Chinese Primary School Teachers' Approaches to the Challenges of Teaching Critical Reading: A Multiple Case Study

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Abstract—The New Curriculum Standards for compulsory education in mainland China have placed renewed emphasis on the importance of critical reading instruction. However, many primary school teachers face significant challenges in both conceptual understanding and practical implementation of critical reading within the classroom. This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how frontline Chinese language teachers navigate these challenges. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten female teachers currently teaching in primary schools across Zhejiang Province. Thematic analysis, supported by MAXQDA (version 2024), was used to analyze the data. Findings reveal that teachers adopt a variety of strategies to address these challenges, including attending demonstration classes, engaging with new media for professional support, implementing project-based learning, and refining classroom techniques. These approaches reflect teachers' efforts to enhance their pedagogical knowledge and adapt their practices in alignment with the goals of the New Curriculum Standards.

Keywords—critical reading, primary school, teaching approaches, the new curriculum, challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Education published the New Curriculum Standards, which place a strong emphasis on the cultivation of critical reading skills among students [1]. Critical reading enables learners to move beyond surface-level understanding and engage in deeper, more dialectical, and holistic thinking processes [2]. Despite these curricular advancements, many frontline teachers continue to hold limited or superficial understandings of critical reading and its instructional value [3]. Uncertainty surrounding the concepts of critical reading and critical expression, coupled with a lack of awareness regarding their pedagogical significance, has impeded the effective implementation of these skills in classroom practice [4].

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine how ten frontline Chinese language teachers respond to the challenges associated with teaching critical reading. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews, this research aims to uncover the strategies these educators employ and to offer insights that may support other practitioners in enhancing their instructional approaches. The findings are intended to inform both pedagogical development and professional growth, thereby contributing to the more effective realization of the goals outlined in the New Curriculum Standards.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical reading has gained attention in recent years as an essential skill that encourages learners to go beyond literal comprehension. It involves questioning the text, recognizing multiple perspectives, and making thoughtful judgments based on evidence [5]. Rather than simply absorbing information, students are encouraged to think more deeply and engage with the text in a reflective and analytical manner. Ideally, this process supports the development of independent thinking and nurtures a critical mindset.

However, the practice of teaching critical reading in primary schools is far from straightforward. One recurring concern is the suitability of the reading materials found in commonly used textbooks. Many of these texts are designed to entertain or inform, but they rarely present enough complexity to prompt students to question or debate. As a result, learners may miss opportunities to develop higher-level reasoning skills [6].

The way teachers pose questions in class also plays a significant role. In many cases, classroom questioning tends to be too basic, often requiring only simple recall or recognition. These types of questions may not provide students with the challenge or encouragement they need to think more deeply about what they read [7]. Some teachers are aware of the need to develop students' thinking skills, yet their understanding of what this entails can be somewhat limited. For instance, they might emphasize imagination or creativity without giving much attention to logical reasoning or analytical skills [8, 9].

Traditional teaching models add another layer of difficulty. In many classrooms, the teacher remains the central figure, delivering knowledge while students passively receive it. Even when teachers try to incorporate questioning or short discussions, these efforts are often constrained by time or routine practices that leave little room for student-driven exploration [10].

Assessment practices also tend to fall short of capturing students' critical thinking abilities. Many teachers rely on familiar tools such as classwork, homework completion, or short tests. While these methods are easy to administer, they may not provide a clear picture of how students are progressing in terms of critical reading [11]. Furthermore, teachers may lack practical guidelines or criteria for evaluating this type of learning, making it harder to adjust instruction based on students' needs [12].

Overall, the challenges in promoting critical reading appear across several areas—from the quality of reading materials and classroom questioning to teachers' understanding of critical thinking, instructional practices, and methods of assessment. Addressing these interconnected issues will require both structural support and professional learning opportunities tailored to the realities of primary education.

In response to these challenges, the present study seeks to explore how primary school teachers perceive and address the complexities of teaching critical reading. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do primary school teachers cope with the challenges posed by critical reading?

III. Methodology

This study adopted a multiple case study design to explore the research questions in depth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten female Chinese language teachers currently teaching in primary schools across Zhejiang Province. All participants were graduates of teachers' colleges and held a bachelor's degree in education. At the time of data collection, they were actively engaged in frontline teaching roles. Their teaching responsibilities spanned a range of grade levels, with three teachers teaching sixth grade, four teaching third grade, two teaching second grade, and one teaching fourth grade. This distribution ensured representation of diverse classroom contexts and student developmental stages, thereby offering a broad perspective on the challenges and practices associated with critical reading instruction in the primary school setting. Thematic analysis, recognized for its flexibility and suitability in qualitative research, was employed to interpret the interview data [13]. The analysis was facilitated using MAXQDA (version 2024), a qualitative data analysis software that enabled systematic coding and theme development. The demographic details of the participants are summarized in Table I.

TABLE I. Distribution of Participants

Code	Gender	Educational level	Students' grade
01	Female	BA	Y6
02	Female	BA	Y3
03	Female	BA	Y4
04	Female	BA	Y2
05	Female	BA	Y6
06	Female	BA	Y3
07	Female	BA	Y6
08	Female	BA	Y3
09	Female	BA	Y3
10	Female	BA	Y2

IV. Findings

Focused on Fig. 1, "Awareness" accounted for the highest percentage of all parent codes at 30%. This may indicate that teachers will tend to improve at the level of awareness when it comes to self-improvement. "Cooperation" and "Lecture" had the lowest percentage at five percent. This may indicate that teamwork and lectures are limited in improving teachers' ability to teach critical reading. "Demonstration class", "More practice", "New social media", and "Teaching video" had the highest percentage of all the subcodes at ten percent, which may indicate that teachers' practice, as well as self-study, contributes to the enhancement of their ability to teach critical reading.

Code System	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	SUM
Awareness											
Actuated things							5.0%				5.0%
Focus on students					5.0%						5.0%
Homework stratification		5.0%									5.0%
Review in time										5.0%	5.0%
Teaching awareness								5.0%			5.0%
Use teaching aids flexibly										5.0%	5.0%
Cooperation											
Group work							5.0%				5.0%
Lecture											
Course and lectures									5.0%		5.0%
Media											
Interpretation Video			5.0%								5.0%
New social media						5.0%			5.0%		10.0%
Teaching video						5.0%	5.0%				10.0%
Method											
Audience-based Education		5.0%									5.0%
PBL									5.0%		5.0%
Teaching methods				5.0%							5.0%
Practice											
Demonstration class				5.0%			5.0%				10.0%
More practice										10.0%	10.0%
Σ SUM	10.0%	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%	10.0%	15.0%	10.0%	10.0%	25.0%	100.0%

Fig. 1. Heatmap with percentage.

With reference to Figs. 2 and 3, both the number of codes and the percentage of codes are higher for thematic teaching than for thematic learning. This may suggest that the tendency of teachers to improve their teaching skills may be greater than the tendency to improve their level of self-learning.
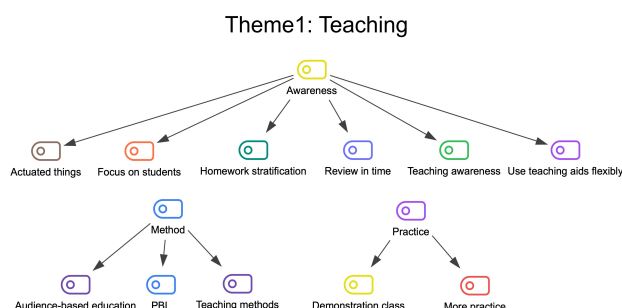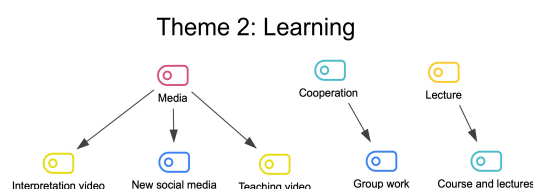

Fig. 2. Creative coding 1.

Fig. 3. Creative coding 2.

A. Theme 1: Teaching

The theme *Teaching* included parent codes "Awareness", "Method", and "Practice". As illustrated in Table II, the participants indicated that teachers could enhance their teaching skills in terms of awareness, methods, and behavioral practice.

TABLE II. EXPLANATION OF THEMES

Themes	Explanation of themes
Teaching	Participants indicated that teachers could enhance their teaching skills in terms of awareness, methods, and behaviours.
Learning	Participants indicated that teachers could enhance their knowledge base and learning skills through the media, lectures, and teamwork.

Regarding *Awareness*, the importance of setting clear, motivating objectives was emphasized:

"If you want to improve, I think you need to have some driving things, for example, I plan to attend a demonstration class." (Interviewee 07)

Teachers also noted the value of monitoring student learning:

"When you find that they are more obedient, more without their own ideas, then you have to intervene in a timely manner to guide them, to ask them." (Interviewee 05)

Teachers reported that they could explicitly teach learning strategies:

"To consciously teach the children some learning thinking method." (Interviewee 08)

In terms of differentiation, tiered assignments were recommended:

"I think it's possible to put it in the afterschool, is to assign homework at these for a stratification." (Interviewee 01)

Regarding *Method*, project-based teaching was seen as highly effective:

"It's project-based learning, and actually if you do project-based well, it's actually all connected to that." (Interviewee 10)

Tailoring instruction to student needs was also emphasized:

"It's just a case of people operating on their own terms." (Interviewee 01)

In terms of *Practice*, demonstration classes were widely appreciated:

"One of the most effective and quickest ways is definitely to enter a competition yourself, to go and do a demonstration class yourself, well, that's how you can get the exercise." (Interviewee 04)

"If there's any competition opportunities within the school, demonstration class opportunities, it's a great learning opportunity." (Interviewee 07)

Participants highlighted that training alone is insufficient without practice:

"Just training to understand the concept is definitely not enough. Then we definitely have to combine that with just practice doing so." (Interviewee 10)

B. Theme 2: Learning

The theme *Learning* included parent codes "Media", "Lecture", and "Cooperation". As illustrated in Table II, the participants indicated that teachers could enhance their knowledge base and learning skills through the media, lectures, and teamwork.

Under *Media*, teachers reported using platforms such as *Little Red Book* to find resources:

"Nowadays, teachers may make use of some new media, such as the material in Little Red Book, or use some online platforms to increase some resources for themselves." (Interviewee 09)

"If I encounter any problems in teaching, I will go directly to Little Red Book to search. And then when I search it out, it's there. And then there are a lot of teachers talking and discussing in the comment section." (Interviewee 06)

Watching teaching videos was also seen as beneficial:

"I just spend a little money; I can go online to see all kinds of big names of the teaching video." (Interviewee 07)

Teachers also watched expert interpretations of curriculum content:

"So, we, the school is before there is more is the preparation group, will watch some experts of some interpretation of the new curriculum interpretation of the video, this kind of watch or some." (Interviewee 03)

Under *Lecture*, while some teachers valued lectures, the practical benefits were seen as limited:

"Of course, listening to lectures I think is still helpful. But like listening to lectures, from our practical point of view, the application effect is not very useful." (Interviewee 09)

Under *Cooperation*, group collaboration was regarded as useful:

"As far as I know, every teacher in the preparation group should have tried to design, for example, unit-integrated teaching, participated in project-based learning activities, planning, and so on." (Interviewee 08)

The findings of this study reveal that the participating teachers proposed a range of practical and contextually relevant strategies for addressing the challenges of teaching critical reading. These included various professional learning methods—such as attending lectures, engaging in group collaboration, seeking support through social media, and participating in demonstration lessons—as well as pedagogical practices like project-based teaching, increased classroom practice, and providing timely attention to students. Notably, these strategies are grounded in the everyday experiences of frontline educators and demonstrate the potential for immediate application in classroom settings.

V. DISCUSSION

While existing literature largely concentrates on enhancing pedagogical techniques, this study offers a broader view of teacher agency and self-improvement. Previous research has often focused on crafting effective questions [14, 15], optimizing task design [15], and constructing meaningful instructional contexts [16, 17]. At the teacher level, emphasis is frequently placed on analyzing the New Curriculum Standards and examining teaching materials [17, 18], though little attention is paid to the specific difficulties teachers encounter in interpreting and operationalizing these materials. The present study addresses this gap by shedding light on teachers' perspectives and the practical strategies they adopt independently.

In particular, this study highlights innovative practices such as participating in teaching competitions, conducting demonstration classes, and leveraging new media—approaches that are underrepresented in the existing literature but offer promising and realistic pathways for professional growth. These findings suggest that, beyond formal training, teachers are actively seeking self-directed ways to enhance their competence in critical reading instruction.

However, certain gaps remain. Few teachers in this study acknowledged the limitations of existing instructional texts or emphasized the pedagogical value of incorporating extended reading materials beyond the official curriculum [19]. Additionally, although student assessment tools such as rubrics and varied evaluation methods have been recommended in prior studies to support the development of critical reading skills [20], these elements were largely absent from the participants' responses. This suggests an area for further professional development and research, particularly in equipping teachers with effective strategies for assessment in critical reading contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

As a newly emphasized component of the New Curriculum Standards, critical reading instruction poses both pedagogical and cognitive challenges for many primary school teachers. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. Through the thoughtful adoption of appropriate teaching and learning strategies, teachers can gradually enhance their instructional practices. Acquiring pedagogical knowledge in a systematic and reflective manner not only deepens teachers' understanding of the curriculum requirements but also supports their own cognitive and professional development. As teachers' comprehension and implementation of critical reading strategies improve, the potential for more effective and widespread integration of critical reading instruction into everyday classroom practice becomes increasingly attainable. Future research could examine how professional development programmes influence teachers' understanding and application of critical reading strategies over time. Additionally, comparative studies across regions or educational levels may reveal context-specific needs and effective interventions to support critical reading pedagogy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Chuyang Zhang designed and conducted the study, including performing the semi-structured interviews, and drafted the initial manuscript; Siew Ping Wong provided critical revisions and edited the final version of the manuscript; Xianghui Yang contributed to data analysis and was responsible for participant recruitment; all authors had approved the final version.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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