

# Application Research on the Teaching Task of “Reading Circles” in Senior High School Aiming at the Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability

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**ABSTRACT**— *Critical thinking ability is an important element of thinking ability under the core competence of English discipline. Combined with “Reading Circles”, a kind of group-based and student-centered reading activity, this paper explores the relationship between “Reading Circles” and four critical thinking abilities: focus and definition, analysis and evaluation, reasoning and demonstration, review and correction. Taking the “Reading Circles” task design in The Million Pound Bank Note as an example, this paper expounds the high school teaching design aiming at the students’ cultivation of critical thinking which provides a specific and operable practical example for the development of English “Reading Circles” course in senior high school.*

**Keyword**— Reading Circles, critical thinking ability, core competence of English discipline, teaching task design

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the *National English Curriculum Standards for General High School(2017 Edition)* (hereinafter referred to as Curriculum Standards) was officially promulgated, which divides the core competence of English discipline into four elements: linguistic ability, cultural character, thinking ability and learning ability, and defines thinking ability as “the ability and level of thinking in logic, criticism and creativity”[i], while critical thinking is an important element of thinking ability under the core competence of English discipline. In the field of domestic education, Qi Yeguo and Sun Xiuli divided critical thinking ability into four levels on the basis of existing research: 1) focus and definition; 2) analysis and evaluation; 3) reasoning and demonstration; 4) review and correction[ii]. Critical thinking is not only an ability, but also a solution to problems, a thinking process, and a comprehensive application of thinking skills[iii]. Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory divides human development into four stages according to their characteristics. Among them, the ability development related to critical thinking is mainly concentrated in the formal operation stage of 11-16 years old, that is, a person's middle school period[iv], as the preparation stage of college learning, the outlook on life and values of teenagers are undergoing great changes. Self-awareness and self-concept are gradually formed, which is the key stage of the development of critical thinking. Therefore, the cultivation of critical thinking should be paid more attention and developed at this stage.

“Critical thinking, as the main driving force to promote the progress of knowledge-based society, has become the basic goal of education at all levels in western countries represented by the United States, and has also achieved rich results in the fields of philosophy, pedagogy, psychology and other related disciplines [2].” However, for the domestic related studies, more attention is paid to the critical thinking of college students, while less is paid to the cultivation of critical thinking ability of senior high school students. And due to the influence of examination-oriented education, it is lack of innovation and localization.

Relevant studies show that the “Reading Circles” method can not only promote the formation of core competence of English discipline<sup>[v]</sup>, but also improve students' interest in reading, and promote the development of critical thinking ability of both Non-English Majors and English Majors<sup>[vi] [vii]</sup>. Therefore, in order to improve senior high school students’ critical thinking

ability and achieve the implementation of core competence goals in English classroom, this paper will specifically analyze the relationship between “Reading Circles” and critical thinking ability in combination with the Curriculum Standards, and discuss how to design the “Reading Circles” teaching task aiming at the cultivation of critical thinking ability, so as to provide specific and operational practice examples.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Reading Circles”, also known as “Literature Circles”, is an activity that takes students as the leader, takes groups as units, independently selects reading materials, and carries out reading sharing and discussion by assigning various roles and tasks<sup>[viii]</sup>. In 1994, Harvey Daniels wrote about “Reading Circles” in his book *Literature Circles--Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*<sup>[ix]</sup>, in which the connotation and implementation path of “Reading Circles” are defined in detail. Specifically, according to different reading materials, students are freely divided into temporary reading groups, and students with the same reading materials are selected to form the same group. Each group member plays a different role, completes the reading tasks according to the different roles’ need, fills in the “role sheet”. Then the group focuses on discussion, in-depth communication and shares their feelings. In terms of genre, reading materials can be literary works and other forms; In terms of language, a large amount of linguistic input should be provided, which should be in line with students’ language level and has a storytelling and entertainment, and attract students’ interests [8]. In addition, we should also meet the requirements of the Curriculum Standards and select materials that can reflect the core competence of English discipline. In the process of reading, students read independently, formulate their own discussion questions, take notes purposefully and consciously, and then show in groups. Group members should speak in order according to their roles, and invite other members to participate in the discussion. “The number of roles of group members is not fixed, and teachers can add or delete them appropriately according to specific teaching needs.<sup>[x]</sup>” The main roles of “Reading Circles” are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Roles and duties of “Reading Circles” group

role	duty
Group Discussion Leader	Be responsible for organizing the group to discuss and put forward at least three questions that can arouse the team members’ in-depth thinking.
Connector	Be responsible for establishing the connection between reading materials and real life.
Summarizer	Be responsible for summarizing the reading content in short English or mind map.
Literary Luminary	Be responsible for selecting beautiful and profound sentences in the reading materials for the appreciation with team members.
Word Master	Be responsible for selecting new, important or interesting words to share, and explaining the meaning and usage.
Passage Person	Be responsible for selecting key paragraphs and explaining the reasons for the selection.
Investigator	Be responsible for introducing the author, writing background and related works.
Culture Collector	Look for similarities and differences between reading materials and our own culture. And supplement the foreign cultures involved.

These roles provide learners with a clear reading support. In the process of completing the “role sheet”, they decompose the reading materials into different parts for in-depth interpretation, understand and explain the words and sentences in the materials by asking questions, solving problems and negotiating with group members, analyze and discuss the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, and freely express their personal views and feelings. Therefore, students’ critical thinking ability can be continuously stimulated and improved. Once the “Reading Circles” teaching activity begin, teachers are no longer the absolute center, but assume the roles of “helper”, “guide” and “observer”, assist students in discussion and interaction, guide them to realize pragmatic needs and observe their turn-taking. The activity of “Reading Circles” not only provides students with a fun classroom and improves their reading interests and fully develops their creativity, but also changes the teaching mode of teachers’ “one person alone has the say” in the past, initiates to students to expand their knowledge and grasp correct reading strategies in the process of stimulating students’ cooperative learning ability and critical thinking ability.

### 3. RESEARCH DISCUSSION

Reading is a meaningful creative activity in which readers find and understand text information by reading the text. Critical reading refers to the understanding of reality, that is, all reading materials have a specific tendency or orientation<sup>[xi]</sup>. Reading points to the conceptual level of information understanding, memory and preservation, while critical reading is an action in which learners not only transmit information, but also apply critical thinking ability such as interpretation, classification, inference, questioning and evaluation of text information. Finally, they have a deeper understanding of the reading materials, which can be fully reflected in the “Reading Circles” activities. Comparing the “Reading Circles” teaching mode with the development of critical thinking ability, it is not difficult to find many connections between them. For example, both of them make learners become the center, and provide students with some clues through a step-by-step, low to high and progressive process to help them become more confident, autonomous and critical readers. The following paper will focus on the four critical thinking abilities proposed by Qi Yeguo and Sun Xiuli to explain their relationship with the “Reading Circles”.

#### 3.1 The relationship between “Reading Circles” and “focus and definition”

Developed on the basis of the Constructivism Theory, “Reading Circles” reflect initiative, that is, it emphasizes that students are not passively accepting knowledge, but are good at active exploration, find new problems in common phenomena, and actively use critical thinking to construct the meaning of what they have learned. It is obvious that the “Reading Circles” emphasizes “cooperation”, “communication” and “meaning construction”, and “discuss and even fierce debate on topics such as religion, art, love, life, life, value, Chinese and Western culture”[7], so as to achieve the purpose of cultivating the critical thinking ability of “focus and definition”. Specifically, it is to classify or decompose the problem situations in the reading materials through the communication and cooperation among students, form appropriate questions, and screen out the main information and terms that can support the argument according to the differences and connections between different arguments or propositions, so as to accurately interpret the stated or implied prejudices, positions, intentions, assumptions and viewpoints, and master the main idea of the text [2].

#### 3.2 The relationship between “Reading Circles” and “analysis and evaluation”

In the “Reading Circles” group, with the Group Discussion Leader as the leading organizer, teachers participate in teaching activities as “chief in equality”, and teachers and students complete the “role sheet” as a team. In this process, each role performs its own duties and actively discusses. For example, the Group Discussion Leader needs to put forward three or more questions that can arouse the team members' in-depth thinking, and ensure that each member can express his own views; Literal Luminary needs to choose the sentences with profound meaning and beautiful language in the reading materials to appreciate, analyze and evaluate with the students; Connector needs to establish a connection between real life and reading materials... Members of each role should be fair, independent and objective: they should be able to think in a transposition, think from the perspective of roles and readers, fully consider different cultural backgrounds, and respect their different views and habits. At the same time, each one can keep his/her own independent thinking rather than accept the views of others without judgment, and can rationally treat all kinds without blind obedience and dependence. Be able to clearly and objectively analyze and evaluate their own and others' views and conclusions, find a true and credible evidence for their own views, refute opposing claims, and ensure the adequacy, reliability and acceptability of premises and conclusions. “Reading Circles” is of great benefit to the training and cultivation of “analysis and evaluation”.

#### 3.3 The relationship between “Reading Circles” and “reasoning and demonstration”

As a reading activity, “Reading Circles” emphasizes readers' subjective participation in reading materials and pays attention to the comprehensible input of language. On the basis of improving students' language knowledge and reading ability, “Reading Circles” also depends on students' deep processing of reading materials. When they read the content of materials and prepare their respective “role sheet”, they will consciously explore various information of the article to conduct analysis and reasoning on the meaning of the text in a hierarchical and orderly manner by deductive and inductive methods, so that they can judge the rationality of facts and opinions, and properly use arguments to judge the quality and logical consistency of the conclusions and answers. Then, in the group discussion session, students carry out meaning negotiation and construction with the completed tasks, then make value judgment. The whole process gives full play to the students' “reasoning and demonstration”, and completes the meaning construction process from “input” to “output”.

#### 3.4 The relationship between “Reading Circles” and “review and correction”

When “Reading Circles” is used as a classroom evaluation task, self-evaluation and peer-evaluation form (Table 2), teacher observation form and students' written report of “Reading Circles” can be used to evaluate students' performance in all aspects. For example, students can use the self-evaluation and peer-evaluation form to evaluate the completion of the “role sheet” and the cooperation mode of the team; Secondly, teachers play the role of “observer” who constantly observe and evaluate students'

performance, and guide them to complete their written reports; Also, teachers can also create “Reading Circles” portfolio in groups to collect students’ self-evaluation and peer-evaluation forms, written reports and teachers’ classroom observation forms<sup>[xii]</sup>. In this process, whether self-evaluation, peer-evaluation or teacher evaluation, they all should follow the following three basic evaluation criteria:

- A. The process of analysis, evaluation and inference is consistent;
- B. Reflect on attitude, emotion, motivation and values, so as to be objective and fair;
- C. Be able to reflect on yourself and be willing to correct your improper views.

Only in this way can the classroom evaluation function of “Reading Circles” be realized to develop and improve students’ “review and correction”.

**Table 2:** Student self-evaluation and peer-evaluation form

Role	Name	Score	Comments&Suggestions
Group Discussion Leader		1 2 3 4 5	
Summarizer		1 2 3 4 5	
Connector		1 2 3 4 5	
Word Master		1 2 3 4 5	
Literary Luminary		1 2 3 4 5	
Investigator		1 2 3 4 5	
Comments on the collaboration:			

## 4. RESEARCH RESULT

### 4.1 A Reading Teaching Sample Based on the “Reading Circles”

Generally speaking, the teaching activities around the “Reading Circles” mainly include the following four stages: planning, reading, communication, display (evaluation). The specific arrangements are as follows: the first step is to select reading materials and form a reading group. The second step is to help each role raise questions and complete tasks according to the “role sheet”. The third step is to discuss among the group members. The fourth step is to display and evaluate their reading results[8].

According to the teaching goal of developing students’ critical thinking ability, taking Unit3 Lesson 1 *The Million Pound Bank Note* as an example, the task design will determine the roles of “Reading Circles” as six--Group Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Connector, Word Master, Literary Luminary and Investigator--to focus on the implementation path of the “Reading Circles” teaching task design aiming at the cultivation of critical thinking ability.

Step 1: Lead-in: Investigator introduces the author and relevant background knowledge.

*[Investigator role sheet]*

- A. Get to know a great literature giant: Mark Twain, and finish the following information sheet (Table 3)

**Table 3:** Investigator role sheet

Real name of Mark Twain	
Year of birth	
Places where he lived	
Names of three of his famous stories	
Evaluation of him	

B. Get to know the background information of The Million Pound Bank Note.

[design-notes]

Critical thinking background knowledge refers to the “rich social and cultural knowledge, common sense knowledge and discipline knowledge, clear basic concepts, clear basic discipline methods and thinking methods” [2]. Mark Twain may be one of the few American writers that students are familiar with. In this lesson, the teacher guides students to read Mark Twain’s works and other background knowledge by designing charts in advance, and independently search for the writing background of the Millennium pound bank note. This process cultivates students’ ability to focus and define, which is an important critical thinking ability. Students need to independently extract key information during reading and internalize it into their new knowledge to pave the way for the next “reading circle” activities.

Step 2: Text Interpretation: Group Discussion Leader organizes discussion to solve problems; Word Master selects about five important words to share with group members; Summarizer summarizes and retells the outline of the story and clarifies the context structure; Literal Luminary provides key sentences, infers implied meaning and analyzes emotional themes of the reading material.

[Group Discussion Leader role sheet]

Put forward at least 3 questions concerning the story to initiate and guide the discussion and keep it going. Pay attention to the 3 question type (factual question, analytical question and evaluative question) when designing your questions. Then provide a possible answer to each question.[10]

For example:

A. Factual question: Where does Henry Adams come from? Does Henry know much about London? What did he do in America?

B. Analytical question: Why do you think that the brothers chose Henry for their bet?

C. Evaluative question: What is Henry like?

[design-notes]

The activity design pays attention to the process of thinking, and exercises the ability of Group Discussion Leaders to decode and ask questions in English. No matter whether the group members answer correctly or not, teachers should focus on cultivating students’ “reasoning and demonstration”- be good at deep processing of reading materials, deeply exploring text information, and making rigorous and reasonable inferences and assumptions. Whether students can ask questions according to the reading content and the types of questions they ask can reflect the students’ cognitive degree<sup>[xiii]</sup>. The questions raised are no longer limited to “factual questions” based on the story details, but should be developed to high-level thinking level, and put forward “analytical questions” and “evaluative questions”, that is, the problems point to the relationship between different information and dialectical analysis combined with article content and students’ experience. Especially “evaluative questions”, which require students to make value judgment, are the core of critical thinking.

[Summarizer role sheet]

A. Go through the story for time, place and characters (figure 1). Don’t read sentence by sentence.

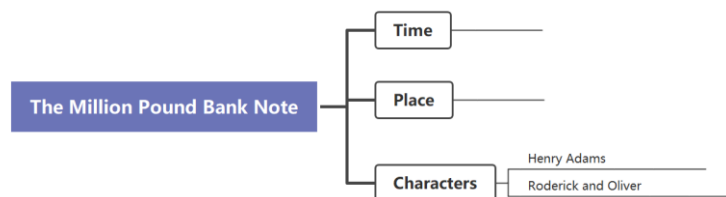


Figure 1: Summarizer role sheet 1

B. Create a timeline to show the key events of the story (figure 2) and form a short passage.

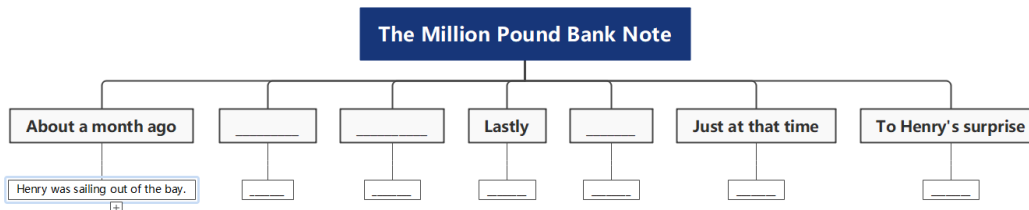


Figure 2: Summarizer role sheet 2

C. Retell the story by using his or her own words within one or two minutes.

[design-notes]

These activities is designed to examine students’ “focus and definition” ability. Task A requires students to find out the time, place and characters involved in the play, and task B requires students to complete the text frame diagram in chronological order. Since this reading passage is a play adapted from Mark Twain’s short stories, it is more difficult for students to understand its clues. Using the mind map and timeline can make the content more logical and visual. The purpose is to train students’ information extraction ability and help them sort out the context structure and test students’ grasp of the story background and overall plot to make their understanding more penetrating. Task C asks students to summarize the story in their own words. Overview is a process of thinking construction based on the understanding of the text in English reading teaching<sup>[xiv]</sup>. In the process of completing this task, students can not only activate their existing background knowledge, grasp the internal relationship between story plots, and cultivate their ability to comprehensively analyze, interpret and master the main idea.

[Word Master role sheet]

A. Read the story carefully and look for and highlight the important words. Then choose no more than 5 words to explain their meanings and demonstrate the reasons why they are vital.

Table 3: Word Master role sheet

My words	Meaning	Reason

[design-notes]

This activity is closely related to “focus and definition” ability of critical thinking. In this part, students need to write the new words in the chart and guess the conceptual meaning and connotative meaning of the new words according to the context. They can consult the dictionary or ask the teacher for help if necessary, and then explain the reasons for why these words are vital to the group members by clearly expressing their views to demonstrate their conclusions.

[Literary Luminary role sheet]

Pick up worth reading scenes and share them with group members. Read those passages loudly, and try to answer: 1) what kind of person do you think Henry is? 2) Why do you think so?

For example:

➤ Honest:

“RODERICK: *Patience, Mr Adams. If you don't mind, may I ask you how much money you have?*

HENRY: *Well, to be honest, I have none.*”

➤ Hard-working:

“HENRY: *Oh, no. I don't want your charity. I just want an honest job.*

RODERICK: *We know you're hard-working. That's why we've given you the letter. James, show Mr Adams out.*”

➤ Direct/Straightforward:

“HENRY: Well, it may seem lucky to you but not to me! On the contrary, in fact. If this is your idea of some kind of joke, I don't think it's very funny. (Henry stands up to leave) Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll be on my way.”

[design-notes]

This activity mainly cultivates students’ “analysis and evaluation” ability and “reasoning and demonstration” ability. Critical reading should not only understand the literal meaning of the article, but also identify the hidden meaning between the lines through analysis. By analyzing the context and inferring the implied meaning of the author, students can have a more accurate, comprehensive and deeper understanding of the play<sup>[xvi]</sup>. This is the key to learning play. After sorting out the plots, Literary Luminary will choose the appropriate paragraphs around the two questions “what kind of person do you think Henry is? Why do you think so?” the read aloud and have discussion with group members, so as to help the students explore Henry’s characteristics. Meanwhile, students should think from two perspectives: one is the reader’s perspective, the other is Henry’s perspective. For example, students are more likely to think that Henry is honest and hard working, while direct / straight needs to think deeply and find reasonable arguments to prove their views. At the same time, Literary Luminary need to encourage other team members to question, discuss and enrich their different understanding of the plot.

Step 3: Text Extension: Connector build the connection between the reading material and real life.

[Connector role sheet]

Take notes and combine the story with our true life and experiments. And answer: 1)What do you think of money? 2) Suppose a rich person gives you a million pound bank-note, what will you do with it ?

For example:

- 1)Money is everything./ Money is nothing.
- 2)save them/ buy a car/ run a business/ trip/ help others...

[design-notes]

The role sheet of Connector is to establish the connection between real life and the reading material for discussion among group members, which is of great significance to cultivate students’ “analysis and evaluation” ability. Connector needs to help the group members to recall how Henry Adams stepped into the upper class from a poor boy with nothing in the play, and married a beautiful and kind noble lady as his wife. The answers to the above questions are not mentioned in the context. But through students’ knowledge of the writing background of the play, combined with daily life and experience, the presentation of different views can attract students to have a heated debate. For example, some students think “money is everything”, while others support “money is nothing”. For some students, they know what to do with the money, while some students may be at a loss. Teachers should guide students’ values and outlook on life.

## 4.2 Data Analysis

In order to prove the promoting effect of "Reading Circles" teaching mode on senior high school students' critical thinking ability, this study conducted paired sample t-test on the pre-test and post-test of experimental class and control class. The pre-test results of critical thinking ability of the experimental class and the control class are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Paired-samples test of critical thinking ability in experimental class and control class (pre-test)

Pair	Experimental class- Control class	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Paired Differences		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
1		-.187	2.879	.509	-1.225	.850	-.368	31	.715

In the Paired-samples test, P value is the most important test value, and its specific value is an important indicator to reflect whether there is a significant difference between them. In the above chart,  $P (= 0.715) > 0.05$ , so there is no significant difference in critical thinking ability between the experimental class and the control class before the experiment, that is, the students in the experimental class and the control class are at the same or similar level of critical thinking ability before the experiment.

After the experiment, the analysis results of Paired-samples test in the control class are shown in Table 5 and table 6.

**Table 5:** Paired-samples statistics of pre-test and post-test in the control class

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	before	6.63	35	1.629	.275
	after	6.74	35	1.521	.257

**Table 6:** Paired-samples test of pre-test and post-test in control class

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	before - after	-.114	1.471	.249	-6.19	.391	-.460	34	.649

The above chart shows  $P (= 0.649) > 0.05$ , so there is no significant difference in the pre-test and post-test of the control class, that is to say, the two students in the control class stayed in sane critical thinking ability before and after the test.

**Table 7:** Paired-samples statistics of pre-test and post-test in experimental class

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	before	6.63	35	1.629	.275
	after	8.31	35	1.451	.245

**Table 8 :** Paired-samples test of pre-test and post-test in experimental class

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	before - after	-.1.686	1.207	.204	-2.100	.1271	-.8.262	34	.000

According to the characteristics of P value in the Paired-samples test, the results,  $P (= 0.000) < 0.05$ , which shows that there are significant differences in the pre-test and post-test, and the "Reading Circles" teaching pointing to the training of critical thinking ability has produced a great effect.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, "Reading Circles", as a student-centered group activity, not only provides teachers and students with a multi-dimensional learning platform and rich contextual experience, greatly improves students' reading ability and cooperative learning ability, but also cultivates students' critical thinking ability. Through reading and discussion, students' "focus and definition", "analysis and evaluation", "reasoning and demonstration", "review and correction" are effectively trained and improved, so that the expression and collision of thinking are realized. In English reading class, teachers can design scientific and reasonable "Reading Circles" activities pointing to the cultivation of critical thinking ability, improve critical reading ability and implement the thinking quality goal put forward in the Curriculum Standards.



## 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is supported by The Innovation Fund of Postgraduate, Sichuan University of Science & Engineering (y2021129).

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