

Exploring Students' Critical Thinking in the Context of Whole Book Reading

Jinfang Yang, Huiling Zhang

School of Literature and Journalism, Shandong University of Technology, Zibo Experimental Middle School, Shandong 255000, China

Abstract

Whole-book reading is a major trend in the development of language teaching today. To a large extent, the purpose of conducting Whole-book reading is to cultivate students' critical thinking, which in turn is guided by logical thinking, the construction of language as a carrier, and finally points to deep cultural understanding and transmission. The combination of Whole-book reading and critical thinking is what really enhances students' reading appreciation skills and thus their core language literacy.

Keywords

Language Teaching; Whole-book Reading; Critical Thinking.

1. Introduction

The GCSE Language Curriculum Standards (Revised Edition 2020) clearly states that " Whole-book reading" is a cross-cutting theme in the curriculum structure of compulsory, optional and elective courses; it is at the top of the 18 learning task groups in the curriculum content. The core qualities of the language subject include the construction and use of language, the development and enhancement of thinking, aesthetic appreciation and creativity, and cultural heritage and understanding, and 'criticality' is an important dimension in the assessment of 'development and enhancement of thinking'. The organic integration of "critical thinking" and "whole book reading" is an effective way to improve students' thinking skills and core language literacy.

Whole-book reading is a kind of reading behavior and reading activity that uses the whole book as a reading teaching resource, using various reading methods such as intensive reading and skimming, so that students can acquire reading methods, accumulate whole book reading experience and develop reading skills. The principle is to improve students' reading skills and broaden their horizons. The aim is to enable students to read complete classics, to dig deeper into the text and to grasp the author's thinking and the context of the work from its complex structure and content. Critical thinking is the ability and willingness to make theoretical assessments and objective evaluations based on full reason and objective facts. The development of critical thinking is essential in the process of reading whole books. Introducing critical thinking to whole book reading not only deepens students' understanding of the text and enhances their literary literacy, but also helps them to develop critical thinking, to explore the work's "emphasis on the human spirit, mind and emotional world"[1] and to improve their overall literacy by questioning and arguing.

2. Into it, Read the Text Deeply

Reading a whole book is a big undertaking, requiring a lot of time and effort, and is a continuous process. So how can you read deeply and thoroughly? The method of reading is crucial, and the close reading method and the critical reading method can be two proven methods of reading.

2.1. Intensive Reading Method

Due to academic pressure and time constraints, some students now read in a haphazard manner. After reading a book, they only remember the names of a few important characters and the general storyline, but they do not understand the details, main idea and spirit of the text thoroughly. This kind of reading has little effect and is not very useful in improving students' reading comprehension and developing critical thinking. Therefore, we advocate intensive reading of the text, the so-called intensive reading of the text, that is, students are required to read and explore every sentence of the text all the way to the core ideas of the text, whether it is the text of the table or inside, to read and eat thoroughly. It is not enough to read the text. To gain a deeper understanding of the author's purpose and the spirit of the book, students need to read relevant research materials. For example, in the case of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which is compulsory reading at the senior secondary level, students are only able to understand the novel at their own level after reading the original text carefully, whereas experts in red science have a scientific and unique understanding of the novel, which students need to read and learn from. A more mature and profound understanding can only be achieved by combining the words of a hundred schools of thought.

When doing Whole-book reading, students can take a variety of specific approaches to reading texts closely. For example, thematic reading, comparative reading, fragmentary reading, sequential reading, etc. We all know that *Dream of the Red Chamber* is an encyclopaedical novel that covers a wide range of topics, including garden design, cooking and eating, poetry and songwriting, Chinese medicine and health, and dressing up. Students can be guided to read around a theme for comparative reading, which both engages their interest and enhances their reading quality.

2.2. Critical Reading Method

The close reading method helps students to eat up the text and understand its connotations in depth, and can be considered the basis for developing critical thinking. On this basis, the critical reading method is also advocated to students. Critical reading is not a wholesale rejection of the author without any basis or principles, but rather a critical eye to identify problems and examine the text. As Mr. Yu Dangxu says, "The key to critical understanding is to find the 'questions' that are 'generative' and 'integrative', to 'questions' to cut into the work, and 'problem solving' to guide and promote understanding and thinking throughout the book." Students often need to think outside the confines of the text, think outside the box and question boldly. Diverse interpretations of the text's intent, structure, and main idea are possible. They can also question some of the views of their teachers and classmates, and through questioning, they can continue to deepen their understanding of the text, and then form their own unique opinions.

The theme of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has traditionally been the subject of divergent opinions. The "political theme" is the mainstream tendency. A large proportion of people believe that the decline of the four great families of Jia, Wang, Shi and Xue actually epitomizes the decline of feudal society as a whole. Some believe that the theme of "Dream of the Red Chamber" should revolve around the "love of Bao Dai" and the emotional entanglement of Bao Yu, Dai Yu and Bao Qi throughout the novel. Others believe that the theme should be 'class struggle', and that the novel is indeed about the conflict between the ruling and ruled classes, which is a novel understanding. Others believe that the theme should be the 'tragedy of desire', a view that can be explained by the famous philosopher Schopenhauer.

3. Out of the Box, Seeking Evidence and Reflection

After a critical reading of the whole book, students will find many questions and generate a series of queries, which give rise to the construction of new ideas and new perspectives. This is because critique and construction are a mutually reinforcing and interactive process. Through continuous deconstruction and construction, students eventually develop a pluralistic and personalized interpretation, and in this process, their critical thinking is gradually formed. [2]

3.1. Reflection for Evidence

After discovering the problem through critical reading, students will have a strong urge in their hearts to argue their point of view, at which point they can be guided to take a variety of ways to argue their point of view. Ouyang Lin once said, "questioning and proof-seeking are two inevitable parts of critical thinking". When confronted with a new viewpoint, one cannot be sure that it is valid if it is not justified by the text and the relevant supporting information.

The image of "Zhou Puyuan" in Mr. Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm" is deeply rooted in people's hearts. Different students may have different opinions on the question of whether Zhou Puyuan really loved Lu Serving Ping. In order to convince others with their own opinions, they must find sufficient evidence. This requires digging deeper into the details from the text or drawing on the findings of relevant scholars. Some students believed that Zhou Puyuan loved Lu Serving Ping deeply because the author, Mr. Cao Yu, once said, "Zhou Puyuan is also a human being, and one cannot assume that capitalists are inhuman. It is his humanity to deliberately drown 2,200 peons for the sake of money. It is also his humanity to love the people he loves and to need the warmth of affection in the circle in which he lives." This shows the emotions that the author pinned on the characters he portrayed. The famous literary critic Lan Di Zhi also believes that this is a love affair between two generations of young people from bourgeois families who have fallen in love with each other but cannot get it. With all the arguments, one's point of view is convincing.

In addition to this, reflection on the text and beyond is crucial, as it is a new psychological construction of understanding and perception of the book and of oneself. Students should not only reflect on the textual content and emotions in the book as a whole, but also on their own reading process, internalizing the cognition gained through reading the book as a whole, and thus promoting the development of their own critical thinking. As Mr. Fei Xiaotong says in his afterword to *China in the Countryside*, "But because they were pressing me for a deadline, I could not wait for many concepts to mature before publishing them, and many of them are still worthy of examination. This is not a final draft, nor can I say that it is a finished draft, but just a record of an attempt".

3.2. Individual Creation

It is not enough to stop at reading and thinking; to get students' critical thinking off the ground, they also need to be guided to personalize their work in response to the text. Mr. Yu Dangxu has divided whole book reading into three levels: firstly, full original reading, secondly, emphasizing critical understanding of the main idea and content, and thirdly, developing expressive training including transformative writing. Transformative writing includes many ways, such as critical essays, reading journals and essays, and text continuation.

At the end of the novel *The Border Town*, "This man may never come back, or he may come back tomorrow!" is full of uncertainty. When teaching reading, I asked students to use their imagination to write a definite ending to the novel. Some students thought that the man would never come back, that he had married outside and had children, and had completely forgotten the past; others thought that he would not come back because he was dead, and that in short there were infinite possibilities for not coming back. Some students also thought that he came back in the end and had a happy ending with Cui Cui, which was a desirable outcome. Through

the continuation of the ending, students gained a deeper understanding of the author's reasons for writing, the content of the text and the main idea of the novel.

When reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*, students can also be asked to write a commentary on an issue or from a particular perspective. As mentioned earlier, *Dream of the Red Chamber* covers a wide range of topics and students can be guided to write interdisciplinary essays from the perspective of disciplinary integration. For example, the costumes in the novel can be analyzed by asking students to consult relevant historical sources and combine literature and history, which will not only enhance the depth of understanding, but also promote a holistic reading perspective and multidisciplinary literacy. [3]

Reading the whole book creates a better platform for students to develop critical thinking, providing breadth, depth and intensity. Critical thinking, in turn, helps students to better understand the text, so that they can truly immerse themselves in the context of the whole book. The perfection can only be achieved by entering it and leaving it out.

Acknowledgments

Zibo City School-City Integration Project: The Stage Results of the Research on Reading Ability Assessment System based on Precision Teaching in Primary and Middle Schools (Project No. 9002/119010).

References

- [1] Zhang Wenjuan. Why love should be forgotten [J]. *Contemporary Writers' Review*, 2020 (04).
- [2] Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* [M]. Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1980.
- [3] Yan Fu. *Yan Fu ji* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1981.