

To teach English reading, to cultivate critical thinking

Ng Hong Chao, Joel

It is globally agreed that critical thinking is one of the most essential skills that students need to develop in order to solve problems and succeed in the 21st century. Unfortunately, due to the exam-driven educational environment, many Macao students' critical thinking ability is very limited. When they practise English reading comprehension, they just read without thinking. Some English teachers may also choose the easy way out by providing standard answers or they set the focus on linguistic patterns, grammatical structures and lexical items only. As a result, students learn passively by gobbling up all that is taught by teachers without thinking, analyzing or questioning. Both teachers and students regard the literal meaning of the text as the only truth. Yet, English reading is an important way for students to acquire global knowledge to explore the world. English reading comprehension should be regarded as a process of critical thinking in which students are trained to separate truth from falsehood, to assess messages from different angles, and to create their own opinions which are supported by evidence. Now that critical thinking ability is so important in English reading, how can English teachers cultivate it? What teaching strategies can they adopt?

To promote the development of critical thinking skills in an English reading lesson, first of all, the teacher needs to create a friendly classroom atmosphere and encourage students to answer and ask questions. Many Macao students are not used to voicing opinions. To challenge the teacher or the text is usually discouraged in the classroom. Considering this, the teacher should be more open-minded and respect different voices and opinions

regardless of right or wrong. Only a harmonious communication environment can make students more willing to express their viewpoints freely. Of course, the teacher should let students understand that to think critically does not mean to criticize blindly. Instead, students should be guided to explore the truth by presenting necessary evidence and supportive reasons. Above all, the teacher should not do away with the practice of critical thinking in order to catch up with the teaching progress or maintain classroom discipline.

When doing lesson planning, the English teacher should include critical thinking ability as a priority teaching objective. Before the lesson, students are to preview the reading material. They should look up unknown words in the dictionary and have a preliminary understanding of the literal meaning of the text. During the lesson, the teacher should arouse their curiosity about the content and stimulate their desire to take part in the discussion. The teacher can design a series of higher-level open-ended questions for students to ponder over. Open-ended questions allow for a variety of possible answers other than just pure memorization and factual recall. They challenge students to think on a deeper level and go beyond the factual information superficially presented by the text. Some sample designs of open-ended questions that can prompt students to think critically are as follows:

How would people from different backgrounds respond to ...?

How would you judge the validity of ...?

How would you predict ... ?

What are arguments for and against ...?

- What are the implications of ...?
- What assumptions or biases underlie ...?
- What is an alternative way to ...?
- What is the motive or reason behind...?
- What is your opinion of ...?
- What would happen if...?
- What would you do if...?

Besides answering teachers' questions, students are also encouraged to ask questions. Peer discussions can also be conducted to encourage students to evaluate different opinions. Students should be trained to express logical viewpoints during discussions. Ultimately, students can become critical thinkers who are used to thinking beyond their own opinions and beliefs.

English is a global language. It provides students with an access to the world. It is English teachers' responsibility to encourage students to think globally, see things from different angles, and explore more possibilities. English teachers need to bear in mind that, in an English reading lesson, basic linguistic knowledge is an important part but not the whole. What makes English teachers different from robots is that they are able to cultivate students' critical thinking ability while robots may teach vocabulary and grammar only. On the other hand, innovation and creativity is the driving force of the 21st century economy and the development of critical thinking has an important impact on students' innovative ability and creativity. Considering that the Greater Bay Area will become a global innovation and technology center while Macao will speed up its industrial diversification and its development of cultural and creative industry, it is necessary to reinforce Macao students' critical thinking skills so that they can become innovative and creative people to embrace all the forthcoming opportunities.

