing the gap with the other two types. Overall, it presents a feature of analysis as the foundation, reasoning as the focus, and evaluation developing in parallel. (Table 3)

Table 3. Frequency and Proportion of Analysis, Reasoning, and Evaluation Tasks in Critical Thinking Tasks

Version/Textbook	Old Version		New Version	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Analysis Tasks	33	38.37%	49	31.41%
Reasoning Tasks	30	34.88%	60	38.46%
Evaluation Tasks	23	26.74%	47	30.13%

This change reflects a shift in the textbook compilation philosophy. The new version of the textbooks shows a transition from "analysis dominance" to "equal emphasis on reasoning and evaluation" in the design of critical thinking tasks. The old version of the textbooks focused more on basic information analysis, while the new version has significantly increased the proportion of higher-order thinking skills such as logical reasoning. This adjustment reflects a deeper consideration of students' thinking development in the compilation of the textbooks. It not only requires students to understand and analyze information but also emphasizes the

ability to conduct logical reasoning and independent evaluation based on evidence. This is consistent with the goal orientation of strengthening the cultivation of critical and innovative thinking in the curriculum standards, marking a deepening of the design focus of critical thinking tasks from "knowledge analysis" to "thinking construction".

4.3 Optimization of Analysis Tasks

There are significant differences in the internal structure of analytical tasks between the old and new versions of the textbooks, which are reflected in the adjustment of the task focus. The

analytical tasks in the old version of the textbooks tend to focus on the understanding of the text content itself, emphasizing students' identification of the central idea and surface information. In contrast, the new version of the textbooks, while retaining the basic analytical tasks, places more emphasis on grasping the deeper features of the text.

Both sets of textbooks have a relatively high proportion of tasks such as "analyzing phenomena, characters, or behaviors in the text", and the proportion of such tasks in the new version has further increased. (Table 4) This indicates that both the old and new versions consider the analysis of text content as an

important foundation for critical thinking training. The old version of the textbooks places more emphasis on the identification and clarification of the central argument, main ideas, and social and cultural values of the article, demonstrating a strong orientation towards basic understanding. In contrast, the proportion of tasks such as "analyzing text features, writing techniques, writing purposes, and the author's attitude" in the new version has significantly increased, indicating that it is no longer limited to the analysis of "what is written" in the text, but rather guides students to think about "how it is written", "why it is written this way", and "what stance is expressed".

Table 4. Proportion of Various Analysis Tasks in Critical Thinking Tasks of the Two Sets of Textbooks

Analysis Tasks	Old Version		New Version	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Identify and clarify the central argument, main ideas, and social and cultural values of the article	9	27.27%	12	24.49%
Compare the similarities and differences between characters, things, or viewpoints, and distinguish facts from opinions	8	24.24%	7	14.29%
Analyze text features, writing techniques, writing purposes, and author's attitudes	5	15.15%	11	22.45%
Analyze phenomena, characters, or behaviors in the text	11	33.33%	19	38.78%

This shift is particularly evident in the design of specific tasks. In the old version of the textbook "English Around the World", the task requires students to sort out the phenomenon of official languages in different regions, which mainly trains students to summarize and understand the text information, belonging to basic content analysis. In the new version of the textbook "Travel Around", the depth and complexity of the analytical tasks have significantly increased. Taking "Healthy Eating" in the old version of the textbook as an example, the task only requires students to analyze the writing technique of "giving examples" in the expository text, with the focus still on the identification of a single text expression method. In the new version of the textbook "Sports and Fitness", a more comprehensive task chain is designed, requiring students to compare the differences in the use of rhetoric in two argumentative texts on the same topic and, on this basis, infer the author's implicit attitude towards "healthy choices". Such tasks integrate text form analysis, comparative analysis, and logical inference, enhancing the comprehensiveness and challenge of thinking activities.

In the new version of the textbooks, the relative proportion of tasks such as "comparing the similarities and differences between people, things, or viewpoints, and distinguishing facts from opinions" has not increased but rather decreased. This indicates that the analytical tasks in the new version of the textbooks integrate thinking processes such as comparison and distinction into more complex and in-depth analytical activities. The new version of the textbooks guide students not to merely distinguish facts from opinions but to further explore the expression strategies, writing intentions, and value positions behind different viewpoints.

Overall, the analytical tasks in the old version of the textbooks focus more on basic text understanding and content identification, while the new version of the textbooks pay more attention to the expansion of analytical dimensions and the enhancement of thinking depth, especially emphasizing the attention to text features, writing purposes, and the author's attitude. This change indicates that the design of analytical tasks in the new version of the textbooks is gradually moving from "content

analysis" to " deep interpretation", thereby more effectively promoting the development of students' critical thinking abilities.

4.4 Improvement of Reasoning Tasks

The new version of the textbook shows significant improvement in the design of reasoning tasks, with the most prominent change being the shift and deepening of the reasoning focus. The reasoning tasks in the old version mainly focused on making reasonable inferences

or predictions about the text content. In contrast, the new version has significantly enhanced" in-depth questioning" tasks, encouraging students to actively question the viewpoints and explanations in the text and raise appropriate questions. This means that reasoning training is no longer just about following the text logic for understanding and extension, but rather guiding students to examine the text and emphasizing critical thinking more prominently (Table 5).

Table 5. Proportion of Various Reasoning Tasks in Critical Thinking Tasks of the Two Sets of Textbooks

Reasoning Tasks	Old Version		New Version	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Infer the author's implied meaning, characters' psychology and attitudes between the lines, and provide reasons or evidence	8	26.67%	14	23.33%
Make reasonable inferences, predictions, or explanations about the development of text content	14	46.67%	25	41.67%
Conduct in-depth inquiries, question beliefs, viewpoints, explanations, and put forward appropriate questions	2	6.67%	8	13.33%
Put forward different hypotheses, plans, or results, and provide reasons, evidence, or facts	6	20.00%	13	21.67%

In terms of logical inference, the task design in the new version is more refined, emphasizing reasoning based on the text. When inferring the author's implied meaning or the attitude of characters, the textbook guides students to pay attention to specific textual details. In the compulsory course two" Wildlife Protection", the textbook leads students to infer the urgent attitude towards ecological protection by analyzing modal verbs such as" must" and" should" in the article. Compared with the information extraction-oriented tasks in the old version, this design places more emphasis on the combination of textual details and emotional logic, making the reasoning process more rigorous and persuasive.

For divergent thinking tasks such as" proposing different hypotheses or solutions", the new version has also made adjustments. The old version of compulsory course two set an open-ended task:" Imagine you work for WWF. Discuss in groups of four what you would suggest. "In contrast, the new version has changed it to" Look at the posters below. Which emotions do the photos communicate?" in multiple units, transforming hypotheses into logical arguments based on text or visual materials, better integrating creative thinking with logical thinking while maintaining the

rationality of the argument.

Overall, the new version of the textbook, while maintaining logical inference training, has strengthened students' critical thinking by adding in-depth questioning tasks, elevating reasoning ability from merely" understanding the text" to the higher-order thinking level of being able to" question, analyze, and argue".

4.5 Strengthening of Evaluation Tasks

There are both continuity and structural adjustments in the design of evaluation tasks between the old and new versions. Overall, both sets of textbooks attach great importance to the task of evaluating text content, relevant characters, events, or plans, and providing reasons or evidence", which always occupies a dominant position in evaluation tasks. However, compared with the old version, the internal composition of evaluation tasks in the new textbooks is more diverse, and the evaluation perspectives are richer. (Table 6)

The evaluation tasks of the old textbooks are highly concentrated, mainly focusing on evaluating text content, characters, events, or plans, with a relatively low proportion of other types of tasks, indicating that their evaluation activities are more at the level of judging the text itself. Although this task type still accounts for

the largest proportion in the new textbooks, its proportion has decreased; at the same time, the proportion of "evaluating the credibility of information or sources of information" and "evaluating the writing techniques, author's viewpoints and attitudes of the text, and providing explanations" has increased

significantly, indicating that in the cultivation of evaluation ability, the textbooks are no longer limited to judging the content itself, but gradually expanding to analytical evaluation of information sources, expression methods, and position attitudes.

Table 6. Proportion of Various Evaluation Tasks in Critical Thinking Tasks of the Two Sets of Textbooks

Evaluation Tasks	Old Version		New Version	
	Frequency	Proportion	Frequency	Proportion
Evaluate the credibility of information or sources of information	1	4.35%	5	10.64%
Evaluate the writing techniques, author's viewpoints and attitudes of the text, and provide explanations	3	13.04%	10	21.28%
Evaluate the text content, relevant characters, events, or plans, and provide reasons or evidence	19	82.61%	32	68.09%

This change reflects the obvious progress in the design of evaluation tasks in the new textbooks. It not only requires students to judge the text content but also emphasizes the interpretation of reasons and evidence support in the evaluation process, guiding students from simply "expressing opinions" to "making judgments based on evidence". In the unit Wildlife Protection in Compulsory 2, students are required to judge whether relevant statements belong to the author's opinions or text facts combined with the living environment of Tibetan antelopes, and explain the reasons. Such tasks are not just simple answers but require students to establish a connection between text information and personal judgments, reflecting the textbook's guidance for students to advance from "information acceptance" to "evidence support".

However, the evaluation tasks of the new textbooks still have certain limitations. Although the task types are more abundant than the old version, the overall evaluation activities are still relatively basic, and the expansion of high-level evaluation tasks is insufficient. Although some tasks require students to evaluate characters' behaviors or moral choices and provide evidence, they often stay at the level of one-way argumentation, lacking the comparison, refutation, and integration of opposing viewpoints, making it difficult to fully train students' dialectical thinking and counter-evidence ability. For example, in the evaluation task of the character's behavior of concealing the truth in *Morals and Virtues* in Compulsory 3, the textbook mainly guides students to judge whether the behavior is reasonable but does not further set up discussions on opposing

viewpoints around the principle of integrity, which limits the thinking depth of evaluation tasks to a certain extent.

Overall, the design of evaluation tasks in the new textbooks is more perfect than that in the old version. It not only retains the main framework of evaluating text content, characters, and events but also enhances the evaluation requirements for information credibility, writing techniques, and author's attitudes, reflecting the expansion of evaluation dimensions and the improvement of thinking requirements. However, from the perspective of higher-level critical thinking cultivation, there is still room for further strengthening in "multi-position discrimination", "opposing viewpoint refutation", and "in-depth inquiry".

5. Conclusions and Implications

By comparing the critical thinking task design in the reading sections of old and new senior high school English textbooks, this study finds that the new textbooks have made significant progress in cultivating critical thinking. Overall, the proportion of critical thinking tasks in the new textbooks has increased significantly, the task type structure is more reasonable, showing the characteristics of collaborative development of analysis, reasoning, and evaluation tasks. Among them, while retaining basic understanding, analysis tasks pay more attention to the training of high-level analysis such as text features, writing techniques, writing purposes, and author's attitudes; reasoning tasks not only strengthen the precision of logical inference but also increase in-depth inquiries to guide students to take the initiative to question and reflect on text premises; evaluation tasks, on the basis of

maintaining the evaluation of text content and characters, increase the analysis of information credibility, writing methods, and author's viewpoints, and the overall level of thinking training has been improved.

However, the study also reveals the limitations of current textbook design. Firstly, the proportion of critical thinking tasks in each grade does not form a continuously rising gradient, leading to insufficient coherence and systematicness in the cultivation of students' thinking ability; secondly, the proportion of high-level thinking tasks such as in-depth inquiry and multi-argumentation is still low, which is difficult to fully meet the needs of critical thinking development; thirdly, evaluation tasks still focus on text form analysis, with insufficient guidance for content value judgment and viewpoint refutation, limiting students' critical thinking depth.

In general, the new textbooks have significantly improved the design of critical thinking tasks compared with the old ones, paying more attention to the cultivation of students' high-level thinking ability. However, there is still room for improvement in in-depth inquiry, evaluation task design, and cross-grade task cohesion. In the future, textbook compilation can further optimize the task type structure, strengthen the design of high-level thinking tasks, establish a cross-grade continuous critical thinking cultivation system, and combine the actual feedback from teachers and students to adopt a combination of internal and external evaluation to comprehensively improve the role of textbooks in cultivating students' critical thinking.

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