

A Study on Classroom Questioning in Junior High School English Reading Classes for Critical Thinking Development

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Abstract: The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) clearly defines developing students' core competencies as the curriculum objective, among which the improvement of thinking quality is a key dimension. English reading is an important way for junior high school students to acquire linguistic knowledge and cultural information, and also an effective carrier to sharpen students' thinking quality, especially critical thinking competence. However, in current junior high school English reading classrooms, teachers' questioning design often overemphasizes the extraction of factual information, lacking question chains that guide students in in-depth analysis, evaluation and creation. There is insufficient attention and inadequate methods to cultivating critical thinking. Therefore, based on specific junior high school English reading teaching cases and theories such as Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, this study explores how to effectively stimulate and improve students' critical thinking skills and dispositions by designing hierarchical and heuristic classroom questioning strategies in the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages, so as to promote the all-round development of students' core competencies.

Keywords: Critical Thinking; Junior High School English; Reading Teaching; Classroom Questioning

1. Research Background

Language learning is inseparable from thinking development. The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards) sets developing students' core competencies as the curriculum objective, covering four dimensions: linguistic competence,

cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability, and implements the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education. Thinking quality, as an important part of core competencies, has attracted increasing attention. Nevertheless, in current junior high school English reading teaching, teachers' cultivation of students' thinking mostly stays at a low level, and the cultivation of students' higher-order thinking, especially critical thinking, is obviously insufficient. Constrained by the traditional teaching mode, the teaching process often overemphasizes the training of linguistic knowledge and examination-taking skills, paying insufficient attention to the development of students' thinking quality, which affects the comprehensive achievement of the core competency objectives.

Classroom questioning is the core means of teacher-student interaction and thinking activation in junior high school English reading classrooms. Effective questioning design can guide students to deeply understand texts, discriminate information, evaluate viewpoints and form independent opinions, which is a key way to cultivate critical thinking competence. Therefore, based on specific junior high school English reading teaching cases, this paper focuses on the link of classroom questioning, and deeply explores how to effectively stimulate and improve students' critical thinking competence by designing targeted, heuristic and gradient question chains, so as to help the practical implementation of the core competency objectives of the English subject.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Status of English Reading Teaching for Critical Thinking Development

The promulgation of the Curriculum Standards has promoted the in-depth research on the core competencies of the English subject, especially the discussion on the cultivation of students'

thinking quality has shown a significant growth trend. This paper reviews representative journal literatures around the two core keywords of “critical thinking” and “reading teaching”.

Ji expounds that critical thinking competence refers to a comprehensive thinking literacy reflected in individual cognitive activities (such as acquiring knowledge, applying knowledge and solving problems). It is not only the core path to cultivating students’ innovative awareness, but also one of the core objectives of junior high school English teaching. Against the background of the in-depth advancement of the new curriculum reform, junior high school English teachers need to consciously implement the cultivation of critical thinking to promote the improvement of students’ thinking quality [1]. Li points out that it is crucial to cultivate students’ critical thinking in junior high school English reading teaching. By innovating teaching strategies, creating heuristic question situations and deepening thinking training, students’ thinking can be effectively activated, their abilities of analysis, evaluation and creation can be significantly improved, and ultimately the overall development of students’ English reading literacy can be promoted, laying a solid foundation for their lifelong learning ability [2]. Liu et al. combine the current situation of traditional middle school English classrooms and hold that students in traditional middle school English classrooms are often in a passive state of receiving knowledge, and teachers also lack the awareness of systematically promoting the development of students’ thinking abilities (especially critical thinking). Innovation, as the core driving force of social development, is rooted in critical thinking competence. Integrating critical thinking into reading teaching in English teaching is an effective way to cultivate this ability [3]. Shang proposes that critical thinking competence is a higher-order cognitive literacy necessary for students’ learning, embodied in the learning habit of independent thinking. Integrating critical thinking cultivation into the teaching of English, a core subject in junior high schools, especially in the reading link, can effectively promote students’ independent thinking. This plays a vital role in cultivating students’ English core competencies including linguistic competence, thinking quality, cultural awareness and learning ability [4].

Wei believes that the establishment of the

concept of English core competencies has made the cultivation of thinking quality (especially critical thinking) a core concern of English classroom teaching. In the era of the advancement of the national reading strategy and the in-depth integration of information technology, strengthening critical thinking training can not only cultivate students’ independent critical thinking ability and information discrimination ability, but also be a key path to responding to the national demand for innovative talents [5]. To sum up, the journal literatures on the exploration of English reading teaching for critical thinking development mainly focus on the teaching practice of English reading, put forward suggestions and strategies on how to develop students’ critical thinking in English reading teaching, which have been fully implemented in teaching practice and have certain reference and enlightening significance for future English reading teaching.

2.2 Research Status of Classroom Questioning in Senior High School English Reading Classes for Critical Thinking Development

Thinking begins with questions. Classroom questioning can open up students’ minds, enlighten their thinking, develop their intelligence and cultivate their abilities. Zhang proposes that reconstructing question types: transforming closed questions into open questions, upgrading clarifying questions to inquiry tasks, optimizing perceptual questions into rational questions, and shifting teacher-led questioning to students’ independent questioning can trigger the active construction process of students’ cognitive systems and realize the improvement of critical thinking competence in the practice of question analysis and solution [6]. Kuang points out that appropriate classroom questioning can arouse students’ interest in senior high school politics classes, acting as a bridge connecting teachers, students and teaching content. It makes the whole class proceed in the dynamic process of interaction and generation, and at the same time highlights students’ dominant position in classroom teaching [7]. Wang constructs a classroom questioning framework by applying the KWL reading teaching mode, guides students to improve the KWL table with the help of question chains, strengthens students’ dominant position, and drives the progressive deepening of

thinking [8].

To sum up, as the core driving force of thinking development, classroom questioning can significantly improve students' thinking quality through systematic design. However, there are few relevant studies focusing on classroom questioning to improve students' critical thinking in reading teaching. Therefore, combined with specific reading teaching cases, this paper elaborates in detail how to guide students to gradually develop thinking quality through effective classroom questioning, so as to provide a reference for relevant research in the future.

2.3 Theoretical Basis

This paper mainly designs effective classroom questioning based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to promote the cultivation of students' thinking quality in English reading classrooms.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives divides human cognitive processes into six levels from low to high: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating, providing a clear advanced framework of thinking for classroom questioning design. In junior high school English reading teaching, traditional questioning mostly stays at the levels of remembering and understanding, such as extracting factual information from texts. The cultivation of critical thinking requires teachers to design questions at the levels of analyzing, evaluating and creating. For example, at the analyzing level, students can be guided to analyze the structural logic of the text; at the evaluating level, students can be encouraged to reflect on the author's viewpoints; at the creating level, students can be allowed to express innovatively based on the text. Designing gradient question chains according to this theory can promote students' thinking to develop from lower-order to higher-order, meeting the requirements of critical thinking cultivation.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development points out that there are existing level and potential development level in students' development, and the area between the two is the zone of proximal development. Effective teaching should be based on students' zone of proximal development, helping students cross this area and achieve ability improvement

through appropriate guidance and support. In junior high school English reading classroom questioning, the questions designed by teachers should be slightly higher than students' existing thinking level, with certain challenges but within the scope that students can reach through efforts. Such questions can stimulate students' thinking potential, prompt them to think and explore actively, improve critical thinking competence in the process of solving problems, and gradually realize the leap from the existing level to the potential development level.

3. Basic Model of Classroom Questioning Design in Junior High School English Reading Classes for Critical Thinking Development

The KWL teaching mode proposed by American scholar Donna Ogle, based on constructivist theory, is highly instructive in reading teaching. K (What I know) represents students' existing knowledge and experience, W (What I want to know) refers to what students want to learn, and L (What I learned) is the knowledge students have acquired through this class. This mode fully mobilizes students' initiative and subjectivity, effectively improving classroom teaching effect. Therefore, this study takes the KWL table (as shown in Table 1) as the basic model of classroom questioning design in junior high school English reading teaching. Through carefully designed questions, students are guided to analyze, evaluate and create in the reading process, so as to cultivate and develop critical thinking.

Table 1. KWL Table

K(What I know)	W(What I want to know)	L(What I learned)

4. Case Study of Classroom Questioning Design in Junior High School English Reading Classes for Critical Thinking Development

4.1 Textbook Analysis

The reading material selected for this lesson is the reading part of Unit 6 I'm going to study computer science in Grade 8 Volume 1 of PEP Junior High School English, and the specific text is Resolutions Made Easy. The core theme of the article belongs to the theme cluster of "Personal Growth, Life and Study Plans" under the general theme context of "People and Themselves". The

content focuses on the formulation, common types and methods of achieving New Year resolutions, aiming to guide students to think about their own goals and plans, and cultivate a positive attitude towards life and self-management ability. The article is an expository essay with a general-specific-general structure. It begins by pointing out the phenomenon that people often make resolutions on New Year's Day, elaborates on different types of resolutions in the middle, such as physical health, self-improvement and academic progress, and ends by explaining that although resolutions are beautiful, they are difficult to achieve, encouraging students to strive to achieve their goals. The language of the article is concise and easy to understand, with diverse and repeated sentence patterns, which is convenient for students to understand and master relevant vocabulary and expressions. Meanwhile, the logic is clear, helping students analyze the article structure.

4.2 Student Analysis

This teaching design is for Grade 8 junior high school students. They have a certain English foundation and the ability to express topics related to daily life. The topic of New Year resolutions is close to life and can stimulate students' reading interest. After studying in Grade 7 and the first half of Grade 8, students have mastered certain reading skills, such as skimming to get the main idea of the article and scanning to find specific information. However, they are weak in in-depth analysis of article viewpoints, evaluation of the rationality of content and creative thinking combined with their own reality, which needs guidance and cultivation through effective classroom questioning by teachers.

4.3 Teaching Objectives

Students can sort out the common types and implementation methods of New Year resolutions mentioned in the article, and accurately analyze the article structure.

Master relevant vocabulary and key sentence patterns such as "resolution", "promise" and "improve", and use these knowledge to describe their own New Year resolutions.

Use reading strategies such as skimming and scanning to quickly obtain key information of the article, and understand the details of the article through intensive reading.

Evaluate the rationality of different New Year resolutions, formulate feasible New Year plans combined with their own reality, and cultivate critical thinking and self-planning ability.

4.4 Key and Difficult Points of Teaching

Key points: Analyze the types and implementation methods of New Year resolutions in the article, master relevant vocabulary and sentence patterns, and describe one's own New Year resolutions.

Difficult points: Evaluate the rationality of New Year resolutions mentioned in the article, and formulate practical personal New Year plans combined with reality.

4.5 Teaching Methods

Task-based teaching method and cooperative learning method

4.6 Teaching Procedures

Pre-class Preparation

Before class, the teacher introduces the KWL table to students, explains in detail the meanings and usage of K, W and L. Then, each student is given a KWL table to fill in the content of Column K preliminarily based on existing knowledge and experience, so as to prepare for classroom reading learning. At the same time, students are guided to initially think about knowledge related to the topic and activate their thinking.

Step 1: Pre-reading

The teacher plays a short video about people making New Year plans to attract students' attention and lead to the topic of New Year resolutions in this lesson.

The teacher shows the article title Resolutions Made Easy and the illustrations in the textbook, guides students to observe and underline the key words in the title, and asks: "What do you think the passage will talk about according to the title and pictures?" Students are asked to make preliminary predictions about the article content combined with the title and pictures.

Based on students' predictions, the teacher further asks: "If you make resolutions, what aspects will you consider?" guiding students to connect with real life and think about the aspects involved in making New Year resolutions.

Design intention: Through videos, pictures and questions, stimulate students' reading interest and cultivate their ability to predict the article content. These two questions belong to

“understanding” questions in Bloom’s cognitive classification, helping students initially construct a cognitive framework for the article content.

Step 2: While-reading

Fast reading to grasp the article structure

The teacher asks students to browse the article quickly, guides them to focus on the title, subheadings, the first and last sentences of each paragraph, summarize the main idea of the article and divide the paragraph structure. Macroscopically, the article can be divided into three parts: the first part introduces the topic of New Year resolutions; the second part introduces different types of New Year resolutions; the third part discusses the difficulties and suggestions for achieving resolutions. The teacher presents the article structure on PPT.

Design intention: Cultivate students’ ability to quickly read to obtain the main idea of the article and analyze the article structure, so that students can grasp the article content as a whole. Fill in Column K combined with the article structure

The teacher asks: “Based on your own experience and the article structure, what do you already know about resolutions?” Students are organized to discuss in groups, communicate and supplement with each other, fill the discussion results in Column K, and then randomly select groups to display and share.

Design intention: Through group discussion, students share their existing cognition of New Year resolutions combined with their own experience and article structure to enrich knowledge reserve. This question belongs to a “knowledge” question, cultivating students’ lower-order thinking.

Raise questions and fill in Column W

The teacher then asks: “What do you hope to learn from this passage about resolutions?” Students are asked to write down what they want to learn in Column W, then share and communicate. The teacher records students’ answers on the blackboard, and students improve Column W according to the records.

Design intention: Stimulate students’ curiosity and awareness of active questioning, clarify reading objectives, and promote students to read the article actively to find answers.

Intensive reading to answer questions

Students read the article carefully, find the answers to Column W questions in the text, and fill the answers in Column L. After completion,

students share, and other students supplement and improve their own Column L. Finally, the teacher explains and guides students’ answers and questions to help them deeply understand the article content.

Design intention: Students obtain information through independent intensive reading of the article, cultivating autonomous learning ability. The teacher plays a guiding and supplementary role in this process, reflecting students’ dominant position.

Step 3: Post-reading

In-depth analysis and content evaluation

The teacher asks: “Do you think all the resolutions mentioned in the article are reasonable? Why or why not?” Students are asked to discuss with deskmates and share viewpoints combined with the article content and real life.

Design intention: Guide students to analyze and evaluate the article content. This is an “analysis” question, cultivating students’ critical thinking and enabling them to view the article viewpoints rationally.

Connect with reality and formulate plans

The teacher shows some successful cases of reasonably formulating and implementing New Year plans, and then asks: “What kind of resolutions will you make for yourself? How will you make them work?” Students are organized to discuss in groups, encouraged to formulate New Year plans combined with their own situation and explain specific methods to achieve the plans. Then, each group selects a representative to share, and other groups can put forward suggestions and opinions.

Design intention: This link belongs to “evaluation” and “creation” questions. Through discussion and sharing, cultivate students’ critical and creative thinking, enable students to apply what they have learned to real life, and improve self-planning ability.

Step 4: Homework

Students write a short essay entitled My New Year’s Resolutions based on the KWL table and classroom discussion results, expounding their own New Year resolutions and implementation plans, with no less than 80 words.

Design intention: Consolidate the knowledge learned in this lesson through writing, exercise students’ written expression ability, and further deepen the thinking and planning of New Year resolutions.

5. Strategies to Promote Students' Critical Thinking through Classroom Questioning

Through the practical exploration of classroom questioning design cases in junior high school English reading classes and theoretical analysis, the following effective strategies to promote the development of students' critical thinking through classroom questioning can be summarized:

5.1 Pre-reading: Create Situations to Stimulate Thinking Interest

In the pre-reading stage, teachers should create real situations close to students' lives through questioning, activate students' existing knowledge and experience, trigger cognitive conflicts at the same time, and stimulate students' inquiry desire. For example, in the lesson *Resolutions Made Easy*, guide students to predict the article content with the help of videos, titles and pictures, and ask "What do you think the passage will talk about according to the title and pictures?" and "If you make resolutions, what aspects will you consider?", letting students think actively, connect life experience with the reading topic, and initially construct a cognitive framework, laying a foundation for the development of critical thinking. Questioning at this stage should focus on openness and interest, avoiding closed questions that limit students' thinking, and encouraging students to imagine and speculate boldly.

5.2 While-reading: Ask Hierarchical Questions to Guide Deepening Thinking

In the while-reading link, teachers should design hierarchical question chains according to Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives. Starting from lower-order "knowledge" questions, such as "Based on your own experience and the article structure, what do you already know about resolutions?", to help students sort out existing knowledge; then to "understanding" questions to guide students to grasp the basic content and structure of the article; and then to "analysis" questions to promote students to deeply analyze the text. At the same time, combined with the KWL table, guide students to raise questions and explore answers independently through questioning. In this process, teachers give timely guidance and enlightenment to cultivate students' autonomous learning and independent thinking ability, and gradually realize the leap of thinking from

lower-order to higher-order.

5.3 Post-reading: Expand and Extend to Cultivate Thinking Quality

In the post-reading stage, questioning should focus on guiding students to evaluate and create text content. On the one hand, ask "Do you think all the resolutions mentioned in the article are reasonable?" to let students analyze and evaluate the article viewpoints combined with real life and cultivate critical thinking; on the other hand, set open questions such as "What kind of resolutions will you make for yourself? How will you make them work?" to encourage students to apply what they have learned to real life, put forward innovative ideas and solutions, and cultivate creative thinking. In addition, activities such as debates and group discussions can be organized to promote thinking collisions between students, broaden thinking horizons and improve thinking quality.

5.4 Pay Attention to Individual Differences and Implement Hierarchical Questioning

Each student has differences in knowledge foundation, thinking ability and learning style. When designing classroom questioning, teachers should fully consider these differences, design questions of different difficulty and types to meet the needs of students at different levels. For students with weak foundation and thinking ability, more guiding and basic questions can be set to help them gradually build confidence and participate in classroom thinking; for students with strong ability, challenging and open questions are put forward to stimulate their in-depth thinking and tap thinking potential, so that every student can realize the development of critical thinking on the original basis.

5.5 Encourage Students to Question and Cultivate Autonomous Critical Awareness

To cultivate students' critical thinking, teachers should not only be good at asking questions, but also encourage students to take the initiative to ask questions. Teachers can create a relaxed and democratic classroom atmosphere to guide students to raise doubts and different opinions about text content, teacher explanations and classmates' viewpoints. For example, set up a special questioning link in class to encourage students to share confusions or problems found in the reading process; respond positively and affirm students' questions, guide students to

discuss solutions together, and gradually cultivate students' autonomous critical awareness and independent thinking ability.

6. Conclusion

As a key component of students' thinking quality, critical thinking plays an important role in junior high school English reading teaching. As an important means to stimulate students' thinking vitality, the design and implementation of classroom questioning directly affect the effectiveness of critical thinking cultivation. This study constructs a basic model of classroom questioning based on the KWL mode, and explores questioning strategies from pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading links combined with specific cases, effectively guiding students to develop critical thinking in analysis, evaluation and creation. Practice shows that strategies such as creating situations to stimulate interest, asking hierarchical questions to deepen thinking, expanding and extending to cultivate quality, paying attention to differences for hierarchical questioning, and encouraging students to ask questions independently can significantly improve students' critical thinking ability, helping students transform from knowledge receivers to active thinkers. However, the cultivation of critical thinking cannot be achieved overnight, which requires teachers to integrate relevant strategies into daily teaching consistently. In the future junior high school English reading teaching, teachers should continuously optimize classroom questioning design, flexibly use various strategies, and constantly explore more suitable teaching methods for students' development. Meanwhile, it is expected that more educators will pay attention to critical thinking cultivation, jointly promote the improvement of junior high school English teaching quality, effectively achieve the

core competency objectives of the English subject, and lay a solid foundation for students' lifelong learning and development.

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