

# A Study of Students' English Critical Reading Skill in Senior High School

Haoyue Fan\*

Department of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China

\* Corresponding author: Email: 1352132725@qq.com

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**Abstract:** Enhanced critical reading comprehension skill has recently been called for in a variety of contexts including educational (Huijie, 2010), academic (Liu, 2010), advertising (Pirozzi, 2003; Goatly, 2000), media (Millan, 1995), among others. With the new curriculum reform, China's English education pays more and more attention to the development of senior high school students' reading ability and thinking quality. The cultivation of critical reading ability is one of the key points to improving thinking and reading ability. The English curriculum standard for senior high schools (2017 edition, 2020 Revision) puts forward requirements related to the critical reading ability of senior high school English learners. In recent years, the college entrance examination English reading comprehension test has also increased the number of times investigating this high-level reading ability, which shows that China's English education attaches great importance to critical reading ability. This study finds that previous scholars have done a lot of theoretical research to explore the essential practical significance of the critical reading ability to English learners through literature review. However, relevant investigation research is rare, which gives this study space to explore.

**Keywords:** English critical reading ability; English reading; Senior high school student.

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## 1. Introduction

"Critical Thinking" derived from "Reflective Thinking", which was brought up by Dewey in 1933. And in the 1940s, the American education reform came to focus on students' critical thinking. Then, since the 1970s, many western countries had attached great importance to critical thinking teaching. In 1998, it was addressed in the first International Conference on Higher Education that the essential mission of education is to improve students' ability of analysis and critical thinking. At the beginning of this century, the UNESCO proposed critical thinking and creative thinking as the themes of 21st century education. With more and more domestic scholars introducing "critical thinking" to native academia, China has now come to pay more attention to the term "critical thinking" than ever before.

In response to the national education policy, The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) (hereinafter referred to as "Senior High School English Curriculum Standards") emphasizes the significance of cultivating reading ability and thinking quality, and also makes specific requirements for the cultivation of these two aspects, such as interpreting and judging the meaning of discourse and developing critical thinking. For language education, critical thinking is mainly reflected in critical reading. When readers apply it to reading, they can find out the bias, wrong information and illogical conclusions in the text, and help readers learn to make rational analysis and make independent judgment. If high school students can master critical reading skills, they will become more active and perceptive readers, more aware of the hidden ideologies that can perpetuate inequality. In addition, students with critical reading skills often reflect on their own values when they find themselves with opinions different from those of the author, and then state their opinions with convincing reasons to make informed decisions. Therefore, effectively improving students' critical reading ability in high school English

courses can not only upgrade students' reading style, but also enable them to adapt their critical thinking ability to the development of The Times and become new talents with a sense of social responsibility in the new century.

The lack of critical Reading teaching in Chinese High School English Classroom. The use of critical reading teaching strategies by teachers can not only ensure that students can understand the core ideas of the text, but also ensure that students can understand the author's writing thoughts, judge the credibility of the author's ideas, and form a good reading habit (Yuan, Peng 2019).

Therefore, it is of great significance to equip students with a high level of reading thinking. Students can improve this ability in English reading teaching (Li, 2017). Teachers shoulder the responsibility of improving students' thinking quality, but rarely incorporate critical reading ability into the goal of reading teaching. The most critical reason is the lack of critical reading ability of teachers themselves (Zhao, 2020). The concept of education under the new curriculum reform requires that classroom teaching is a process of teachers and students' participation and interaction. Therefore, the development of high school students' ability cannot be separated from teachers' guidance. Therefore, in order to cultivate the critical reading ability of high school students, teachers must master this high-level reading skill. Under such requirements, teachers not only need to polish their own teaching quality, but also need to timely update the knowledge of the subject field, in order to integrate the teaching of this new reading ability in the reading classroom.

Although English teachers have the consciousness of setting thinking goals in reading teaching, the phenomenon of thinking absence still exists in real reading teaching (Gu, 2020). Finally, high school students' passive learning and acceptance of learning form wrong learning habits, which leads them to rarely question the content taught by teachers and fear that they are different from others' views. In the long run, students' critical thinking can hardly be improved.

Therefore, by collating relevant literature on "critical reading ability", this study started from the English subject of high school, and compiled necessary tools to understand the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability. This study hopes to understand the current high school students' lack of English critical reading ability, analyze the reasons behind it from the perspective of teachers and students, and put forward suggestions to promote the development of English critical reading ability.

It is also hoped that after the survey, the teachers and students of this school will realize the importance of critical reading ability in English and be helpful to those who want to improve their critical reading ability in English.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of key concepts

#### 2.1.1. Critical Reading Skills

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines the adjective "critical" as "characterized by careful, exact evaluation and judgment". Despite the prevalent negative connotation of finding faults, the idea of being critical is equated within the literature with "a higher order thinking which brings in more rigorous analysis to problem solving of textual understanding and a way of developing more critical distance from the writer" (Pennycook: 2001: 4). Pirozzi (2003) best captures the significance of critical reading in regarding it as a necessity on the part of learners "to uncover motivations and assess arguments, to consider options, products, advertisements and commercials, and to judge policies and programs offered by the various levels of government". In fact, a number of definitions have been proposed each of which sheds light on one aspect of critical reading. As "a thinking process improved as a result of individuals learning to use language more constructively through skillful questioning" (Hafner, 1974: 40), critical reading is conceived of as active reading, requiring an activity on the part of the learner (Schwegler, 2004). To read critically implies maintaining objectivity so as not to allow exceptions, biases or personal prejudices to interfere with understanding (Milan, 1995). In China, some domestic scholars also voice their opinions on the definition of critical reading. He and Liu (2003) elaborate on the objects of critical reading, regarding it as a reading activity with which readers judge and evaluate the authenticity, validity and value of the reading materials. Liu and Guo (2006) point out that in critical reading, instead of memorizing, readers raise question, make hypothesis, synthesize, and make clear the thematic contents. Liu and Luo (2012) believe that critical reading is a process, in which readers relate prior knowledge with the reading, make hypothesis, raise questions, analyze, and synthesize for making critical comments on the reading materials.

### 2.2. Previous Studies on Critical Reading

Critical reading has gained in popularity with overseas researchers since it was introduced in the 1970s. 1970s witnessed the springing up of the term critical reading. The concept was first initiated in the early 1970s, when the findings of an educational survey in America called for more emphasis on critical thinking. In 1979, the landmark book *Language and Control* was published by Fowler and Kress, which marks the first time for critical reading to resort to concepts and theories in critical discourse analysis.

In the 1980s, more and more academics paid attention to critical reading, and committed themselves to the analysis of its nature and the skills it entails. After observing the learning behaviours of readers in high critical reading ability, Wassman

and Paye (1985) clarified the concept by describing the distinctions between literal reading and critical reading and making a list of the traits of successful critical readers.

In the 1990s, critical reading was brought into the classroom setting. Collins (1993) examined the teachers' role and teaching strategies in class, and found out the roles of teachers as a guide and an assistance make contributions to students' active and in-depth reading, as well as critical reading ability.

In the 21st century, the research over critical reading experiences a mature stage.

The systematic and scientific view of it is gradually established. The characteristics are summarized and explained by some influential scholars in this field (Garrigus, 2002; Pirozzi, 2003). Moreover, critical reading begins to be integrated with other subjects such as psychology, physiology and even network science, signifying a striking process in this field (Wilson, 2016). For example, Antonova and Tyrkheeva (2021) discussed the positive impact of formative assessment on high school online teaching in the context of epidemic. Based on the definition of the core of critical reading ability by previous scholars, they design and compile the formative evaluation criteria of critical reading ability.

Shao (2018) explained the importance of critical reading ability cultivation from the perspective of testing. Based on the analysis of the national Volume I of college entrance examination, it is suggested that the critical reading ability will be the direction of the change of the content of the reading part of Chinese college entrance examination in the future, thus emphasizing that the English subject should lay emphasis on cultivating the critical reading ability.

Wang (2019), on the basis of interpreting the characteristics of the reading literacy assessment of PISA2018, suggested that domestic students should not only establish goal-oriented reading libraries, but also improve their critical reading ability in reading. Therefore, we can see that in addition to domestic tests, international tests also focus on critical reading ability. The above literature explains the importance of critical reading ability from the perspective of testing.

Some researchers present their ideas in critical reading strategies. Gui (2011) summarizes seven critical reading strategies, including preview, annotating, summarizing, analyzing, questioning, predicting, and evaluating. She discovers the use of them in the reading teaching in senior high schools, and finds out that critical reading activities might not cater to every text, and that teachers should design critical tasks according to students' cognitive level and interests. Li (2011) points out three main strategies for critical reading teaching in middle schools, which are creating a relaxed study environment for relieving students' stress, developing the awareness and habits of questioning and problem-solving. Zhang (2012) reviews a number of critical reading strategies and extracted five comprehensive, operable, and applicable ones: predicting, analyzing, questioning, inferring, and evaluating. Starting from the types of reading texts, this paper puts forward that using newspapers and periodicals as tools to implement critical reading teaching can effectively improve students' thinking quality and reading

ability.

She then proposed four approaches, namely, building a critical reading community, designing and implementing teaching and research activities on the topic of critical reading, carrying out process research on critical reading lessons and conducting research on critical reading topics, so as to effectively improve the teaching ability of middle school English teachers in critical reading.

### **2.3. A summary of the research status of high school English critical reading skills**

Different from China, foreign countries pay more attention to empirical studies related to high school students' critical reading ability, focusing on exploring methods and tools to improve English critical reading ability. Despite the late research in our country, we have made some achievements to adapt to our educational reality. Through the review of previous studies, it is found that: first of all, from the perspective of research significance, a large number of literatures show that it is very important to study critical reading ability, which is of great significance to form students' lifelong reading habit.

This makes this paper has great research necessity. Secondly, domestic and foreign researches have provided specific teaching strategies and steps for improving critical reading ability, which can provide references for the part of teaching suggestions in this paper. Finally, there have been many relevant investigations and studies on the English critical reading ability of high school students abroad, and the research methods, tools and scales used by them can bring beneficial enlightenment to this paper.

Domestic research on English critical reading ability is lagging behind, and relevant research has not yet formed a systematic system. Most of the research methods used focus on theoretical research. In summary, there are mainly the following problems: First, from the perspective of the research scope, through the review of the literature, it is found that the relevant research with the keyword of "critical reading ability" is basically carried out around college students or postgraduates, and only a very small number of research contents involve students in the secondary education stage. The more segmented "high school students" are almost absent. Most scholars believe that critical reading ability has certain requirements for logical thinking ability, so they all believe that critical reading is more important for high-level talents who can receive a certain level of knowledge, such as college students and postgraduates. But it's not. According to the requirements of quality-oriented education, the cultivation of critical reading ability is equally important for students in the stage of compulsory education and high school students. At the same time, "high school English Curriculum Standard" also put forward higher standards and requirements for high school students' reading ability. What is the status of high-level reading among high school students? High school teachers want to improve students' English critical reading ability, how to carry out effective and targeted reading teaching? How can we better teach students critical reading strategies? These problems need further research and confirmation.

Finally, from the perspective of research methods, most of the domestic literature focuses on the theoretical interpretation stage, focusing on the concept interpretation, importance and improvement methods of English critical reading ability. Through literature review, it is found that

relevant domestic researchers have realized the importance of English critical reading ability and can put forward corresponding promotion strategies from different perspectives. However, few studies have introduced the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability from an empirical perspective. In order to effectively improve their English critical reading ability, it is necessary to further understand their mastery level of English critical reading ability and explore the factors affecting the improvement of English critical reading ability, so as to put forward corresponding suggestions and strategies. Therefore, domestic research on critical English reading ability needs scientific practice and exploration. By solving the problems existing in previous literature, this study adopts the method of qualitative and quantitative research, combined with the theoretical knowledge of schema and critical discourse analysis, and focuses on investigating the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability, aiming at giving targeted suggestions.

## **3. Research design**

### **3.1. Research questions**

By investigating the level of high school students' English critical reading ability, this study mainly focuses on answering the following questions:

- 1). What is the overall level of high school students' English critical reading ability? What are the characteristics of the different dimensions of this ability?
- 2). Is the self-assessment of high school students' English critical reading ability consistent with the test performance level of this ability?

### **3.2. Survey respondents**

A middle school grade two 300 students. With 11 years of learning experience, these students are very familiar with English reading, have developed personalized reading styles, and have the ability to participate in critical reading tests.

Interviewees: The interviewees in this study included three English teachers and eight students in grade two of senior high school. The eight students had different levels of academic performance and survey data results. The purpose of this study is to further analyze the reasons for the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability and high school English teachers' understanding of and obstacles to promoting students' critical reading ability in English reading classes.

### **3.3. Research tools**

The tools used in this study include: self-assessment questionnaire and interview of critical reading ability in English. The self-assessment questionnaire objectively explores the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability, and analyzes the main reasons for the formation of the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability combined with interviews.

### **3.4. Interview Outline**

Teachers are the implementer who specifically promote and implement the relevant requirements of critical reading ability in High School English Curriculum Standards in English classroom teaching, and the guide of reading teaching activities. Teachers' understanding of critical reading ability and teaching development directly affect students' critical

reading learning effect. Therefore, from the perspective of teacher teaching, this study investigates the current situation of high school English critical reading teaching. With reference to the results of this survey, this study will focus on exploring teachers' views on the importance of critical reading ability, teachers' mastering and understanding of the relevant requirements of critical reading ability, whether they can put forward the teaching strategies of critical reading and the factors that affect teachers' teaching of critical reading in English classrooms.

#### 4. Data analysis and results discussion

The survey was conducted among 300 high school sophomores. Among them, 282 valid questionnaires and 282 valid test volumes were recovered. The following contents are the analysis of the obtained data and the discussion of the results.

Self-assessment of high school students' English critical Reading ability.

**Table 1.** Overall analysis of the questionnaire (n=282)

Sample size	282
Mean value	93.489
The median number	95.000
Minimum value	53.000
Maximum value	132.000

Based on the interviews with some teachers, the following conclusions are drawn:

As for the understanding degree of English teachers' critical reading ability, the three interviewed teachers all put forward their own views on English critical reading ability. One of the key words mentioned by teachers many times is "critical thinking". All three teachers explained critical reading ability from the perspective of critical thinking. Teacher C believes that critical reading is the use of critical thinking and reading. Secondly, teachers emphasized the role of relevant knowledge and experience in critical reading. For example, Teacher A said, "Critical reading requires the use of textual background knowledge." The last three teachers without exception ignored the response discourse dimension of English critical reading ability as defined in this study.

As for the importance of critical reading ability, all three teachers expressed that it is very necessary to teach English critical reading and agreed that critical reading ability lays a solid foundation for improving students' critical thinking. Teacher B also said, "Critical reading ability can not only promote students' reading level, but also improve teachers' reading teaching ability."

Three teachers gave different answers to the suggestion of improving critical reading ability. To sum up their answers, there are two suggestions. First, more reading interest groups should be organized after class to supplement reading materials, improve the enjoyment of reading and make students feel happy and grow in English reading. For example, Teacher B said, "More news reading materials should be supplemented for students, and extracurricular reading activities will give students an opportunity to display critical reading."

Secondly, various teaching activities should be carried out in the classroom, such as multi-organized discussion activities, task-based teaching or inquiry learning activities, so that

students can communicate with questions and share different views. Teacher C said, "Task-based teaching can improve students' critical reading ability. For example, students are required to find the arguments and supporting evidence put forward by the author in the text." As for the difficulties encountered in critical reading teaching, all three English teachers mentioned the test-taking pressure in reading teaching.

Through interviews with students, this study draws the following conclusions:

For the critical reading test, students agreed that it was a type of reading comprehension question that had never appeared on a formal test. However, some students accept the appearance of subjective questions in reading comprehension. For example, student B believes that "subjective questions can avoid us from choosing the best answer and diverging our own thinking to write different ideas.

"In addition, the students all agreed on the difficulty of the test. They generally agreed that the test was difficult. The whole process requires not only knowing what the text expresses, but also expressing one's own opinion. For example, student A: "I think this test requires us to analyze the author's views and put forward our own inferences and ideas." Despite the difficulty of the test, the students all expressed their desire to get a high score in this test, hoping to improve their critical reading skills in the following reading teaching.

For example, student F thought, "We need the teacher's guidance to get high marks in this new test." For a small number of students with deviation between the self-assessment of critical reading ability and the actual test performance, there are two kinds of situations combined with the interview. Some students are overconfident about their critical reading ability, and believe that the actual test results can not represent their critical reading ability level.

Among them, student B thought that there was a new type of question in this test, which was also very difficult, and there was no training in this aspect. A small number of students are too modest about their critical reading ability, they think that their literary literacy is not high, and rarely touch the test in this area. The reason for the good test is because of the training of relevant reading skills.

Student A thinks that his good performance in this examination is the teacher's usual training for the type of questions to be continued after reading. For the concept of critical reading ability. Most of the high school students interviewed said they were not aware of the concept before taking part in the survey. Except for student A, she had encountered this concept in extracurricular materials, but did not have a thorough understanding of it.

The accuracy of students' self-assessment of critical reading ability needs to be improved. In the interview part, this study focuses on communicating with students who overestimate their critical reading ability in English. The reasons for their wrong evaluation are summarized as follows: one is cognitive limitation, they believe that the previous reading ability can represent the critical reading ability. The second is lack of reflection, they always attribute failure to external factors, do not think it is their own problem.

Finally, it is found from the interview that the main reason why students cannot successfully use some high-level critical reading skills is their reading habits. From their interest in reading to the writing of notes after reading, they all believe that reading is a learning task and extracurricular reading is a

kind of academic burden.

## 5. Conclusions

The overall critical reading ability of senior high school students in English is at an average level.

According to the results of the questionnaire, nearly 60% of the students said that they can use the English judgment reading ability correctly, but the performance of different dimensions varies greatly. This means that high school students think their performance of discourse analysis is better than other dimensions, and their confidence in this ability is also the highest, followed by reasoning ability. However, students gave lower scores in the evaluation and response dimensions. This also shows that students have a correct and clear self-understanding of their English critical reading ability, and they will give more accurate scores for the questions of different reading levels according to their reading ability, which is basically consistent with their test scores.

This can be verified by interviews and correlation analysis. As can be seen from the self-assessment results of high school students' critical reading ability, most students have realized the importance of critical reading ability, have a clear understanding of this ability, and know what aspects of their ability need to be improved in the future.

Finally, according to the interview, most of the interviewed students said that they had never been exposed to the concept of English critical reading ability before the survey. But they didn't do badly on the test. This shows that although high school students do not understand this concept in real life, they can show certain critical reading ability in the actual process of reading.

There are three main reasons for the medium level of students' critical reading ability. First, although teachers are aware of the importance of critical reading ability, they do not put the cultivation of this ability into the teaching objectives in the actual classroom. Although teachers may encourage students to carry out critical reading, they are limited to the teaching of low-level critical reading ability. Secondly, students themselves have not developed good reading habits. No matter in the interest of reading or the choice of text genre, they try their best to make reading an entertainment activity in order to reduce their academic burden. The third reason is the examination, especially the students, the interview repeatedly mentioned the usual academic tension, empty.

Lack of free time. It can be seen that the academic burden is a huge burden on high school students, and the negative learning experience makes it difficult for students to develop the inclination to read in their daily life.

## 6. Suggestions

The results of this study reveal the current situation of high school students' English critical reading ability and provide some suggestions for English teachers and English learners.

### 6.1. Advice for high school English learners

First of all, high school students must accept the systematic critical reading teaching and realize the important role of English critical reading. The relationship among critical reading, language learning and thinking development is mutually reinforcing and deserves adequate attention. Students should form good reading habits. From the interview, this study found that reading habit is one of the main reasons that hinder students to improve their critical reading ability.

The formation of habits is inseparable from the accumulation of quantity.

As for the genre of reading discourse, students should spend more time reading real texts, such as high school English newspapers, news or review articles suitable for their cognitive level. To increase their own content schema. The extensive and diverse schemata help them to awaken the schemata related to the text in the process of reading, and then deduce the development of the text content based on the content schema. Students should also avoid the task of reading activities, reduce their interest in reading; As for the reading method, students should adopt extensive reading. The function of extensive reading is to get more information quickly, so that students can form a variety of schemas. This is true for critical reading

It's useful. Their accumulated mental schema can be used as evidence for refutation and evaluation in future reading activities. Especially for the students with unsatisfactory academic performance, their reasoning ability has a big gap with that of the students with high scores, so special attention should be paid to the formation of psychological schema. Language knowledge, the level of language knowledge greatly affects the play of critical reading ability. In the above interview, some students believe that one of the obstacles to reading is that they can't understand the literal meaning of an article, so they can't read critically. According to the definition of critical reading ability in this study, this ability requires knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to interpret the literal meaning of a text in order to read with critical thinking. Therefore, the level of English proficiency determines whether students can correctly use high-level critical reading skills. This is not an overnight process. Students need to form the habit of accumulating vocabulary and grammar knowledge in daily life to supplement their own language schema.

Finally, there needs to be a substantial change in students' attitudes in the classroom. According to the feedback of some teachers' interviews, students' response in class is not so positive. Interviews with students show that students rarely take the initiative to put forward their own ideas in class. This makes it difficult to reflect students' subjectivity in class. The reduction of students' dominant status may be because teachers themselves are too serious and have a strong desire for control, but it is also inseparable from the factors of students. In daily English class, students should take an active part in class activities and dare to speak out different ideas. Out of the "audience", "spectator" identity, vigor and vitality into the classroom training.

### 6.2. Advice for English teachers

The quantitative data results of this study show that the overall English critical reading ability of senior high school students is in the middle level, and there is still room for improvement. Without professional critical reading training, students can still achieve better results in the test. If teachers can pay attention to the cultivation of students' critical reading ability in daily reading classes, so that students can get familiar with and use this ability, then the overall status quo of high school students' critical reading ability may rise to a higher level.

Therefore, teachers need to start from their own, establish critical reading awareness, focus on improving their own critical reading teaching ability, so as to help students improve the quality of thinking, and cultivate talents needed for the

society. According to the explanation and theoretical basis of the concept of critical reading in this study, teachers should not only provide relevant knowledge, but also guide students to give their own views on the theme of the discourse without blindly following the author's point of view.

Based on the characteristics of critical reading, combined with the survey results, this study aims to improve the English critical reading ability of high school students, and according to the reading teaching process, gives the teaching strategy of critical reading.

## 7. Limitations of the study

Although this study evaluated the English critical reading ability test paper for students in each class before the self-assessment questionnaire. But there is no thorough explanation of the concept. This also prevents the analysis of this study from obtaining more reliable results of self-rated questionnaire data. Finally, the number of students who participated in the survey was small. If the number of participants had been higher and the area wider, this study might have yielded more accurate and significant results.

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