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# How is critical thinking incorporated in pre-service English teacher education in China?

Jie Liu, Xiaohui Sun and Hongying Zheng

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# About the authors

**Jie Liu** is a senior lecturer in English Language Teaching at School of Humanities and Performing Arts at De Montfort University, Leicester. Jie has gained expertise in carrying out interdisciplinary studies on teaching and learning critical reading in the contexts of international students studying abroad (2012, 2015,2016) and sitting the IELTS test (2017).

Email address: jie.liu@dmu.ac.uk

**Xiaohui Sun** is an associate professor in the School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University. She got her Ph. D in Pedagogy and post-doctor study in Applied English Linguistics in Beijing Normal University. Her research interests include English language teaching and learning, English teacher education and development, and Chinese as a second language teaching and learning.

Email address: xhuisun@bnu.edu.cn

**Hongying Zheng** is a professor of education, and Ph.D. supervisor at Sichuan Normal University. She got her Ph.D. in the faculty of Education at Cambridge University. Her research interests include EFL teaching and learning, and EFL teachers' professional development. Her specialties lie in the study of EFL teachers' beliefs and practice from a perspective of complexity theory and developing students' thinking competence in EFL teaching.

Email address: zhenghy@sicnu.edu.cn



# Abstract

This project investigates how critical thinking is incorporated in English reading instruction in pre-service English teacher education in China, and how such pedagogical practice is entwined with contextual factors. All participants – both teacher educators and pre-service teachers – were recruited from two teacher training universities, except questionnaire respondents who were from various parts of China. A mixed-methods approach is adopted, including questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. Findings of quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that teaching critical reading is highly dynamic and complex. Some universities have embedded critical reading in curriculum design, while others largely rely on teachers' own initiatives. In addition, variations exist regarding what and how critical reading is taught, owing to factors such as cultural influence, teacher educators' expertise and perspectives, and support available for grassroots teaching. Furthermore, it is found that the test-oriented education system constitutes a key factor, not only resulting in underdeveloped thinking abilities among pre-service teachers, but also leading to divided views among them regarding teaching critical reading in future. Lastly, this study shows that gender is not considered as an affecting factor of engaging in critical thinking among pre-service teachers. Recommendations are proposed for pre-service teacher education in China and language support for Chinese international students in western universities.

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# 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Research context

Literature review suggests that international students from mainland China are generally not considered to be competent critical thinkers by western universities (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Liu, J., 2015, 2016; Pang, 2008). In the past, China has been through radical education reform at all levels (Ryan, 2011, p.3), focusing on developing students' critical thinking, problem solving and creativity (Ryan et al., 2009, p.429). While some changes could be observed in terms of teaching methods and students' learning approaches (Ryan et al., 2009), it is argued that reform in higher education is yet to achieve intellectual freedom and institutional autonomy (Yang, 2011, p.41).

Recently, the Chinese government has taken increasing measures to develop students' creative and critical thinking. The revised English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (2017) (ECSSHS hereafter) explicitly specifies developing students' core competence in areas such as language and learning ability, cultural awareness, and thinking capacity. The Standards of English Language in China (2018) (SELC hereafter) highlights that critical thinking is an essential component for English language assessment across different proficiency levels. Arguably, these two policies may complement each other in a way that the first functions to steer current English teaching towards more innovative practice at a macro level, while the latter attempts to generate a positive washback effect on what to teach in grassroots teaching.

Meanwhile, studies have been conducted in pre-service English language teacher education (PELTE hereafter), focusing on topics such as curriculum reform (Zhang, 2009); how to balance teaching theoretical knowledge and creating teaching practice for pre-service teachers (Hong, 2013; Yang, 2014; Zhu, 2019); the importance of updating pre-service educators' pedagogical knowledge (Shan, 2014); and the cognitive development of pre-service teachers and changes in their learning attitudes over time (Ceng, 2011; Yu, 2016). It is noted that pre-service teacher education tends to be more

“academic” than “normal” (pedagogical knowledge of how to teach) (Cheng & Sun, 2010), with inadequate attention being paid to developing students' critical thinking ability (Huang, 2010; Ma & Luo, 2021; Xu, 2018). Consequently, the over-emphasis on English language in classroom teaching (Hu & Sun, 2006; Ma & Luo, 2021; Wen, 2015) gives rise to the “Syndrome of Critical Thinking Absence” (Huang, 2010) among students. Furthermore, teacher educators' individual understandings of critical thinking largely determine what and how critical thinking is taught, resulting in variations of what students learn (Li et al., 2017; Li & Huang, 2021). So far, few studies have been carried out to explore the impact of the two policies (ECSSHS and SELC) on PELTE, in particular, how the emphasis on developing students' thinking ability is incorporated into pedagogical practice.

Furthermore, education quality varies from region to region across China, with great gaps between eastern, central, and western provinces (Cheng, 2009). Cheng (2009) argues that unbalanced economic growth has led to education inequality. Generally speaking, education institutes in the more affluent eastern regions have more advanced educational resources, enabling them to attract more competent students and achieve higher student attainment (C. Liu, 2016). In addition, government funding and investment in these areas further aggravates the gaps in education resources (Yuan, 2005). All these factors suggest the intricate relationships between education quality, economic development, geographic locations, and government investment. Nevertheless, little is known about whether teaching critical thinking in PELTE would be affected by these factors, especially geographic locations.

Lastly, previous research suggests that there is a gender difference in language learning. For instance, female students seem to prefer memorization strategy, together with some affective and metacognitive strategies, which is in contrast with the cognitive strategies used by male students such as categorizing and repetition strategies (Ye & Zhang, 2008; Zhang et al., 2002; Zhou, 2007). Few studies have explored whether gender plays a role in developing critical thinking among pre-service teachers.

**Table 1:** Key components of a reading curriculum (Grabe, 2009, p.332)

<b>A</b>	Promote word-recognition skills.
<b>B</b>	Build a large recognition vocabulary.
<b>C</b>	Practice comprehension skills that combine awareness of grammar, main idea identification, and comprehension strategies. Strategy instruction should not be separate from text-comprehension instruction.
<b>D</b>	Build awareness of discourse structure (main idea, major organizing patterns, organizing patterns in parts of the text, overt signals of text structure, anaphoric relations in texts, other cohesive markers in texts).
<b>E</b>	Develop strategic reading.
<b>F</b>	Practice reading fluency (building reading rate, build text-passage reading fluency, read and re-read at home with parent or tape or self).
<b>G</b>	Promote extensive reading.
<b>H</b>	Develop motivation.
<b>I</b>	Integrate both reading and content-learning expertise.

Against the backdrop of such changing education context, the present project aims to investigate the impact of the two educational policies – ECSSHS and SELC – on PELTE through reading instruction, focusing on how pre-service teachers are taught to read critically and to teach critical reading in future; and on whether geographic locations and gender differences would affect PELTE regarding engaging in critical reading. These are important because such information will help us not only gain insights into the quality, but also into the equality of PELTE in China.

## 1.2 Theoretical framework for this study

The theoretical basis for this project draws mainly on two components: curriculum-development principles for L2 reading (Grabe, 2009) and the framework for academic reading (Liu, 2012). The rationale for incorporating these two theories is that each of them has a unique focus on L2 reading instruction and learning. Namely, Grabe's (2009) principles highlight that a curriculum framework for L2 reading instruction should address developing readers' reading ability in a systematic and developmental manner. Specifically, considerations should be given to elements such as combining major skills instruction (see Table 1) and reading practice; abundant reading resources; instruction centring around pre-, during-, and after-reading activities; and setting developmental goals by means of teaching reading skills and strategies. In Grabe's view (2009), "the most fundamental goal for reading instruction is to incorporate key component skills and knowledge into a coherent reading curriculum" (p.331).

Within this framework, the central role of teaching is to help students become strategic readers in terms of modelling, scaffolding, and extensive practice, which eventually enables students to use

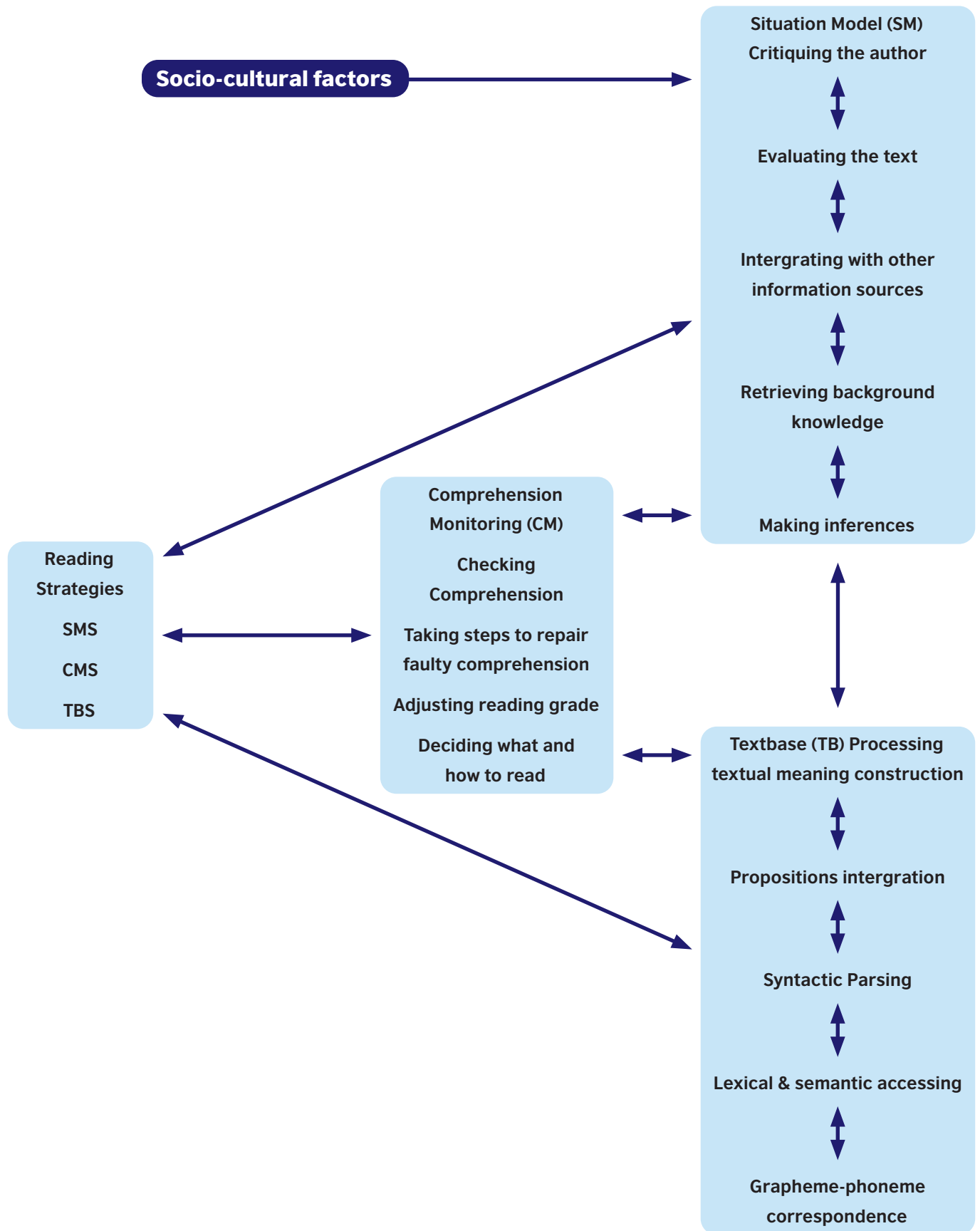
various strategies independently and automatically for fluent reading (Grabe, 2009, p.335). Grabe (2009) contends that strategy instruction is complex and multifaceted, owing to variations such as instructional possibilities, teacher orientations, and student engagement (p.329).

In comparison, Liu's (2012) framework (see Figure 1 below) encompasses two key elements in academic reading: reader's underlying cognitive faculties and socio-cultural factors. The cognitive processing in this framework consists of three dimensions: textbase (understanding of the text content), situation model construction (association of text meaning with the reading purposes/tasks), and comprehension monitoring (tracking the understanding of the text). Furthermore, readers' attention is interdependent between the textbase and their situation model construction.

As for socio-cultural factors, they determine whether readers interact with only the textbase or also construct a situation model (i.e. interpreting the text). This is because, as a socially situated learning activity, reading processing inevitably reflects the social beliefs and cultural values within that community. It is the everyday mediation in the community that gradually shapes a shared pattern of what and how to read a text.

In addition, this framework considers that a reader's conscious and effortful cognition is an inseparable part of the comprehension process. As conscious cognitive resources, reading strategies can be used in textbase processing, in situation model construction, and in comprehension monitoring (simplified as SMS, TBS, and CMS in the framework). These strategies are effortful mental activities which take place during reading in order to facilitate or consolidate comprehension at any level of processing in the three dimensions outlined above.

Figure 1: A framework of academic reading by Liu (2012)



The concepts of readers' levels of processing: textbase and situation model construction (Kintsch, 1988; Kintsch & Rawson, 2007; Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2008) are important in this study. This is because, for one thing, situation model construction refers to readers' mental efforts that go beyond understanding literal meaning, namely, engagement in interpretive and critical reading. For another, the association of cognitive processing with strategy use lends theoretical support for scrutinizing the pedagogical practice in L2 reading instruction and learning among pre-service teachers and educators in China, regarding what reading strategies are taught and practised. Furthermore, the interplay between social cultural values and reading practice is reflected in the framework, which enables us to tease out how Chinese culture is intertwined with teaching critical reading in PELTE.

Clearly, Liu's (2012) framework is about the interrelationship between levels of cognitive processing (reflected by deployment of reading strategies) and sociocultural factors in the local context, while Grabe's (2009) curriculum principles stress the pedagogical guidelines of developing students' strategic reading. The combination of these components will provide us with a joint theoretical basis to explore teaching and learning critical reading in PELTE in China, and guide the research design and data analysis in this study.

The research questions are as follows:

- 1** What are the prevalent pedagogical focuses in pre-service English teacher education in China?
  - a** How do teacher educators perceive the government's call for developing students' critical thinking ability in China?
  - b** How do the teacher educators incorporate this requirement in their teaching, especially in teaching critical reading?
  - c** How do pre-service teachers perceive their training on critical thinking in China?
  - d** How confident do pre-service teachers feel about engaging in critical reading in their study, and teaching critical reading in future?
- 2** How do geographic locations and gender differences affect pre-service teacher education in terms of developing critical thinking in China?
- 3** To what extent does pre-service teacher education align with Chinese social and cultural values?







# 2

## Research design

### 2.1 Approach

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, encompassing questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and classroom observations. Specifically, questionnaires were used to explore teacher educators' perceptions and beliefs on reading instruction. The questionnaire construct was developed based on critical review of Grabe's (2009) curriculum principles and the questionnaire on academic reading strategies by Liu (2012, 2017) (see Appendix 1). Both open- and closed-ended questions are used and the structure of the questionnaire construct is as follows:

- Section A elicits respondents' bio information.
- Section B-A explores respondents' knowledge of ECSSHS and SELC, and their beliefs on reading instruction.
- Section B-B examines perceptions of classroom teaching, especially strategy instruction on pre-, during-, and after-reading.
- Open-ended questions ask about respondents' views on gender differences in critical reading among pre-service teachers and on pedagogical challenges in reading instruction.

In order to gain in-depth knowledge of teacher educators' reading instruction, interviews and classroom observations were conducted together so that their teaching beliefs are examined in relation to classroom practices in line with Borg (2003). The interview questions are presented in Appendix 2.

Focus groups, on the other hand, were carried out among pre-service teachers, enabling us to explore their views on the following topics (see Appendix 3):

- abilities to engage in critical reading
- teaching critical reading in future
- factors relating to learning and teaching critical reading
- gender equality and how to address this in future

### 2.2 Participants

All participants were recruited, using purposive and convenience sampling principles in two teacher training universities in China: University North (UniversityN) and University South (UniversityS), except that the questionnaires were issued to teacher educators across China. All teacher educators from UniversityN and UniversityS were anonymised as NEP and SEP respectively, while the pre-service teachers were coded as NPP and SPP. Among the eleven teacher participants, there were five who had doctorate degrees in UniversityN in areas such as English literature, education, and L2 reading, and one was studying her PhD (in education) in UniversityS. The rest had master's degrees. Given the nature of student intake in PELTE in China, there were only three male pre-service teachers among twenty-five participants, and one male teacher educator (see Figure 2).

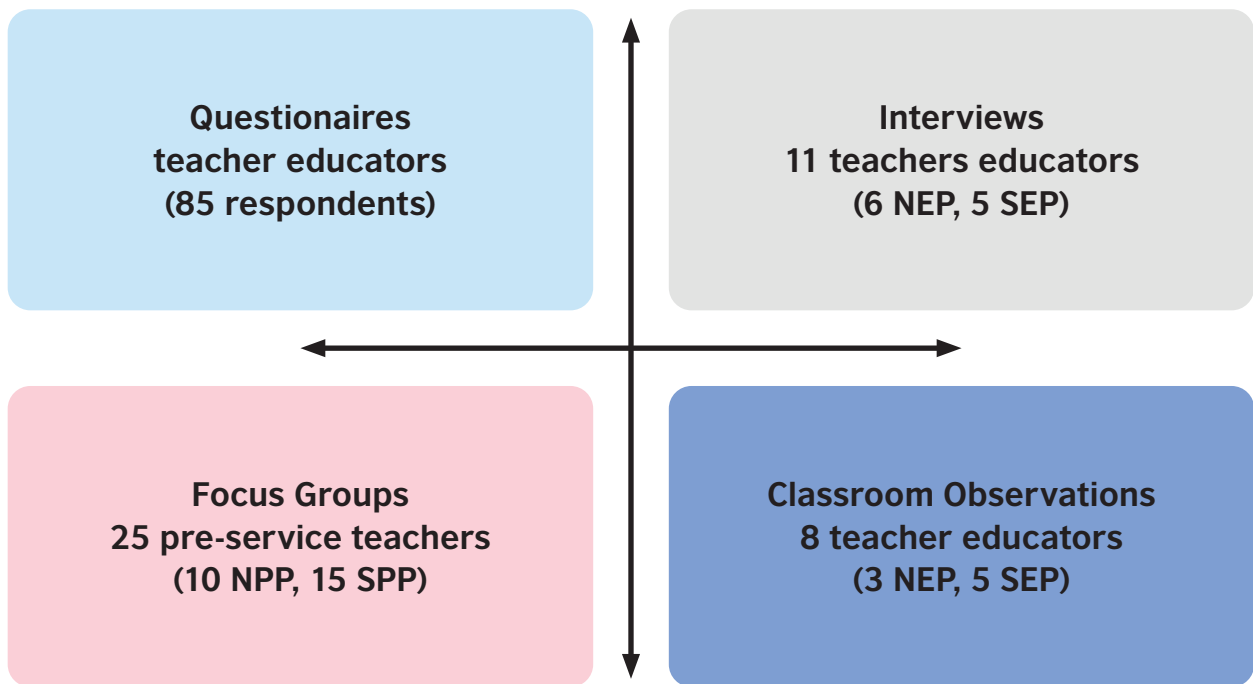
### 2.3 Data collection

The ethics application was approved at De Montfort University in November 2020, and the participant information sheet and consent forms were sent and signed by the participants before data collection. Owing to the unexpected Covid-19 pandemic, all data collection was conducted online.

The questionnaire construct was piloted first to test reliability in March 2021 among thirty-nine university English teachers (not teacher educators) through an online survey platform: Wen Juanxing. Data analysis showed a strong degree of reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.964) relative to all the questionnaire items. Then the questionnaires were issued to teacher educators across China in June 2021.

Similarly, a piloting interview was conducted on an English lecturer in China. Based on the interviewee's feedback, one question was rephrased as 'what factors do you think may restrain you from teaching critical reading in class?' instead of 'what cultural factors do you think...?' By deleting 'cultural', participants would feel more comfortable to talk about anything that occurred to them.

Figure 2: Participants for this study



All interviews were conducted in English on WeChat (an online app), ran between 35 to 90 minutes. A different app VooV was used for focus groups, given its reliability for group communications. We had to recruit more pre-service teachers because the first focus group partially clashed with participants' evening classes. The focus groups lasted from 70 to 120 minutes, and all participants chose to speak a mixture of Chinese and English. All video-recorded data were first transcribed in English and Chinese. Then all the Chinese utterances were translated into English (indicated as tr.: in following transcripts) by a bilingual in Chinese and English.

As for classroom observations, we video-recorded eight teacher educators' teaching (five in UniversityS and three in UniversityN).

## 2.4 Data analysis

### Quantitative analysis

There were eighty-five teacher educators who filled in the questionnaires, with average 13.7 years of teaching experience, ranging from 1 to 35 years. Based on respondents' locations, they were categorised into five groups: Beijing, Mid-north Region, North-east Region, Sichuan Province, and Jiangsu Province. Such categorisation enables us to investigate the interrelationship between geographic locations and instructions on critical reading in PELTE in China. All questionnaire items in Section B were coded into strategies in line with Liu's (2012) reading framework. Data analysis focused mainly on whether significant difference existed between teaching textbase and situation model construction

strategies. Non-parametric tests were conducted because Kolmogorov-Smirnov results indicated abnormal distribution:  $p < 0.05$ .

### Qualitative data analysis

The transcripts of interviews and focus groups were first studied carefully. Based on Braun and Clarke (2016), data were further categorised into different themes in the light of emerging patterns across different data sets relating to the research questions (p. 741). As for classroom observations, they were used to triangulate teacher educators' perceived classroom practice as revealed in interviews.





# 3

## Findings

### 3.1 Teacher educators' knowledge about the English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (ECSSHS) and the Standards of English Language in China (SELC)

Findings from quantitative and qualitative analyses present a mixed picture about teacher educators' knowledge of the ECSSHS. Questionnaire results show that most teacher educators (67.1%) believe that they have adapted their teaching in order to meet the requirements in the ECSSHS, together with another 23.5% who think that they have made some changes in teaching. There is only 11.4% who indicate that they have never made any adaptations. These results suggest that most teacher educators are incorporating the ECSSHS into classroom teaching, including developing pre-service teachers' thinking abilities.

In contrast, interview results reveal that many interviewees have little knowledge of the ECSSHS for various reasons (see the transcripts below):

- Curriculum research is not falling into the scope of my interest. (NEP2)
- My major is not about English teaching. (SEP7)
- Actually I don't teach high school students. (SEP4)
- But it is for high school, right? And we are teaching in universities. (NEP6)
- We are not required to read it. (NEP1)
- I am not very good at decoding policies. (NEP5)

Furthermore, interview findings reveal the reasons which deter some teacher educators from enacting the ECSSHS (see the following transcript):

***Assessment and reward have caused the gap between the document [ECSSHS] and reality, because if you want to highlight the thinking in education, you need to have the detailed, for example, rules, or guidelines, or even you need to have some stimulus to encourage the teachers to focus on these parts. Or teachers like me would say: why bother! Because I need to prepare for this kind of critical class for a long time. This is not used as a kind of assessment in your teaching career or in your profession. (SEP9)***

Here we can see the multifaceted nature of the enactment process, which should involve both the institutional and individual efforts regarding pedagogical guidance, new assessment construct, and associating innovative teaching with career development. Otherwise, it is challenging for teacher educators to be left to their own devices (see interview transcript below):

***Critical thinking has been emphasised no matter in primary school, or to English major in university ... Many teachers and educators agree that it is important. But how to realize this standard? This is an actual question in real teaching. (SEP3)***

In the education context, assessment has been used as a tool to trigger an impact on teaching and learning, especially the standardised tests. The SELC (issued one year after the ECSSHS) highlights critical thinking as a core component in English language assessment across all language levels. In theory, SELC matches ‘perfectly’ with ECSSHS regarding the requirement of critical thinking; and 60% of questionnaire respondents think that they have adapted their teaching to meet the new assessment construct, with another 22.4% having partially done so. Nevertheless, interview results reveal that SELC has generated little impact on PELTE, simply because this document is designed to assess learners who are not studying in the universities or schools: “for amateur students learning English who expect to have a certificate” (NEP2).

In all, the above conflicting results suggest that while quantitative findings may have reflected what some teacher educators wished to do in their teaching, qualitative analysis reveals the dynamics and complexity underlying the enactment of the ECSSHS in PELTE.

### 3.2 Prevalent approaches in reading instruction

As far as reading instruction is concerned, quantitative results reveal the most and the least effective activities perceived by teacher educators (see Table 2). Almost 59% of questionnaire respondents at least partially agree that they use checking answers to comprehension exercises, and 41% of them address understanding word meaning. The least effective approach is doing translation to improve comprehension (25.8%). Meanwhile, answers to the open-ended questions show other activities such as reading circle, jigsaw task, writing summary, writing one’s own ending after reading, paraphrasing sentences, graphic organizer, and discussions. These activities suggest that, while various activities are used in reading instruction, some traditional teaching remains strong, such as using exercises to check students’ reading comprehension.

In addition, there emerge two distinctive approaches in interview analysis and classroom observations: ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. General speaking, the ‘traditional’ approach largely resonates with established pedagogical practices, with great emphasis being placed on English language. In addition, how teacher educators teach largely resembles how they were taught as students, such as memorising the text, checking comprehension exercises, and doing translation. As Feryok (2012) argues, “early experiences mediate later development because they are the basis for orienting to individual actions” (p. 106). Take memorising the text for instance.

***In each of my class, I will ask them to memorize and to read that [text] to me. I think memorizing good pieces of writing may be one way for them to cultivate their language competence. (SEP7)***

Such teaching practice greatly echoes Cortazzi and Jin’s (1996) description of English classes in China: “to read the text aloud (or recite or paraphrase it) with fairly good pronunciation” (p.182). Likewise, SEP8 consciously copies her own teacher’s practice: asking students to read the same book list she used to have. She believes that students’ reading and writing will be improved automatically by reading like a native speaker. Hence, SEP8 focuses on speed reading and comprehension exercises in class:

***Skim and scan. Every week and every session I will give them like 10 minutes to do speed reading... there will be a lot of reading comprehension. I will give them 20 minutes to finish reading comprehension...They choose the answer, then I will give them the correct answer and try to tell them why I choose this one, instead of that one. (SEP8)***

**Table 2:** Teacher educators’ beliefs on reading instruction

Effectiveness of classroom activities	Strongly agree/agree (percentage of respondents)	Partially agree (percentage of respondents)
Doing Comprehension exercises	34.2%	24.7%
Translating into Chinese	11.7%	14.1%
Understanding word meaning	20%	21.2%

Similar answer checking activities are observed in SEP7 and SEP4's classroom teaching, triangulating the quantitative result of doing comprehension exercises in class. Furthermore, classroom observations and interview analysis reveal another common practice: doing translation. There are four teacher educators (out of five) in UniversityS who ask students to either translate Chinese sayings into English or translate (parts of) the text into Chinese. Inconsistent with the quantitative results, qualitative findings suggest that doing translation may be more frequently used than teacher educators think. The following narratives from SEP3 may account for her rationale for this practice:

***When we do translation in class, it is obvious to find the difference in thinking, especially how to organize our language, the difference to express in English and in Chinese. (SEP3)***

According to Johnson (2009), teachers' "personal beliefs about language learning and teaching had a much stronger influence on the way they carried out their instructional practices" (p.75). Such deeply ingrained everyday concepts are formed based on their own instructional histories and lived experiences (Lantolf and Johnson, 2007, p. 884). Eventually, the entrenched image of what it means to be a teacher could make it very difficult for many teachers to cut off with the past and what they are used to (Akbari, 2007). To some extent, the traditional approach illustrates the interplay between established practices, social forces and individual experiences which in turn leads to a teacher's approach to language teaching (Feryok, 2012, p.95).

In contrast, the 'modern' approach is more anchored in relevant reading theories, with more attention being paid to students' critical engagement. The following narratives from SEP9 and NEP1 demonstrate such effort in their classroom teaching.

***Before their reading, I will not only ask them to make guessing and prediction according to the title, but also ask them to pay attention to some questions, e.g. what's the main idea of this reading material? ... In the while-reading part, normally I will begin from the main structure ... to the detailed information of the reading material. In the post-reading, I'd like to have some discussions, some extended learning of the material. I will also assign some writing tasks because I think reading and writing are closely related. (SEP9)***

***In class, the first step is warming-up activities, such as discussion, questions and answers ... Sometimes students will relate it to their own life... Secondly, I will give an introduction to the general structure of the text... I will ask students about their opinions. They will pick up the topic sentences, the conclusion and summary of different paragraphs. Thirdly, we will explain and practice some new words, vocabulary building. Fourthly, when we read in detail, I will also add some cultural background. Finally, there will be some open questions for them to discuss. (NEP1)***

The above pedagogical practices largely resonate with Grabe's (2009) principle: "Lessons that are structured around prereading, during-reading, and post-reading activities" (p.332). In addition, the designed activities have incorporated various strategy practices such as activating background knowledge, making prediction, paying attention to text structure, getting the gist of the text, as well as vocabulary building. Unlike the 'traditional' approach, the 'modern' teaching has displayed a transformative move towards scientific practices both theoretically and pedagogically (Johnson and Golombek, 2011, p.2).

In summary, the findings of this study reveal two prevalent approaches in reading instruction: traditional and modern. The mixed results from quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that, while there may be a mismatch between teacher educators' beliefs and actual classroom teaching, the traditional approach seems to be deeply rooted, featured by pedagogical practices such as checking comprehension exercises and doing translation.

### 3.3 Teaching reading strategies

Inconsistent results are found about strategy instruction among teacher educators. Quantitative findings show that 83.6% of questionnaire respondents believe that strategy instruction is one of their teaching objectives, and 63.6% of them think that their current syllabus focuses on developing pre-service teachers' strategic reading. These figures suggest that strategy instruction is widely incorporated both at the institutional and individual levels. As far as teaching critical reading and geographic locations are concerned, results of Kruskal Wallis Test show insignificant differences in teaching situation model construction strategies  $p=0.819$  and in teaching text-base strategies  $p=0.798$  across the five regions.

Furthermore, Table 3 presents respondents' perceived strategy instruction, including the most taught (about 80% of respondents who strongly agree / agree to have taught these strategies) and the least taught strategies (about 40% of respondents who strongly agree / agree to have taught these strategies). Among the most taught strategies, there are three situation model construction strategies: 'associating with background knowledge', and 'paying attention to text structure' (pre- and during-reading). The rest are textbase strategies such as 'predicting', 'skimming', and 'summarizing the text'. As for the least taught strategies, they are all textbased: 'focusing on sentence meaning', 'translating the text into Chinese', and 'teaching grammar'.

To some extent, the above strategy repertoire helps further understand the 'traditional' and 'modern' approaches. For instance, the most taught strategies largely match the ones disclosed by NEP1 and SEP9 whose teaching is structured by three stages (representing the 'modern approach'). Among these strategies, however, there are no evaluative ones such as 'making inferences', 'integrating different information sources', 'critiquing the author(s)' and 'evaluating the text' both during- and after-reading. Such strategy instruction contradicts teacher educators' belief about incorporating the ECSSHS into classroom teaching, regarding developing students' critical thinking. Similarly, the least taught strategies greatly resonate respondents' beliefs on the least effective activities in reading instruction in terms of doing translation and focusing on word meaning. Given the revealed mismatch between teacher educators' perceptions of what they teach and what they actually do in class, it is likely that these strategies may be taught more frequently than they believe, aligning with the 'traditional' approach.

**Table 3:** Teacher educators' perceptions of reading strategy instruction

Taught strategies	Percentage of respondents who strongly agree/agree to have taught the strategies
<b>The most taught strategies</b>	
<b>Pre-reading strategies</b>	
Predicting	80%
Preview	84.7%
Paying attention to text structure	81.2%
Skimming	79.8%
<b>During-reading strategies</b>	
Associating with background knowledge	91.8%
Summarizing the text	94.1%
Paying attention to text structure	89.4%
Using discourse markers	84.7%
Guessing unfamiliar words	81.2%
<b>The least taught strategies</b>	
<b>During-reading strategies</b>	
Focusing on sentence meaning	20%
Translating the text into Chinese	25.9%
Teaching grammar	40.1%



Nevertheless, interview findings present us with a different story: most teacher educators either know little or lack enthusiasm about strategy instruction (see the following interview transcripts).

- When we talk about reading strategies, it is just about how to find the correct answers, and how to get the higher score. (SEP3)
- I am actually not good at strategies, like fast reading, skip and skim to remember when we took part in the exams, like Grade 8, Grade 4 (two standardized national English tests in China). (SEP7)
- I am not a fan of strategies. In fact, I probably put comprehension as a top priority. (NEP6)
- I don't believe the strategies. You just read like a native speaker. I seldom teach strategies. (SEP8)
- I am not consciously using any reading strategies in my reading classes. (NEP5)
- I am not quite sure about this concept, I should admit. (NEP1)
- I don't pay particular attention to that [strategy instruction] because that's some basic skills required in the first two years in their college study. This course is not for the basic skills. (SEP4)
- I don't deliberately teach them reading strategies. (SEP9)

Of the few who acknowledge their strategy instruction in class, their focus seems to be largely on strategies such as 'skimming', 'scanning', and 'making prediction'. Take the following narratives for instance.

***In my class, like prediction, studying the title, and then the open paragraph, the logic in-between these paragraphs. Such knowledge is important in the reasoning of how the author is making his defence. Each text we will deal with these strategies in order to enhance students' reading abilities ... If you were the writer, what you were planning to write in the next paragraph... I think this is a good method for students to practice predictions... to develop their critical reading. (NEP2)***

***In the methodology class, they [pre-service teachers] have to know what skimming means, what scanning means... So pre-service teachers need to know how to teach those reading strategies. (NEP10)***

NEP2's narratives, apart from 'making prediction', also reveal other strategies such as 'paying attention to text structure', 'making inferences' and 'evaluating the author/text'. Similarly, previous accounts from SEP9 and NEP1 show that their classroom practice involves some situation model construction strategies, despite their above acknowledgement of not knowing or teaching strategies. Their lack (or absence) of articulation of strategy instruction, in Brevik's (2014) view, does not necessarily mean that there is no strategy instruction. Instead, it simply indicates that some "teachers might not have been explicitly aware of their reading comprehension strategy instruction" (Brevik, 2014, p.63).

In all, findings of this study support Grabe's (2009) view that strategy instruction is complex in which teacher-related factors play a big part (p.329). In this project, the association of reading strategies with testing strategies (like SEP3 and SEP7) may reflect the impact of some teacher educators' own learning experience, which eventually builds up their 'negative' beliefs about strategy instruction. Furthermore, separating subject knowledge from strategy instruction (like SEP4) may indicate some degree of the existing dualism in classroom teaching. It is argued that there should be holistic knowledge of teaching in terms of acknowledging the interdependence between what is taught and how, because such recognition is essential for learning-to-teach and enriching teaching expertise (Johnson and Arshavskaya, 2011, p.170). Lastly, the fact that many interviewed teacher educators show inadequate knowledge of strategy instruction is begging for targeted professional trainings (see interview transcript below):

***I don't mention strategies in my classes because I don't think I have learnt enough to share with students. I always believe, including me, all young English teachers should be trained on reading strategies... There are no strategies in the textbook. (SEP3)***

### **3.4 Interpretations and instructions of critical reading**

As far as teaching critical reading is concerned, qualitative findings show that great discrepancies exist between teacher educators' individual understandings and classroom practices (see below).

- comparing different views
- developing students' thinking abilities



- building own arguments, but not necessarily mean to say something is bad or it is something good, nor evaluate and judge
- linking textual information with real life
- approaching a text from different perspectives or compare different points of views
- develop something new, being creative

Among the various interpretations of critical reading, there is little emphasis on the evaluative feature of critical reading. The following account from NEP10 may shed light on the non-evaluative interpretation against the backdrop of ECSSHS:

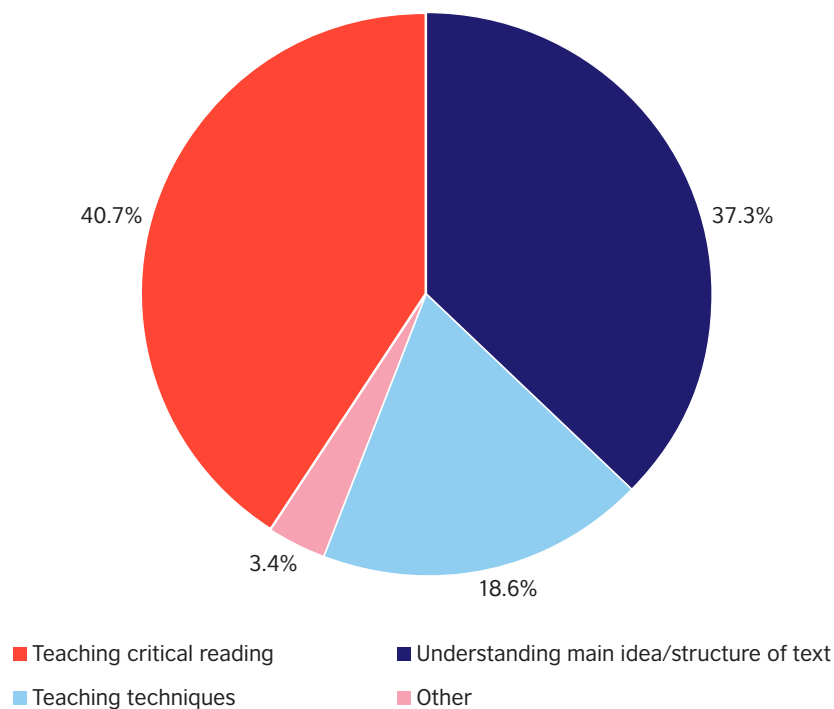
***Critical reading, it may not refer to guiding students to read a text critically. So here critically, it means from different aspects to analyse or understand the text. Not 批评 (criticise) ... because in the New Standard Curriculum, 思维品质 (thinking competence) refers to students' thinking at the logical, critical, and creative these three levels (指学生在逻辑性, 批判性, 和创新性等方面的思维). That is why I think critical is closely related to logical and creative aspects. (NEP10)***

Undoubtedly the emphasis on logical and creative aspects of critical reading is very different from the ones defined below which highlight evaluating different information sources:

- “to evaluate and critique information from multiple texts...to make decisions about which aspects of the text are most important, most persuasive, least persuasive, or most controversial. Moreover, readers need to decide how to relate the text information to other information intertextually and to their prior knowledge and beliefs” (Grabe, 2009, p.10).
- “the capacity to evaluate what you read and the capacity to relate what you read to other information” (Wallace and Wray, 2021, p.9).

These different interpretations will inevitably determine what and how critical reading is taught, but they also likely reflect teacher educators' perceived teaching challenges. Among the 59 questionnaire respondents who answered the open-ended questions, 40.7% of them consider it challenging to teach critical reading, and 37.1% find it difficult to help students get the main idea or the text structure (see Figure 3). There are another 18.6% who have trouble with various teaching techniques. The remaining 3.4% report difficulty in motivating students. Though they may seem discrete, they are in fact all related to teaching critical reading, because effective teaching techniques are the key to helping students understand the text, as well as its structure. Without proper textbase processing, it is simply impossible to guide students to read critically.

Figure 3: Teacher educators' perceived teaching challenges



Meanwhile, qualitative results provide us with in-depth information about teaching critical reading both at institutional and individual levels. Specifically, UniversityN has replaced the traditional Extensive Reading course by 'Critical Reading and Writing', together with a new textbook for this course. In addition, students' classroom participation accounts for 40% of year-end exam. Owing to the new curriculum design and innovative assessment, critical thinking becomes a key component in classroom teaching (see transcript below):

***In class we will focus on understanding the text, basic ideas. Then we will try to make progress regarding understanding the theme. So more questions about the facts, and more questions on between the lines. Finally, we try to read beyond the lines. In this part, we will have primarily 'why' questions... I tell students to give particular attention to this critical part, say, where the author has failed to make her point; where the argument is solidly supported and organized by the author. We also put the reading tasks in a broader culture. (NEP2)***

***I always like to engage them [pre-service teachers] in discussion and encourage them to talk about their own perspectives. So I understand how they think about certain issue before I share with them how I think about it. And how my perspective can actually meet their perspectives. There is also a kind of middle ground when I meet their perspectives. That's the most important thing in my reading class. (NEP6)***

NEP6's effort to reach the 'middle ground' greatly reflects Confucius' philosophical idea of 'taking the middle way'. In other words, seeking the commonalities between different perspectives has overshadowed interpreting different views. Such culturally influenced pedagogical practice inevitably has an impact on her students regarding their understanding and their future teaching on critical reading.

Another shared practice between NEP2 and NEP6 is that neither of them focuses on language teaching: "we normally don't focus on the language part, primarily on the overall comprehension of the text" (NEP2). Similarly, NEP6 believes that "if you take care of critical thinking, the language stuff takes care of itself".

According to Liu's (2012) reading framework, readers' critical engagement is built on solid understanding of the text. Given that pre-service teachers had limited English reading practices before entering university (see the following section), arguably, it would be more appropriate to develop their critical reading together with English language (see Table 1), rather than prioritising one and neglecting the other.

In contrast, discrepancies exist in teaching critical reading in UniversityS, as illustrated below:

- I think [I teach] in some way, not completely. (SEP7)
- I don't ask them and teach them how to read critically. I don't know how I can combine critical thinking with literature reading. (SEP4)
- I don't teach critical reading on purpose. Maybe sometimes. I try to ask my students to think more. (SEP8)
- Actually I am still on the way of learning how to carry out critical reading. (SEP9)
- Not often. And it depends on my abilities and my experience. (SEP3)

Among them, SEP4 explicitly doubts the plausibility of combining critical reading with English literature instruction, demonstrating the ingrained dualistic view which separates teaching critical reading from subject knowledge. Likewise, SEP3 reveals other reasons (see below):

***Critique, or critical thinking, is to ourselves, not to the text, not to the author, nor to the foreign culture. Sometimes, we find there is no connection between the text and our real life. So we just focus on the phrase, vocabulary, and understand the main idea. (SEP3)***

Undoubtedly, SEP3 misinterprets critical reading. In her view, the determinant for teaching critical reading is the familiarity with the textual information, namely, one's own experience. Furthermore, she mistakes critical reading for critiquing ourselves, rather than the text, or the author. Congruent with Li and Huang (2021) and Li et al. (2017), these teacher educators' personal understandings of critical reading eventually affect not only what but how to teach it.

While insignificant difference is found quantitatively in teaching critical reading across China, different institutional practices inevitably result in variations in PELTE. As a by-product of such practices, pre-service English teachers end up with different

learning experiences, leading to further disparities in teaching critical reading in future. In addition, the emphasis on logic, creativity, and 'common ground' greatly reflects the cultural 'twist' of interpreting critical reading, and explains why there is a void of teaching evaluative strategies. All these components largely characterize the multi-layered complexity of teaching critical reading in PELTE in China.

### 3.5 How do pre-service teachers feel about their critical reading?

Findings of this study show that most pre-service English teachers believe that they read differently in university. While some have learnt not to take the text at face value, others are taught to ask questions during reading (see the following narratives):

***I learnt from one of them (teachers) to read critically. She asked us to write a book review after we finished a book... The second way is to ask questions when you are reading. (SPP1)***

***Before entering university, we just do some reading exercises to check our comprehension of the text. Now we begin to take the text in a way that we can judge, we can show our agreement and disagreement, and we can show our own opinions. (NPP6)***

Clearly the above accounts indicate participants' various awareness of engaging in critical reading, which is in contrast with doing comprehension exercises in high schools. Nevertheless, different views exist in terms of what constitutes critical reading (see below).

- 1 To read with own ideas and make judgement whether to believe the authors' views.
- 2 To question the writer's views.
- 3 To exchange ideas with the author and create something new
- 4 To develop your own ideas
- 5 To avoid being too subjective and too objective.
- 6 To agree to have different opinions.
- 7 To take the middle way.

These interpretations greatly echo variations among their teacher educators. For instance, No. 3 and No. 4 largely resemble the view which highlights the creative feature of critical reading, while No. 5, No. 6, and No. 7 reflect the similar cultural influence as "seeking the

common ground”. Likewise, No.1 and No.2 could be linked to classroom teaching where critical evaluation is emphasised. The similar views strongly suggest that pre-service teachers’ knowledge of critical reading is fundamentally shaped by what and how it is taught in class. These situated social interactions, in Johnson’s (2015) view, consequently become the tools (basis) for their teacher thinking (p.516) and the guidelines for future teaching.

Furthermore, the above interpretations also reflect the different institutional practices and grassroot teaching. Those who learn critical reading in class naturally display clearer awareness of having their own opinions. But as illustrated below, having critical awareness is one thing, while reading critically is another:

***I will read the text from the beginning to the end. If I meet some parts that I don’t understand, I will just underline it. And when I finish the whole passage, I will come back to this part, and read it over again until I grasp the main idea of the whole text. (NPP4)***

***I will quickly look through the whole article, try to get the main idea. In the second time reading, I will check out some difficult words, and try to focus on some important sentences which may cover the important persons or relate to the topic. In the third time reading, I will read it slowly... and try to fully understand the material. (SPP5)***

The text bound reading disclosed above is both time consuming and laborious, with all their efforts directed to understanding the written language. Such mindful reading explains why some students feel inadequate in critical reading:

***“(tr.: It means that we are only aware of it. Maybe we are capable of engaging in critical reading in the articles we have learnt in class. If reading a new article, it is likely that although we have done a lot of preparation, we may still get nowhere.)” (NPP3).***

In contrast, some participants from UniversityS know little about critical reading: “I am not sure what it is like to engage in critical thinking” (SPP6). As for others, asking question during reading is all they have learnt in class (see the transcript below):

***((tr.: Our teachers never taught us directly how to do critical reading. But we were required to ask questions about the text... There were not many students who were enthusiastic about it. One reason is that we were never trained to ask questions during reading in our previous education. More often we were expected to answer teachers’ questions. Another reason is probably that we have never been encouraged to speak in class. Sometimes even when I asked questions in class, the teacher seemed to show little interest in them. As a result, my enthusiasm gradually diminished.)) (SPP1)***

The above narratives reveal some engrained factors that constrain pre-service teachers from thinking for themselves. For one thing, Chinese students are not trained to ask questions throughout their education, but to answer questions. For another, the teacher-centred approach leaves little room for organizing student-centred activities. Classroom observations show that there is only one class (out of five) in which group discussions and presentations are organized. Unsurprisingly, SPP1 claims that “it takes both the teachers and students’ effort to develop our critical thinking in class, and it is a long process”.

In brief, significant difference exists regarding pre-service English teachers’ awareness of engaging in critical reading, owing to different curricula. Nevertheless, their established text bound reading greatly confines their information processing to written language, limiting them from critical evaluation. Furthermore, the prevalent teacher-centred teaching in some universities further entrenches their non-participatory learning habit. In the next section, we will explore factors relating to both teaching and learning critical reading.

### **3.6 Factors relating to teaching and learning critical reading**

#### **Test-oriented education system and students’ learning style**

Qualitative findings indicate that the test-oriented education system in China has triggered widespread negative washback effect on teaching and learning, especially the university entrance examination (Gao Kao): “you [teachers] give me the standard answers, and I copy down and memorize them” (SEP8). Such teaching and learning for the test not only build up the association of learning with exams, but also greatly deprive students



from developing other skills such as thinking for themselves (see the transcripts below from teacher educators and pre-service teachers):

**All we were thinking was how to sit the exams, what approaches could help us get higher marks. I feel my thinking ability is decreasing. (NPP6).**

**They [pre-service teachers] tend to see that education, learning, or exams, simply is a way of giving the right answer. They bring that habit into undergraduate study, maybe even unconsciously... That particular habit of thinking is restricting them to think critically in their own terms. (NEP5)**

**Some students are more exam oriented. They don't see the point of emphasizing critical thinking that much. Some would say: Teacher J, I just want to pass the exam. These students make it difficult for me. (NEP6)**

Another negative impact is students' inadequate reading practices, resulting in limited background knowledge and incompetent language proficiency. Consequently, some students find it awkward to voice their own opinions:

**((tr.: Because we have not read enough, even if we wanted to have our own opinions, we actually don't have any. As a result, it is impossible to criticise the author from a different perspective, because I don't know what the author is talking about.)) (NPP3)**

**((tr.: For me, it is not until I enter university that I start to have time to read around, and I begin to have my own opinions.)) (SPP5)**

Undoubtedly the experience of learning for the exams has a lasting impact on students. The underdeveloped abilities come to the surface in university study and clash with learning where independent thinking is required. Furthermore, the test-oriented education system will continue to influence pre-service teachers in future (see the transcript below):

**In my knowledge, in high schools, that is very rarely carried out in critical aspect. If the system, especially the national entrance examination culture is not changed, if it is still examination oriented high school education, the critical part will be tough to be executed or administered. (NEP2)**

In the next section, we will tease out how the education system goes hand in hand with Chinese culture, affecting learning to read critically.

## Chinese culture

Findings of this study show that the impact of Chinese culture is largely demonstrated in terms of the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, as well as their attitudes towards education and knowledge. Such cultural values are gradually built up both at home and at school (see below):

**From primary school to high school, they [students] have this type of idea and image of teacher established in the mind. Parents are instilling the concept at home to their children that they should follow the teacher and obey the order ... Seldom in a Chinese classroom will you find students debating or arguing with their teacher, because they believe that the teacher is the authority, the source of truth. (NEP2)**

Because of the social values attached to education, NEP2 argues that "both the teachers and students have to change their perspectives" when it comes to critical thinking. In his class, NEP2 assures his students that it is acceptable to have different opinions from those of the teacher:

**The top priority in my reading class is to make my students understand that we are equal. I often say to my students that nothing will happen to you if you have different ideas from mine, and they would be laughing. (NEP2)**

It is documented that education in China has been largely influenced historically by Confucianism (Hu, 2002; Zhang and Watkins, 2007). Liu (2012) argues that Confucius's emphasis on harmonious society and hierarchical structure has largely

conditioned people to prioritising harmony over questioning. Within such a cultural context, Chinese students' non-participatory learning may reflect their respect for teachers. Likewise, NEP6's efforts to 'seek common ground' between different views may be interpreted as avoiding confrontation. The cultural value attached to harmonious relationships undoubtedly conflicts with the essence of critical reading in which individual opinions are not only encouraged but expected.

Another deeply rooted cultural impact is the attitude toward existing knowledge. In Chinese society one is not expected to criticise others unless they have become the master in the field (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006, p.9). As a result, some pre-service teachers genuinely believe that they are not qualified to criticise other people's work (see the transcripts below).

***((tr.: Only when we have accumulated enough is it possible for us to engage in critical thinking. As for me, I have neither mastered in-depth understanding in some area, nor have a wide range of knowledge in other areas. As a result, it is difficult for me to do critical thinking)). (SPP1)***

Consequently, a shared reading pattern emerges among those who have never learned critical reading in class, demonstrating an acceptance of what is taught and read in the texts:

***"We were trained to accept the authoritative views and believe that teachers and parents are always right, to the extent that we would totally accept what is written in the books". (SPP2)***

***((tr.: It is very likely that we would be affected in our reading by our previous education, displaying reluctance or even fear, or unwillingness to question the authority, or to debate, this kind of thinking.)) (SPP7)***

As a situated learning activity, reading reflects the norms and social cultural values of the community (Liu, 2012). In the context of this study, the influence of social cultural values is demonstrated as accepting the textual information without any critical

evaluation, at least for those who have never learned critical reading in class. Such textbased reading is further enhanced by the test constructs in which critical reading is yet to be assessed.

## Professional development and tight teaching schedule

This study reveals that professional development plays an important role in carrying out innovative teaching among teacher educators, especially in universities where critical reading is not required in the curriculum. The following account shows how SEP7 experiments with different approaches based on her teaching experience in America:

***Starting from last year, I tried to do some reform in my teaching. I try to give them [pre-service teachers] some room for discussion, for presentation. For instance, in the US, you need to plan your class in the 5C objectives. Different abilities need different ways of teaching. (SEP7)***

Similarly, SEP3 changes her perspective of language teaching as a result of her recent trip to Australia as a visiting scholar: teachers and students should share their ideas in class. The concept of sharing is demonstrated by her constant efforts to prompt students' ideas, leading to more teacher-student interactions in class (classroom observation).

Likewise, SEP9 joins in a research group on innovative teaching projects. Anchored in relevant research theories, SEP9 eventually finds a solution to teaching critical thinking after five years' experimentation on her own:

***I started to think seriously about that kind of thing in the past five years. That is why I joined Professor Zheng's research group, to learn some knowledge about thinking and thinking skills. (SEP9)***

In classroom observation, SEP9 applies the Six Thinking Hats Theory to her classroom activity design, helping students analyse protagonists from six different perspectives. The innovative teaching method is not only engaging, but also focuses on developing students' thinking abilities.

Nevertheless, interview findings show that teacher educators in both universities feel restrained by the tight teaching schedule when delivering

student-centred learning. This is because, for one thing, organizing student discussion in a big size class is time-consuming. For another, there is constant pressure not to fall behind other colleagues' teaching pace. When the timing issue comes to the fore, the solution is either to reduce or cut off discussion activities so the class can catch up quickly.

In all, teaching and learning critical reading is subject to the hybrid impact of many factors, including Chinese culture, the education system, professional development, and institutional management. Having explored factors relating to critical reading, the following will investigate how confident pre-service teachers feel to teach critical reading in future.

### 3.7 Teaching critical reading in future

Focus group analysis shows that there appear to be three different views among pre-service English teachers: innovative, blended, and traditional (see Figure 4) relating to teaching critical reading in future.

As far as the innovative view is concerned, the key feature is that their teaching should not be the same as their own high school teachers' approach: "Exactly not that way! Reading is not doing comprehension exercises" (NPP2). Instead, instruction should be based on what they have learnt or observed in university study (see the transcripts below):

***I will probably teach like what my teachers [in university] have done: setting a series of questions that dig deep into the text to scaffold their critical thinking. I believe it is important to evoke students' desire to argue with the author with their creative thoughts, and to let them know that their own voice matters ... I may have reading circles. Every student will read with their critical mind in playing his or her own role and share their ideas with the group mates. (NPP2)***

***My reading classes will be divided into three sessions. In the pre-reading session, I will introduce the topic by presenting some pictures, playing radios or videos, or pre-teaching some new vocabulary. The while-reading session takes the dominant place. Group discussion, pair work will be designed to promote the student-student interactions and some open questions to induce students to further think of the meaning and theme of the texts. As for the post-reading, role plays, interviews and mini debates are activities cultivating students' critical thinking ability and expressing ability. (NPP9)***

Clearly the above pedagogical views largely echo how they are taught in university, especially in the course Critical Reading and Writing class. Such resonance again suggests how and what is taught in class have a strong impact on pre-service teachers.

As for the blended view, it is mainly characterised by incorporating critical reading into teaching for the test. The rationale for adopting a balanced approach is well illustrated in the following interactions between the researcher (R) and NPP2:

***R: Are you going to teach reading in the similar way as your teacher used to teach you: doing reading comprehension exercises owing to the pressure of the entrance exam?***

***NPP2: Yes, I think I will. But I may add some different approaches, based on the teaching methods which I have learnt.***

***R: So you will continue to use the traditional methods, combined with something you have learnt in university?***

***NPP2: ((tr.: yes, it is a balance between students' future and the benchmark score they need to achieve. They have to pass the exam in order to have the opportunity for long-term development.))***

The idea of balancing long-term development (of critical thinking) with the immediate goal (of entering university) suggests that this participant has considered both their previous learning experience and what they have learnt in university. Indeed, the impact of learning for the test still remains tangible, as illustrated by NPP6's account: when

some parents found out that the English teacher was not focusing on preparing for the entrance exams (in high school), they reported him to the headmaster and demanded to replace this teacher. Korthagen and Lagerwerf (1996, p. 174) contend that “student teachers may have only vaguely formulated philosophies of education, but often hold strong images of teachers, influenced by positive or negative experiences”.

Arguably, the reason that NPP6 chooses not to give up teaching for the test may have arisen from this negative experience. Apart from the test-generated pressure, SPP6 reveals his reason for blended teaching:

***((tr.: if things remain the same, we are most likely to be influenced by the way that our previous teachers taught us. But there were moments when we were not so happy about what we learnt in class [in high school]. Now we have learnt new knowledge in university, such as teaching methods and critical reading. So it will be a blended teaching of both.)) (SPP6)***

While SPP6 displays realistic views about the testing system, his motivation for blended teaching is simple: help his students avoid his unhappy learning experience by applying new teaching knowledge. It is noted that in the context of school learning, there exists a pervasive tension between learning for an assessment grade and learning for addressing real-world problems (Barab et al., 2002). To some extent, the blended approach might reflect pre-service teachers’ intention to accommodate both components.

In comparison, the non-blended view reflects the entrenched image of teaching and learning for the test, arguing that critical thinking should be taught at universities, not in high schools.

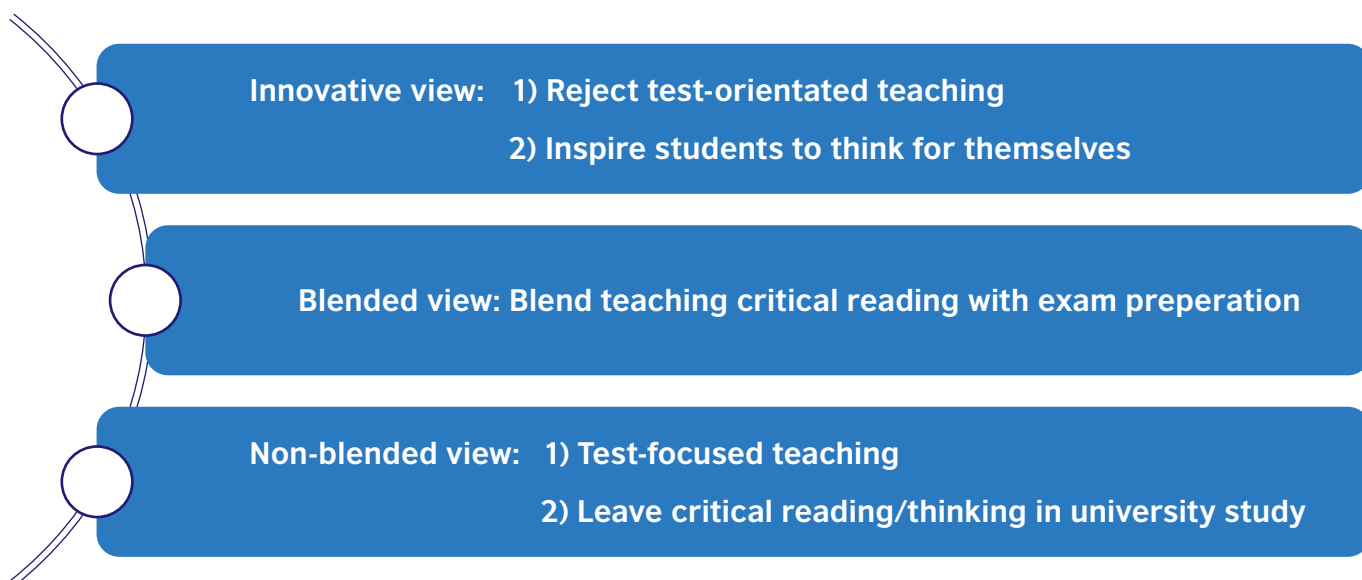
***((tr.: I think that we should not focus on training critical thinking at High School. It might be a step too far for critical reading. It seems more appropriate to engage in critical reading in university.)) (NPP7)***

***((tr.: Their priority is learning for the entrance exam. In my opinion, it is in the university that they are expected to engage in critical reading. In High School, it is more about raising their awareness, because they focus only on the entrance exam.)) (NPP1)***

Clearly the non-blended view adopts a realistic and conventional approach. This view also reflects pre-service teachers’ knowledge of the future teaching environment: the standardized tests leave little freedom for teachers owing to the teacher guides which require them to adhere to even the smallest details (Akbari, 2007, p. 205). In this study, the high stakes tests in the Chinese education system definitely become the trigger which divides the pre-service teachers.

Despite the above different views, the following account from a fourth-year pre-service teacher may offer some insights into future English teachers in China:

**Figure 4:** Pre-service teachers’ three different views on teaching critical reading





***((tr.: I wish that I would not completely follow my previous teachers whose teaching was dominated by teaching for the test. I hope that I could develop students' enthusiasm about learning English as well as some thinking ability, not only for the tests. As for how to incorporate critical reading into other aspects of classroom teaching, I will first see what my students are like, then I will make a plan afterwards. I will take my time working out a solution.)) (SPP2)***

Here SPP2 largely echoes the question: "Who teaches what to whom, where?" (Freeman and Johnson, 1998, p.405) in the education context. The idea of taking her time to find a solution shows that SPP2 already visualises her future teaching as an evolving trajectory: "the self-formation of being and becoming a teacher in the practice of doing teaching" (Barkhuizen, 2021, p.6). Cross (2020) argues that the image of being a teacher is entwined with elements such as knowledge of what teachers do, who and what the teacher brings to their teaching practice; and all these elements have an impact on their understanding of who one is and who one is going to become.

### **3.8 Gender differences relating to learning and teaching critical reading**

#### **Teacher educators' views on gender differences in critical reading**

Different views are found among teacher educators regarding gender differences in reading. Answers to the open-ended question in the questionnaire show that 47.5% of respondents do not think that there is any difference between male and female students' reading abilities. In their opinions, any differences in reading arise from variations in students' English language proficiencies and learning attitudes.

In comparison, 42.6% of respondents believe that male and female students differ from each other, but with conflicting opinions about the differences (see below):

- 1 Male students are better at logical thinking and female students are more sensitive to emotion or subtle ideas.
- 2 Male students tend to gain deeper comprehension.
- 3 Male students are more active.
- 4 Female students are more active.
- 5 Female students like to read literature works while male students are interested in science.

- 6 Female students tend to grasp the details during reading.
- 7 Female students are generally more competent than male students, both in terms of English language proficiency and reading comprehension.

One possible explanation for these contradictory views is that they may stem from teacher educators' own teaching experiences, such as No. 6 and No.7. It is also possible that these views may represent socially rooted gender bias against male or female students despite the inconsistency. Whatever the case may be, such biased views on gender could affect how teacher educators interact with pre-service teachers, resulting in different learning experience among pre-service teachers.

Unlike teacher educators, pre-service teachers in this study are unanimously against the idea that gender factor plays a part in engaging in critical reading. Instead, they believe that any variations between male and female students result from individual differences (see the narratives below):

***\*((tr.: I think we all differ from one another. But the difference has nothing to do with gender. It largely arises from factors such as personalities, thinking habits, mainly individual differences.)) (NPP4)***

***\*((tr.: Because of individual differences, we would pay selective attention to different things. I think it is groundless if we associate such differences with gender)) (NPP1).***

While they strongly refute gender difference in critical reading, pre-service teachers acknowledge some existing stereotype bias against females in Chinese society (see the following narratives):

***((tr.: Most people in society tend to think that male students have a stronger ability in critical thinking. They feel more comfortable to question and to voice their ideas. If we grew up in such social atmosphere, subconsciously we would accept the difference between male and female students.)) (NPP4)***

***((tr.: It is more to do with the parents' influence which believes that girls should be quiet, not too active. Such an attitude towards girls consequently suppresses their desire to speak their own ideas, giving rise to the shared view that boys are more active.)) (SPP1)***

SPP1 argues that the social expectations of girls keeping quiet could eventually demotivate them from speaking their mind, resulting in potential consequences in their self-perception. Widodo and Elyas (2020) contend that the biased views help build an invisible barrier, influencing upon gender ideology in terms of ways of thinking, acting, and behaving. Furthermore, social norms and values attached to gender differences help shape gendered privilege and marginalization (p.2019–20). Here the social invisible barrier helps create gender-related opportunities: male students seem to have social privilege to voice their mind, while female students do not.

When it comes to tackling gender issues in future teaching, pre-service teachers express various solutions. Specifically, their students will be taught differently not because of their gender differences, but because of their individual needs:

***((tr.: I would like to encourage every student to read critically, because they have the ability to do it. Even if they show different ways of thinking, I will respect their differences.)) (SPP3)***

***((tr.: This requires us to try different teaching methods to encourage boys and girls to be involved, especially inviting more girls to speak their ideas, while not suppressing boys' enthusiasm in learning. In doing so, it will build up their confidence.)) (SPP6)***

***((tr.: In my opinion, we should try to create the opportunity for both boys and girls to develop together, rather than to cater for the biased views in our teaching. We need to pass on such message to our students that boys and girls are the same, and they are all capable of achieving something in some areas.)) (NPP4)***

Judging from the above accounts, we can see that there is both enthusiasm and positivity to combat the gender inequality among pre-service teachers. More importantly, their proposed solutions, although rudimentary, sound plausible in that they are anchored in pedagogical knowledge such as using different teaching methods to engage students and taking account of individual differences.







# 4

## Discussion and conclusion

In all, this study explores the multi-faceted features of PELTE in China, focusing primarily on teaching and learning critical thinking as required in the ECSSHS. As far as incorporating the ECSSHS into PELTE is concerned, this study reveals multilayered complexity: macro-level (government support to implement the ECSSHS), meso-level (implementing measures taken by universities), and micro-level (grassroot teaching relating to enacting ECSSHS). At the macro-level, inadequate supporting mechanisms from the government seem to have largely inhibited the enacting process in classroom teaching. In fact, most interviewed teacher educators know little about the document; some even consider it irrelevant to their teaching. Consistent with literature review [see Li and Huang, (2021) and Li et al. (2017)], this study demonstrates a wide range of individualized practices on teaching critical thinking, among which some are directly based on teacher educators' own 'experiential knowledge' (Johnson, 2009).

At meso-level, universities' different academic requirements create further variations. There is a question as to whether embedding critical thinking in curriculum design has resulted in significant difference in pedagogical practices. Although critical thinking is also taught in universities where it is not required in the curriculum, findings of this study show that such teaching is mainly carried out experimentally by individuals. Since teaching critical thinking requires a significant shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach, this shift is reflected in professional development which requires both individual and collective involvement, and capacity and willingness to adopt appropriate alternative approaches (Avalos, 2011, p.10). Without collective efforts, teacher educators inevitably "rely largely on themselves to perform multifarious professional tasks, especially as they make efforts to improve their teaching efficacy" (Ruan et al., 2020, p.7). Consequently, it would be a tall order to maintain their innovative practice consistently, let alone motivate students when critical thinking is not assessed.

At micro-level, the complexity largely lies in teacher educators themselves. It is the hybrid impact of various factors – their teaching and language learning

experiences, pedagogical knowledge, professional development, willingness for innovative teaching – that gives rise to the two prevalent approaches in which critical reading is (not) taught: traditional and modern.

To some extent, these multi-layered complexity echoes Cushing (2019) that the processes of policy designing, implementing, and enacting are interconnected in an educational context. In the present study, arguably, more interactions between these levels would not only facilitate teaching critical thinking at grassroot level, but also speed up the implementation and enactment processes of ECSSHS in PELTE.

Furthermore, findings of this project suggest that Chinese culture and the education system go hand in hand, constituting two key factors affecting teaching and learning critical reading. It is well documented that education in China has been largely influenced historically by Confucianism (Hu, 2002; Zhang and Watkins, 2007). Liu (2012) argues that Confucius' philosophical emphasis on harmonious and hierarchical social structure has largely overshadowed his ideas on reflective learning (see Hinton, 1998). The ideology of maintaining the social order and harmonious relationships eventually leads to people prioritizing harmony over question and challenge (p.30). In this study, the cultural impact is demonstrated by interpreting critical thinking as 'seeking common ground' and highlighting its creative and logical features, with an absence of teaching critical and evaluative strategies in class.

In addition, the social values attached to existing knowledge greatly contribute to the shared learning and reading pattern: 'absorbing' and 'accepting', rather than questioning what is read or taught. Lastly, the common teacher-centered classroom instruction may also reflect the ingrained hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. Ryan et al. (2009) contend that the impact of Chinese culture makes it extremely difficult for Chinese teachers to adopt student-centered teaching methodologies. In this study, there are only two teacher educators (one in UniversityN and

one in UniversityS) who organize group discussions in their teaching (classroom observations). Most classroom interactions are largely confined to questions and answers between teacher and students. You and Jia (2008, p.843) argue that the prevalent teacher-centered instruction is connected with the inadequacy in students' creativity, original thinking and exploratory spirit.

Entwined with Chinese culture is the test-oriented education system in China. Johnson (2009) exclaims that in the global education context it becomes a common practice of associating teachers' accountability with student learning based on standardized assessment instruments; and such politics of accountability inevitably affects L2 teaching, L2 learning, as well as L2 pre-service teacher education (p.121). In this study, pre-service teachers' proposed approaches for future teaching – innovative, blended, and non-blended – largely reflect their different degrees of negotiation between teaching for the test and teaching beyond the test.

As far as answers to RQ1 is concerned, findings of this study demonstrate co-existing pedagogical practices in pre-service teacher education in China, namely, teaching English language and/or developing students' critical reading. While most teacher educators believe that it is important to develop students' critical thinking through education, some feel inadequate to do so owing to the absence of supporting mechanisms (answer to RQ1a and RQ1b).

From an emic perspective, this study indicates a similar co-existing situation regarding learning and teaching critical reading among pre-service teachers. Those who learn to read critically in class tend to display stronger confidence in engaging in critical reading, compared to those without any formal training. Nevertheless, it is the test-oriented education system that separates pre-service teachers' visions of teaching critical reading in future (answers to RQ1c and RQ1d).

Furthermore, results of this study suggest a mixed picture about the interrelationship between geographic locations and teaching critical thinking. While quantitative findings indicate insignificant difference, qualitative analysis shows that different institutional requirements lead to significantly different pedagogical practices, mainly demonstrating whether critical thinking is taught collectively as required in the curriculum. Furthermore, the unbalanced teacher resources between universities, as revealed in this study, inevitably have an impact on what and how critical thinking is taught (answer to RQ2).

In contrast to teacher educators' different views on gender difference, all pre-service teachers strongly reject gender-related biased views on engaging in critical reading. Instead, they embrace the academic concept of individual differences and are willing to apply this concept to meeting their students' individual needs in future teaching (answer to RQ2).

Lastly, findings of this study reveal the deeply engrained cultural impact on teaching critical thinking in PELTE, largely characterised by de-emphasising critical evaluation and highlighting harmonious relationships. Furthermore, cultural impact is intertwined with the test-oriented education system, which helps build up students' shared thinking pattern: accepting rather than challenging (answer to RQ3).





# 5

## Recommendations

Findings of this study offer implications for PELTE in China in terms of implementing and enacting the element of critical thinking required in ECSSHS, as well as language support programmes running in western universities.

### Recommendation 1

Given that most of the interviewed teacher educators are unaware of the ECSSHS in this project, it is important that professional trainings on this policy are offered to both teacher educators and pre-service teachers. In doing so, classroom teaching could be more focused on preparing pre-service teachers for the requirements in the ECSSHS.

### Recommendation 2

Findings of this study demonstrate that institutional involvement plays a significant role in both teaching and learning critical thinking in pre-service teacher education. Such results imply that the implementation and enactment process of the ECSSHS could be greatly sped up if critical reading was required in the curriculum design in all pre-service teacher education programmes in a top-down manner. Consistence in institutional management would in turn help narrow down gaps between pedagogical practices on developing students' critical thinking across universities in China.

### Recommendation 3

This study suggests that innovative assessment plays an essential role in teaching and learning critical reading. By incorporating students' classroom participation into their final assessment, it helps transform students' established learning concept from listening to the teacher to participating with peers in class. It is both what and how knowledge is taught that prepares pre-service teachers for their future teaching.

### Recommendation 4

Results of this study reveal inadequate knowledge of strategic reading among teacher educators. This issue could be addressed by organizing professional trainings both at macro-level and meso-level, in ways that connect the academic concepts (reading strategies) with teacher educators' classroom activities (everyday knowledge) (Johnson and Arshavskaya, 2011, p.169). The purpose of linking these two components together is to help teacher educators go beyond their experiential knowledge to more theoretically and pedagogically sound practices (Johnson and Golombek, 2011, p.xii).

### Recommendation 5

This study reveals the dualistic view which separates teaching critical reading from subject knowledge among some teacher educators. Findings of this study also suggest that what and how classroom instruction is carried out has a fundamental impact on students' learning. All these results pinpoint the necessity of updating teacher educators' theoretical and pedagogical knowledge through professional trainings so that critical reading/thinking could be taught systematically across different subjects.

### Recommendation 6

This study shows that Chinese students tend to have the culturally influenced interpretations of critical reading, together with their underdeveloped thinking ability, text-bound reading habit, and non-participatory learning owing to the test-oriented education in China. Such knowledge helps understand what Chinese international students have brought with them when they arrive in western universities. This is important because such information enables us to offer more targeted and effective support for this big student cohort at different levels: disciplinary-related and language-related.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Questionnaires

Dear Participant

This is a funded project which aims to explore pre-service teacher education in China. Specifically, this study focuses on two areas: pre-service teacher educators' knowledge of developing students' critical thinking; and the relationship this knowledge has with their classroom teaching in English reading. All the statements in this questionnaire are related to beliefs and perceptions of teaching English reading in your daily practice. There will be no right or wrong answers. Your responses will be treated anonymously, and will be used only for the stated purposes of this study.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jie Liu

School of Humanities and  
Performing Arts  
Faculty of Arts, Design,  
and Humanitiesv  
De Montfort University,  
Leicester, LE1 9BH, UK  
Jie.liu@dmu.ac.uk

Dr Xiaohui Sun

School of Foreign Languages  
and Literature  
Beijing Normal University  
Beijing, China  
xhuisun@bnu.edu.cn

Dr Hongying Zheng

School of Foreign Languages  
Sichuan Normal University  
Sichuan Province, China  
zhenghy@sicnu.edu.cn

## Consent

Your consent to participate in this study

I understand that:

- The purpose of this study is to collect and analyse information from those who are currently teaching pre-service teachers in China.
- My name will not appear in any project publication.
- The information I give, but not my name, may be quoted.
- I am free to refuse to participate in the study and may withdraw at any time.
- My completed questionnaire is for the study team only; it will not be shown to anyone not connected with this study.

CONSENT options: Please tick one of the options:

Yes, I give my consent.

No, I do not give consent.

## Section A: About you

Your full name:

Form of address: Ms Mrs Mr Dr Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

Your age, please: below 30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, 60+

Institution where you work:

Number of years you have been teaching pre-service teachers: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you received any training in how to teach pre-service teachers:

Yes. If yes, please describe briefly:

No.

## Section B: Beliefs and perceptions of teaching English reading

The following statements are related to your beliefs and perceptions of teaching English reading. If you are not currently teaching pre-service teachers, please refer to the most recent class you taught.

### A I think that these are my opinions about teaching English reading in general.

(Please enter the number for each item using the scale 1 – 6: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=slightly disagree; 4=partly agree; 5=agree; 6=strongly agree)

1	The best way of understanding a text is to translate (parts of) the text into Chinese.	
2	An effective way to check students' comprehension is to go through comprehension questions together.	
3	Once students understand word meanings in a text, they should have reasonable comprehension.	
4	Instruction on reading strategies is one of the teaching objectives in my reading class.	
5	The current syllabus has a developmental goal to build students' strategic reading ability.	
6	My reading class motivates students to read their own texts at their own time.	
7	I have made changes in my teaching in order to meet the requirements in the Standardized English Language Curriculum for High School Education (2017).	
8	The document: National Language Standard (2018) has triggered changes in my teaching in order to prepare students for the new assessment criteria for English language.	

### B This section is a series of statements about classroom teaching. It aims to reflect your perceptions of what you normally do in reading class.

Before I start to teach a text,

(For each statement below, please tick <input type="checkbox"/> the box that applies to your own teaching experience.)		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Partly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
9	I usually ask students to predict what the text is about from the title.						
10	I often organize discussions about what students already know about the text topic.						
11	I usually guide students to go through the titles and headings in the text to gain a general idea of the text.						
12	I tend to ask students to skim the text quickly to get a general idea of its content.						
13	I often ask students to discuss about the text structure and how such knowledge could help reading comprehension.						

**During the process of teaching a text,**

(For each statement below, please tick <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> the box that applies to your own teaching experience.)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Partly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
14 I tend to ask students to think about what is going to happen next in a text.						
15 when we encounter new words in a text, I always encourage them to guess the meanings in the context.						
16 I usually require my students to use their background knowledge to help understand the content of a text.						
17 I always let students check whether they have anticipated correctly as they acquire more information in a text.						
18 I often encourage students to write down their own comments on some ideas in a text.						
19 I always teach the structure of a text to help students grasp the main ideas, e.g. how the arguments and supporting details have been organised together, patterns of discourse organizations (cause-effect, comparison-contrast, problem-solving), and the outline of the text.						
20 I have developed a method of selecting new words in a text and using various techniques to teach them in class.						
21 I like to focus on certain grammatical features when going through each text.						
22 I always make sure that students understand every sentence in a text.						
23 I usually ask students to underline the important parts for further understanding.						
24 I tend to guide students to link text content with other relevant information which they have read elsewhere.						
25 I feel more confident in students' comprehension if they work out the Chinese meaning of relevant passages in a text.						
26 I often let students make inferences from the information in the text if the arguments are not clearly stated.						
27 I always teach students how to get clues about the logical relationships between ideas in a text with the help of linking words.						
28 I like to ask students to re-read parts of a text and monitor their reading speed.						
29 I tend to ask students to slow down if they are having difficulty understanding certain parts of a text.						
30 I like to teach students how to piece together the details of the main argument from different parts of the text.						
31 I often ask students to check their comprehension during their reading, e.g. whether and where they have comprehension difficulties.						
32 I often ask students to think about whether they agree with the author.						



**After I finish teaching a text,**

(For each statement below, please tick <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> the box that applies to your own teaching experience.)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Partly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
33 I like to ask students to summarise what they have read.						
34 I usually help them check in different ways whether they have fully understood it.						
35 I tend to let them discuss about the writing of the text, e.g. whether it is easy to understand, and whether the ideas are well developed.						
36 I often design activities on the structure of a text after finishing teaching a text, e.g. asking students to draw a graphic organizer of the text structure.						
37 I always ask them to evaluate whether the writer's ideas are convincing.						
38 I like to ask them comment on what they like/dislike the most in the text, and why.						

**If you have used some other teaching methods/activities, would you like to share with us?**

**Please answer the following questions based on your own experience of teaching English reading.**

Do you think that there are any differences between male and female students' reading abilities? If yes, could you clarify?

Which aspects of teaching do you find enjoyable?

Which aspects of teaching do you find challenging?

**Thank You Very Much!**

## Appendix 2 Interview questions

(Introduction How many years have you been teaching in the pre-service teacher education?)

- 1 To begin with, a general question. When we talk about 'reading', what comes to your mind?
- 2 What do you normally teach in reading class?
- 3 Based on what you think about reading, what do you do as a teacher to help your students develop reading abilities?
- 4 What's your view on reading strategies? Do you teach reading strategies in your reading class?
- 5 What would you translate 'critical thinking' into Chinese? Would you like to share with us your understanding of 'critical reading'?
- 6 Do you teach critical reading in class? And How?
- 7 What factors do you think may restrain you from teaching critical reading in class?
- 8 Chinese Education Ministry issued Standardized English Language Curriculum for High School Education in 2017. Are you aware of the requirements in this document?
- 9 In this document, it is pointed out that it is important to develop students' abilities in areas such as cultural awareness and creative thinking. How do you think of the relevance of such requirements to your teaching?
- 10 Following Standard English Language Curriculum for High School Education, there is another document relating to English assessment: National Language Standard: China's standards of English Language Ability (2018). Are you familiar with this document? If yes, what do you think of the relevance of this document to your own teaching?

## Appendix 3 Questions for focus groups

- 1 To begin with, a general question. When we talk about 'reading', what comes to your mind?
- 2 How would you normally read? Do you read the same way in English as you do in Chinese?
- 3 You have had/are having English Reading class. Do you mind telling us what you have learnt about English reading?
- 4 How do you translate 'critical thinking' into Chinese?
- 5 If we put critical thinking in the context of reading, how do you understand critical reading?
- 6 What do you think of your ability of engaging in critical reading? (Are you comfortable with engaging critical reading?)
- 7 What have you been learnt in class about engaging in critical reading?
- 8 Now you are pre-service teachers in training. How would you imagine yourself teaching English reading in three years' time? Would you teach your students about critical reading?
- 9 Chinese Education Ministry issued Standardized English Language Curriculum for High School Education in 2017. In this document, it is pointed out that it is important to develop students' abilities such as creative thinking. Do you think that as pre-service teachers, you are being prepared for this?
- 10 What factors do you think may restrain you from teaching critical reading in future?
- 11 Do you think that there is any difference in engaging in critical reading between male and female students? Or in terms of reading around the subject?
- 12 How are you going to address the gender differences in future teaching?





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