International Journal of Educational Development
ISSN Print: 3104-4263
ISSN Online: 3104-4271
CD ISSN: 3104-428X
https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9096

Research on the Strategies of Cultivating Critical Thinking in Junior High School English Teaching

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How to cite this paper: Xiang, S. (2026). Research on the Strategies of Cultivating Critical Thinking in Junior High School English Teaching. International Journal of Educational Development, 4(1), 96–103. ISSN Print: 3104-4263, ISSN Online: 3104-4271.
https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9096
Published: 2026-07-13

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Abstract

Critical thinking, as a vital component of "thinking quality" within the core competencies of the English discipline, holds a significant position in English language teaching. The emphasis placed on cultivating students' critical thinking in the *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards*, the requirement for the integration of diverse Chinese and foreign cultures in junior high school English textbooks, and the intrinsic need for the rapid development of junior high school students' cognitive abilities all underscore the urgency of enhancing critical thinking cultivation in junior high school English instruction. This study, drawing on a literature review and theoretical analysis, identifies the key problems in cultivating critical thinking in junior high school English teaching and proposes corresponding strategies to address them. It offers practical implications for junior high school English educators seeking to align classroom instruction with competency-based educational reform.

Keywords

Junior high school; English teaching; Critical thinking; Core competencies; Cultivation strategies

1. Introduction

Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the *New Curriculum Standards*) points out that thinking quality refers to the personality characteristics of a person's thinking, reflecting students' levels and degrees in understanding, analyzing, comparing, inferring, critiquing, evaluating, creating, etc. (Ministry of Education, 2022) Critical thinking, as an important component of thinking quality, is the core thinking quality that determines the competition of talents and national development in the new century. (Dong, 2018) However, in daily English teaching practice, many teachers still confine their teaching focus to the transmission of language knowledge and skills, failing to place the cultivation of critical thinking among the important teaching objectives, so that

students' critical thinking fails to develop adequately. Therefore, exploring effective ways to cultivate students' critical thinking in junior high school English teaching has become an important issue that needs to be solved urgently.

2. The Connotation and Importance of Critical Thinking

2.1. The Connotation of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking, also known as thinking ability or reflective thinking, is a key part of thinking ability, and its cultivation has become an important task in the current educational field (Zhang, 2024). The American Delphi Project proposed in the 1990s that critical thinking can be divided into two dimensions: cognitive ability and affective disposition. (Zhang, 2024) Among them, cognitive ability includes interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Affective disposition includes curiosity, confidence, open-mindedness, flexibility, fairness, honesty, prudence, diligence, empathy, etc. (Facione, 1990) Paul and Elder pointed out that critical thinking is the process by which people adopt appropriate evaluation criteria in order to determine the true value and significance of a thing, so as to achieve an accurate evaluation of the thing; the evaluation is characterized by autonomy, self-discipline, self-monitoring and self-correction, emphasizing the systematic monitoring of thinking for its improvement. (Paul & Elder, 2014) Critical thinking is related to specific topics and specific contents; knowledge, standards and arguments in different disciplinary fields differ, so the manifestations of critical thinking in different disciplinary fields are also different (Mahanal et al., 2019). In today's English teaching, critical thinking, as an important thinking quality for the development of students' core competences, is a key ability to promote students' all-round development.

2.2. The Importance of Critical Thinking

In 1998, the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century*: Vision and Action issued at the first World Conference on Higher Education emphasized that an important mission and responsibility of education and training is to adopt new teaching and learning methods to help students acquire skills, talents and interpersonal abilities, and learn creative and critical analysis as well as independent thinking and collaborative work (Zhao, 1998). Zhang Jinxiu pointed out that the cultivation of higher-order thinking ability is a universal requirement for all students in the compulsory education stage, especially critical thinking (Zhang, 2016). Junior high school is a critical period for students' cognitive development. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development stages, students at this stage have begun to be able to engage in abstract logical thinking, and have a deeper understanding of the world. Therefore, during the learning process, they not only need to master basic knowledge and skills, but also need to cultivate higher-level thinking abilities such as critical thinking, in order to meet the needs of future learning and social

development.

3. Existing Problems in Cultivating Critical Thinking in Junior High School English Teaching

3.1. Teaching Content: Neglecting the Influence of Cultural Background Knowledge on Thinking Development

In junior high school English classrooms, the "foreign cultural model" is relatively common. As a common cross-cultural teaching method, this model focuses on cultivating students' interest in the culture of the target language countries, aiming to enable learners to deeply understand and appreciate the cultural backgrounds, values and social customs of these countries. (Sun et al., 2021) This also leads to the teaching content being overly biased towards Western culture, while local culture often appears only as a comparative object. Students lack the opportunity to actively explore and compare the two cultures from their own cultural perspective, and are confined to viewing the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures from a simple binary oppositional perspective, which is not conducive to the development of their critical thinking.

3.2. Teaching Methods: Mechanical Repetitive Drills Hinder Thinking Improvement

The teaching process is the state and process of activities in which students continuously construct new knowledge and improve thinking quality, and it directly affects students' learning outcomes. (Gong, 2024) However, in junior high school English teaching practice, many teachers overemphasize the one-way inculcation of language knowledge and skills. In class, vocabulary teaching degenerates into simple word recitation and dictation reinforcement; grammar explanation is confined to mechanical interpretation of rules; sentence pattern drills are repetitive imitation and copying. Students are immersed in rote memorization of word spelling and rigid application of sentence transformation all day long. The cultivation of students' thinking quality is seriously marginalized. Reading classes mostly focus on clarifying words and sentences; teachers seldom guide students to explore the cultural connotations and the author's emotions behind the text. Oral training only stays at the imitation of simple daily conversations, without encouraging students to express their unique opinions. In English writing teaching, teachers focus on correcting vocabulary spelling and grammatical usage, but neglect the depth of students' thinking. This knowledge-centered, teacher-centered teaching leads to the phenomenon in junior high school English teaching of "emphasizing acquisition over critical thinking, emphasizing lecturing over practice, and emphasizing symbolic exercises over cultivating through culture." (Hao & Dan, 2024)

3.3. Teaching Evaluation: Ignoring the Organic Embedding of Critical

Thinking

In May 2023, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued the *Action Plan for Deepening the Reform of Basic Education Curriculum and Teaching*, which pointed out that it is necessary to focus on teaching evaluation based on core competences, leverage the guiding, diagnostic and feedback functions of evaluation, enrich and innovate evaluation methods, pay attention to process-oriented evaluation, and achieve promoting teaching and learning through evaluation, so as to promote students' all-round development. (Luo & Yang, 2024) However, for a long time, the result-oriented educational evaluation concept has been deeply rooted, and schools, parents, and society generally pay more attention to quantitative indicators such as enrollment rates, while paying insufficient attention to soft qualities such as thinking quality. In this context, the content of teaching evaluation focuses on easily quantifiable knowledge memory items; the evaluation method mainly relies on examinations; and the evaluation is mostly conducted by the teacher. This unidimensional assessment is difficult to fully reflect students' cognitive levels, nor can it effectively promote the improvement of students' thinking quality during the learning process.

4. Strategies for Cultivating Critical Thinking in Junior High School English Teaching

4.1. Excavating the Cultural Connotations in Textbooks to Stimulate Critical Thinking

Language and culture mutually construct each other, and cultural "facts" are constantly changing. (Sun et al., 2021) Language knowledge contains profound cultural value; teaching cannot stay at the level of language teaching, but should pay close attention to and appropriately reveal the cultural implications behind knowledge. Teachers should consciously excavate Chinese and Western cultural elements from vocabulary, texts, charts, and videos, and through carefully designed content explanations, question guidance, and thought-provoking activities, guide students to grasp the deep cultural connotations and differences between Chinese and Western cultures, so as to stimulate students' critical thinking.

Take Unit 7 "Teenagers should be allowed to choose their own clothes" from the People's Education Press (PEP) Grade 9 English textbook as an example. In the lead-in stage, the teacher can display some pictures of different dressing styles of Chinese and Western junior high school students, such as Chinese students in school uniforms and Western students in personalized clothing, and guide students to observe and think: (1)What are the differences in dressing between Chinese and Western teenagers? (2)Why are there these differences? Later, when explaining content related to adolescent codes of conduct, the teacher guides students to discuss the different views on behaviors such as choosing clothes, getting ear piercings, and tattoos in Chinese and Western cultures. For example, Chinese culture

values collective image and discipline, and schools require students to wear uniforms to cultivate collective awareness and discipline; Western culture emphasizes individualism and freedom, and teenagers have more autonomy in clothing choices. In the subsequent group discussion, students discuss the following questions in groups: (1)Do you think teenagers should have the freedom to choose their own clothes? Why? (2)What are the strengths and weaknesses of the differences between Chinese and Western views on teenagers' dressing concepts? (3)How might these cultural differences affect the growth of teenagers? After the group discussions, each group sends a representative to speak and share the results of their discussion. The teacher should encourage students to express different views and guide them to think and analyze deeply. For example, some students may support teenagers' freedom of dress to express their personality and creativity; others may think that uniform dressing helps to create a good learning atmosphere and cultivate a sense of collective honor. During the discussion, the teacher should guide students to recognize that the differences in dressing concepts between Chinese and Western cultures are influenced by many factors, and there is no absolute right or wrong. Each culture has its unique value and significance; we should understand and respect different cultures with an open and inclusive attitude, and cannot simply use our own cultural standards to measure and judge other cultures.

4.2. Innovating Teaching Methods to Implement the Cultivation of Critical Thinking

Teaching methods consider the teaching process as a whole, make overall planning for teaching activities, and inherently determine the quality and level of teaching activities. (Kang, 2015) First, teachers should be guided by the Activity-Based Approach to English Learning, and consciously cultivate students' critical thinking by designing various learning activities. Specifically, in activities of learning and understanding, teachers should focus on guiding students to observe and think about problems from multiple perspectives, build bridges between old and new knowledge, and activate students' critical thinking. For example, teachers can choose articles or materials covering multiple viewpoints, and encourage students to analyze the author's attitude and stance. In activities of application and practice, teachers can instruct students to use mind maps to sort out the structure of the text, marking the logical connections between different parts. This process not only helps students to sort out the context of the text, but also lays a solid foundation for subsequent application and practice. For example, after learning an article introducing environmental protection measures, the teacher can ask students to draw the causal chain among various measures, presenting complex information in a graphical way. In activities of transfer and innovation, teachers should encourage students to break through fixed thinking patterns and flexibly use existing

knowledge to meet new challenges. For example, teachers can break disciplinary boundaries and combine knowledge from other fields to enrich the content of English learning.

Secondly, teachers can also combine knowledge with problems that occur or may occur in reality, and design targeted and realistic core questions or tasks, so as to arouse students' attention to and thinking about the practical value of knowledge, and cultivate students' ability to view problems from multiple perspectives and their dialectical critical thinking ability. (Liu & Ling, 2020) Taking Unit 14 "I think that mooncakes are delicious" from the PEP Grade 9 (Volume 1) textbook as an example, the teacher can set the core question for the class as, "In today's globalized world, how should we inherit and innovate the traditional customs of the Mid-Autumn Festival?" and thereby construct a question chain: (1)What are the main ways of celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival in current society? (2)What are the younger generation's views on the Mid-Autumn Festival? Which traditional elements are they more inclined to retain? (3)If you were a planner of a local tourism bureau, how would you promote the Mid-Autumn Festival to make it more attractive? By stimulating students' deep thinking, students' thinking development can be promoted.

4.3. Improving the Examination and Evaluation Mechanism to Promote the Development of Critical Thinking

Teaching evaluation plays a key role in the teaching process. The New Curriculum Standards points out that teachers should accurately grasp the different functions of teaching, learning and evaluation in the process of education, and establish the overall concept of "teaching—learning—evaluation" integration (Ministry of Education, 2022). Therefore, it is of vital importance to improve the examination and evaluation mechanism for junior high school English and to incorporate thinking quality into the evaluation system. First, the examination and evaluation mechanism should increase the proportion of non-paper-and-pencil tests, such as oral expression and project presentations, so that students can apply their knowledge to solve problems in authentic situations. For example, in the reading comprehension section, open-ended questions can be designed, requiring students not only to combine the content of the text, but also to provide personal views and reasonable argumentation in their answers. This stimulates students' deep thinking, encourages them to put forward unique viewpoints, and supports their conclusions through logical reasoning. Second, process-oriented evaluation should be given more attention. Compared with summative assessment, formative assessment can more accurately capture the trajectory of students' thinking development. Teachers can collect data through daily classroom observation, homework grading, and group discussion records, and provide timely feedback to help students improve. Finally, the diversification of evaluation subjects is also an indispensable part. In addition to

teachers, parents and classmates can also be involved in the evaluation process. Encouraging peer evaluation can not only cultivate students' cooperative spirit, but also enable them to learn to examine problems from others' perspectives in the exchange with peers. A diversified evaluation perspective can make the evaluation results more objective and fair, and also provide students with more diversified feedback channels.

5. Conclusion

Critical thinking is one of the important thinking qualities of the core competences of the English subject, and it is of great significance to cultivate it in junior high school English teaching. Teachers need to dig deeply into the cultural connotations of texts, guide students to view Chinese and Western cultural differences dialectically, and combine cultural background knowledge with the development of critical thinking; carefully design teaching activities and questions to stimulate students' active thinking; and continuously improve the examination mechanism to ensure that the goal of cultivating students' critical thinking is implemented. This will lay a solid foundation for enhancing students' core competences and promoting their all-round development.

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