

**TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES  
IN THE INTEGRATION OF CRITICAL  
THINKING IN EFL READING CLASSES IN  
CHINA: A CASE STUDY**

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by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CET-4	College English Test, Band 4
CET-6	College English Test, Band 6
CT	Critical Thinking
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
NCEE	National College Entrance Examination
PPT	PowerPoint

# **TANGGAPAN DAN AMALAN GURU DALAM PENGINTEGRASIAN**

## **PEMIKIRAN KRITIS DI DALAM KELAS BACAAN EFL DI CHINA:**

### **SATU KAJIAN KES**

#### **ABSTRAK**

Kebolehan untuk berfikir secara kritis telah dikenal pasti sebagai kemahiran yang perlu ada pada pelajar di institusi pengajian tinggi. Di dalam konteks reformasi baru kaedah pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris di China, terdapat keperluan yang semakin meningkat supaya para guru mengintegrasikan Pemikiran Kritis (CT) ke dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Namun begitu, tanggapan dan amalan guru terhadap pengintegrasian CT dalam pengajaran kurang diberikan tumpuan secara empirikal. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti tanggapan dan amalan bilik darjah guru EFL di kolej di China tentang mengintegrasikan CT di dalam kelas bacaan. Peserta yang terlibat dalam kajian ini terdiri daripada enam orang guru EFL dari sebuah universiti ulung di sebuah wilayah di China. Data diperoleh melalui siri temu bual (temu bual awal, temu bual ingat semula tersimulasi, dan temu bual akhir) dan sesi pemerhatian di dalam kelas. Dapatan utama daripada kajian ini berkisar kepada empat aspek. Pertama, guru-guru tersebut faham akan maksud CT dan kaedah untuk membangunkan CT di dalam kelas bacaan Bahasa Inggeris walaupun pemahaman mereka agak terbatas. Sementara itu, guru tersebut secara umumnya mempunyai kepercayaan yang positif tentang pengaplikasian CT dalam pengajaran. Kedua, data dari sesi pemerhatian di dalam kelas menunjukkan bahawa guru tersebut memperuntukkan sebahagian waktu pengajaran (17%-3%) di dalam

kelas untuk aktiviti berkaitan dengan CT. Ketiga, guru cenderung menggunakan pendekatan secara tersirat untuk membangunkan kemahiran CT pelajar melalui pelbagai aktiviti di dalam bilik darjah, dengan menggunakan kaedah pengajaran seperti soalan aras tinggi, perbincangan secara berpasangan/dalam kumpulan, pembentangan secara lisan, dan kaedah main-peranan. Tambahan pula, empat daripada guru tersebut telah memperlihatkan sokongan terhadap penerapan CT di dalam pengajaran di kelas. Keempat, dapatan kajian menunjukkan beberapa faktor penghalang dan penyokong yang mempengaruhi penerimaan guru berkaitan arahan mengintegrasikan CT. Faktor penghalang termasuk tahap kemahiran pelajar berbahasa Inggeris, buku teks, kekurangan peluang menjalani latihan berkaitan CT, waktu kelas yang terhad, pelbagai ujian serta silibus. Faktor menyokong pula termasuk persekitaran pengajaran yang membantu serta kaedah pengajaran berbantuan komputer. Kajian ini telah memberi pencerahan tentang tanggapan dan amalan berkaitan pengintegrasian CT dalam pengajaran, yang boleh dijadikan rujukan oleh pendidik untuk mereka bentuk dan melaksanakan program pembangunan profesional guru. Kajian ini juga ingin mencadangkan tentang perlunya usaha secara kolaboratif di antara penggubal polisi, pereka bentuk kurikulum, penulis buku teks, serta pihak pentadbir sekolah dalam mewujudkan persekitaran yang kondusif bagi arahan mengintegrasikan CT dalam konteks pengajaran EFL di China.

**TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN THE INTEGRATION OF  
CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL READING CLASSES IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY**

**ABSTRACT**

The ability to think critically is recognised as a crucial skill for students in higher education. In the new context of English language teaching reform in China, there is a growing demand for teachers to integrate critical thinking (CT) into the regular EFL teaching. However, teachers' conceptions and practices regarding CT instruction have been awarded little empirical attention. The primary objectives of the study were to investigate Chinese college EFL teachers' conceptions and classroom practices concerning the integration of CT in reading classes. The participants were six EFL teachers from a provincial key university in China. Data were obtained through a series of interviews (initial interview, post-lesson stimulated recall interviews, and final interview) and classroom observations. Major findings of the study entailed four aspects. First, teachers had some understanding of the meaning of CT and the ways to develop CT in English reading classes; however, their understanding tended to be narrow. Meanwhile, teachers generally held positive beliefs about the implementation of CT instruction. Second, classroom observation data indicated that teachers devoted varying proportions of class time (17%-53%) to CT-related activities. Third, teachers tended to adopt an implicit approach to develop students' CT through various class activities, employing teaching strategies such as higher-order questioning, pair/group discussion, oral presentation, and role-play. Additionally, four teachers displayed

encouragement for CT in the classroom teaching. Fourth, the results revealed both constraining and facilitating factors that influenced teachers' CT instruction. The impeding factors included students' English proficiency, textbooks, lack of CT training opportunities, limited class time, tests, and syllabus. Facilitating factors comprised supportive teaching environment and computer-based teaching. This study provides insights into teachers' conceptions and practices concerning CT instruction, which teacher educators can draw upon in designing and implementing teacher professional development programmes. It also suggests a need for a collaborative effort between policymakers, curriculum designers, textbook writers, and school administrators to establish an environment conducive for CT instruction in Chinese EFL context.



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Overview

Critical thinking (CT) has long been emphasised as a crucial skill for academic success and social life in western educational domain (Elder & Paul, 1994; Facione, 2015; Halpern, 2001; Lipman, 2003; McPeck, 1981; Moon, 2008; Moore, 2011; Paul, 1993, 1995; Pithers & Soden, 2000). At present, focus on CT is not confined to any particular country, but appears to “span education systems around the world” (Stapleton, 2011, p.14).

In English as first language (L1) contexts, clear requirement for CT has been listed in teaching guidelines and assessment criteria in higher education institutions (Durkin, 2008; Lun, Fischer, & Ward, 2010). Recent trends in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) have as well highlighted the significance of enhancing CT as an integral part of English language curriculum (Davidson, 1998; Kabilan, 2000; Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Sun, 2011, 2015; Tang, 2016).

In Chinese EFL context, attention to CT began to occur in the nationwide English language teaching reform at the very beginning of the 21st century. English language teaching, especially at the tertiary level, is expected to go beyond the traditional sole linguistic level to develop students’ overall competence in language use and CT (Ministry of Education of China [MoE], 2000, 2004, 2007). Meanwhile, Chinese scholars and educators (Han, 2012 ; Huang, 1998, 2010; Qi & Zhang, 2014; Sun, 2011, 2015; Sun et al., 2013; Q. Wen, 1999, 2008) accentuate the importance of CT in promoting effective language learning

and students' personal development, and advocate that teachers should incorporate CT in the regular English language teaching practice. However, teaching CT has not been an easy task, and it sets high demands on EFL teachers (Ruan, 2012; Sun, 2011).

In actual classroom teaching, both teachers' conceptions and contextual factors tend to affect their teaching practices (Borg, 2003; Grove, Dixon, & Pop, 2009; Mok, 2008; Woods, 1996; Zhang, 2005; Zhang & Liu, 2014). Therefore, to better interpret and improve teachers' classroom practices with reference to CT, there is a need to understand their related conceptions and the factors in the teaching context (Borg, 2006). Given that the role of teachers is pivotal to students' CT development as well as successful language learning in the Chinese EFL context (Huang, 2010; Sun, 2011, 2015), an investigation of the relationship among teachers' conceptions, practices, and contextual factors becomes a worthy issue of enquiry.

## **1.1 Background Information**

This section provides basic information on the Chinese context where the study was carried out. It begins with a brief introduction of the Chinese education system, followed by a description of the EFL teaching history, the primary and secondary EFL teaching, and College English teaching and reform in China. Finally, it discusses CT development in Chinese higher education that motivated the present study.

### **1.1.1 Education System in China**

The People's Republic of China (hereafter *China*) was established in 1949. The state is administratively divided into twenty-three provinces, five autonomous regions, four

municipalities, and two Special Administrative Regions. However, in this study the term *China* refers specifically to Mainland China, without the inclusion of Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong.

After six decades of change and development, China has now established its extensive and varied education system run mainly by governments at different levels. The pattern of regular education in China generally follows four levels: pre-school, primary school, secondary school, and higher education. The primary and secondary education in China is generally referred to as *basic education* (Liu & Fang, 2009). The pre-school education generally starts at age three. At the age of six, children begin to receive their formal school education.

Secondary schools in China consists of three years of compulsory junior secondary education (*middle schools*) for youngsters aged 12 to 14 and three years of senior secondary education (*senior high schools*) for those aged 15 to 17. For senior high school students, the most important test is the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE, *Gaokao*) that determines their entry into universities and the type of education they will receive. Due to the comparatively low admission rate, the NCEE is highly competitive and high school students and teachers undergo intense pressures (Davey, Lian, & Higgins, 2007).

Higher education at the tertiary level in China comprises two types of institutions: tertiary vocational-technical institutions (junior colleges without degree programmes, two or three years) and undergraduate institutions (*regular colleges and universities*, four or five years). With the radical enrolment expansion starting from 1999, the national gross enrolment ratio of tertiary education reached 40% in 2015 (MoE, 2016). While the

expansion has increased access to higher education for Chinese young people, it has also brought the issue of quality improvement to the front.

### **1.1.2 Development of EFL Teaching in China**

English language teaching made its debut in China in the mid-nineteenth century during the Qing Dynasty. To learn from the West and strengthen itself, the Qing Dynasty established its first foreign-language institution called *Tongwen Guan* in 1862 (Li & Xu, 2006). Since 1949, EFL teaching in China has gone through four periods of shifts that were influenced by the political, economic and social context.

The first period lasted from 1949 to 1956, when Russian dominated as the priority foreign language. Because of western isolation to the new Communist China and the close relationship with the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, Russian language programmes were promoted in secondary schools and universities, and EFL teaching underwent a great set-back (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

The second period was from 1957 to 1966, during which the pendulum swung from Russian back to English because of the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relationship around 1960 (Lam, 2002). At the time, various teaching methodologies such as grammar-translation, audiolingualism and the direct method “existed side by side” (Hu, 2002. p.19).

The third period witnessed a decade of chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). English as a “foreign” language was removed from secondary school subjects, and higher education institutions were closed from 1966 to 1969. EFL teaching at this period reached the lowest point.

The new revival and reform period of EFL teaching began in 1977. In the 1980s, the Open Door policy and the increasing international exchange fueled the nation's enthusiasm for EFL learning. After several ups and downs in China's foreign language education, English regained its dominant position and its supremacy continued unabated onwards (Zhao & Campbell, 1995). The past two decades was a phase of reform and innovation at all levels of English educational system. In the 1990s, new English teaching syllabi and textbooks at various educational levels were revised and designed. Communicative language teaching was introduced and encouraged (Adamson, 2004; Lam, 2002).

In the new millennium, curriculum reforms were further implemented to improve EFL teaching quality. China's entry into World Trade Organization in 2001 and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games further promoted the role and status of English in the country. Along with the more widespread use of English in business, tourism, science and technology, EFL learning and teaching in China enjoys paramount importance in the formal and informal education systems (Gil & Adamson, 2011).

### **1.1.3 Primary and Secondary EFL Teaching in China**

English curriculum was mandated for primary schools on a national scale in 2001. Children generally start English language learning from Primary Three (aged eight) (MoE, 2001a). In large cities and economically advantaged areas, English classes are offered from Primary One or even from kindergartens (Wu, 2001). For primary English, the activity-based approach is encouraged and an enjoyable learning process is expected (Wang, 2002).

In secondary education, English gained prominence as a major subject in the 1980s, on a par with Chinese and mathematics (Hu, 2003). English is also a mandatory subject in the High School Entrance Examination and the National College Entrance Examination, both considered high-stakes tests for secondary school students. According to the national English curriculum standards (MoE, 2001b, 2003, 2011), the goal of secondary English is to promote students' overall ability in English language use, which includes language knowledge, language skills, affective development, learning strategies, and cultural awareness. To achieve these goals, student-centred and task-based teaching approach is recommended, which stresses language use in context and cooperative learning.

The English curriculum reforms at the basic education have a push effect on textbook designing and teaching methodology (Chang, 2006; Cheng, 2011; Wang, 2007). At the same time, professional development programmes have been provided to help teachers at primary and secondary level to update their ideas and teaching methods (Li & Edwards, 2013). The overall English proficiency of Chinese high school graduates is assumed to have improved in recent years (Han, 2012; Wen, 2012). However, despite positive changes and encouraging trends, gaps remain between curriculum standards and actual teaching practices (Yu & Wang, 2009). Under the pressure of the university entrance examination, much of the secondary English teaching is still test-oriented and teacher-dominated, which impedes students' development in learning autonomy, communicative competence, and CT (Han, 2010; Halstead & Zhu, 2009; Li, 2016).

#### **1.1.4 College English Teaching and Reform in China**

At the tertiary level, EFL programmes in China involve two strands, one for English majors and the other for those majoring in other subjects (also called non-English majors). The two programmes have different national curricula and assessment systems, though the line between the two is beginning to blur (Cai, 2007).

The English language programme for non-English major students, who constitute the majority of EFL learners at the tertiary level in China, is commonly known as College English. College English was introduced at the beginning of the 1980s and it used to be considered secondary in importance, as compared with that for English majors (Cheng, 1988). However, with the unprecedented spread of English as a global language, there is a growing demand for college graduates with good command of English, and College English teaching is becoming a focal topic and gaining more policy and research attention (Chen, 2011).

For non-English major undergraduates in China, College English is a required course unit lasting from the first to the fourth semester (two academic years), with four to six study hours per week. Third and fourth year students can take some elective English courses in accordance with their interests and specialities. The two nationwide tests to assess students' English proficiency levels are College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and College English Test Band 6 (CET-6, a higher level). Before the 2002 reform, passing CET-4 was compulsory and passing CET-6 was optional for undergraduates in most Chinese universities (Han, 2002).

In 2002, the Ministry of Education launched the College English teaching reform to meet the demand for higher English proficiency in the new social and economic context (Cai, 2007). As part of this nationwide reform, the new *College English Curriculum Requirements* (hereafter *Requirements*) was issued, the trial version in 2004 and the final version in 2007. The *Requirements* shifted the teaching focus from linguistic knowledge and discrete language skills to communicative and overall competence of language use. Another prominent feature of the teaching reform is a call for introducing information and communication technology (ICT) into College English teaching. A new computer- and classroom-based teaching model, a combination of web-based teaching with face-to-face classroom teaching, was recommended (MoE, 2004, 2007). The suggested teaching model was piloted in 180 selected higher education institutions in 2004, and then gradually disseminated to more universities throughout the country (Hu & McGrath, 2012). The teaching model reform aimed to promote individualised learning, active participation, and learner autonomy.

In line with the College English teaching reform, a new testing system of CET-4/6 was initiated in 2005. To rectify the test-oriented teaching and learning, a new 710-point scoring system was adopted, and the CET-4/6 certification practice was replaced by the report of transcripts of test results. The emphasis on communicative competence and language use is reflected in the changes of the test content: more non-multiple choice questions (35%-40% instead of 15-20%) and a larger proportion for listening (35% instead of 20%) (Jin, 2005). Passing the CET-4 test is no longer compulsory for students in most universities in China. Nonetheless, the two national English tests, administered twice a



year, are still of great importance to non-English majors as graduates with higher CET scores are more likely to obtain desirable jobs (Cai, 2005).

In the College English teaching reform, teachers are faced with challenges such as heavy workload, large classes, lack of pre-service training in language education theories (Cai, 2007). As the quality of teachers is vital to the success and sustainability of the reform, teacher professional development becomes a concern of researchers and policymakers (Wang & Wang, 2011). English language teacher training programmes, at the national or local level, began to occur in the early 2000s (Zhou, 2002). These programmes, which are usually short-term training courses on language theories, teaching methodology, and research methods, have provided English teachers with assistance in adapting to the new teaching context. However, compared with the development of English curriculum, that of teacher education lags behind (Zhou, 2008). Tensions still exist between teachers' increasing demand for professional development and inadequate training opportunities, and between traditions and innovations (Xia, 2007; Xu & Fan, 2016).

### **1.1.5 Critical Thinking in Chinese Higher Education**

Starting in 1949, the new Chinese government restructured the education system in a close imitation of the Soviet model, and a highly specialised education in higher curriculum was developed (Li, 2010). The narrow and uniform education system matched the planned economy and the needs of social development of the time, but resulted in neglect of the breadth component of education and the overall development of students (Yang, 2004).

Dramatic changes took place in Chinese higher education in the 1990s. Along with the transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, major

educational reforms were launched with noticeable features of decentralization, marketisation, enrollment expansion, and quality improvement. Universities and colleges enjoyed more autonomy and flexibility in institutional management. In this period, there were strong demands for creative and independent professionals to promote economic growth as well as for competitive intellectuals with all-around characters (Ma, 2009). To overcome the problem of overspecialization of traditional curriculum, a liberal education curriculum reform was initiated at the early beginning of the 21st century, spreading from the prestigious universities, such as Peking University and Tsinghua University, to the other common institutions of higher education (Hu et al., 2008; Xin, 2004). Many universities began to offer comprehensive programmes, and college students were required to take more courses outside their major. Coupled with the curriculum change, the pedagogy reform began with a stress on student-centred, heuristic and participatory teaching methods (Min, 2004).

The gradual but significant reform and changes in Chinese higher education bring about attention to the development of students' CT ability. Educators and scholars, increasingly exposed to Western models of education, become more concerned that Chinese university students are deficient in CT and that there is an urgent need to prepare students to be critical thinkers in the globalised world (Luo, 2000; Qian, 2011; Wu, 2004).

In the most recent Chinese national education plan for the decade (2010-2020), the importance of "reflective thinking" and "independent thinking" is emphasised:

Putting a premium on integrating learning with reflective thinking. We will advocate teaching to be heuristic, exploratory, discussion-based, and participatory, and help students learn how to study. We will stimulate student's curiosity, develop their

interest and hobbies, and foster a fine environment for independent thinking, free exploration and innovation. (MoE, 2010, p.25)

The idea of combining study with independent and creative thinking has also been mentioned in talks on various occasions by the former President Hu Jintao (2011), Premier Wen Jiabao (2010, 2012) and the Minister of Education Yuan Guiren (2012). Although the exact term “critical thinking” (*Pipan xing siwei*) has not been adopted in the government official documents mentioned above, it is commonly found in academic periodicals and university documents in the past decade.

At the practice level, some Chinese universities such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Sun Yat-sen University are making attempts to teach CT by setting up stand-alone CT courses (Gu & Liu, 2006; Li & Liu, 2006). More positively, some CT seminars and workshops have been conducted since 2011 (Zhou & Rong, 2016). At the same time, scholars and researchers assert that separate CT courses alone are not enough to bring about substantial changes; to pursue the goal of CT promotion in Chinese higher education, it is essential to imbed CT in various subject courses (Luo, 2000; Miao, 2007; Wang, 2009; Wang et al., 2006).

## **1.2 Background to the Study**

Against the backdrop of higher education reform at the beginning of the 21st century, CT, as a central element for independent life-long learning and an enduring skill for the rapidly changing world, has begun to become one of the widely discussed concepts. EFL teaching has an important place in Chinese tertiary education and plays a key role in developing students’ English language proficiency as well as CT capacity (Chen, 2011).

The shift of attention to CT in Chinese tertiary EFL teaching is reflected in various national and institutional English curriculum requirements. For example, in the national *College English Curriculum Requirements*, ideas such as “independent thinking”, “individualised and autonomous learning” and “students’ lifelong learning ability” are mentioned as the teaching goals (MoE, 2004, 2007). College English, as the *Requirements* states, is not only a language course that provides basic knowledge about English but also a quality-oriented and capacity enhancement course; it possesses both instrumental and humanistic values, serving to develop learners’ ability to use English for communication as well as their overall personal growth in cognition, affect, and character (MoE, 2007). At the policy level, it is hence indicated that Chinese tertiary EFL teaching is expected to depart from the teacher-centred approach to the learner-centred approach, from rote-learning to active participation, and from the provision of linguistic knowledge to the promotion of communicative competence and CT capacity (Han, 2012).

The significance of enhancing CT, alongside language proficiency, among Chinese EFL learners has been widely discussed (Chen, 2015; Han, 2012; Sun et al., 2013; Wen, 1999, 2008). It is argued that CT is closely linked to English language development and that effective language learning requires CT (Qi & Zhang, 2014; Wang & Zheng, 2016). Liu (2013) asserts that mastering linguistic knowledge and being able to use English do not equate with successful language learning; to become proficient in English, EFL learners also need to apply CT in the use of the target language. In this sense, college EFL teaching in China should go beyond the sole linguistic horizon and aim to cultivate “real talents possessing language skills and critical thinking skills” (Liu, 2013, p.59). Furthermore, in

the increasingly complex and changing world, CT is essential to EFL learners' success not only in academic studies at home or abroad, but also in the future workplace and personal life (He et al., 1999; Sun, 2011, 2015). Due to the significance of CT to Chinese EFL learners, scholars and researchers further call on teachers to integrate CT in various English language classes (Han, 2012; Huang, 2010; Sun, 2011; Sun et al., 2013; Wen, 1999, 2008).

The English reading class is viewed as an ideal platform to develop English learners' critical reading and CT competence (Chen, 2015; Hong & Ye, 2011; Li, 2002; G. Tang, 2009; Wang, 2012). In Chinese EFL context, English reading course has long been the backbone of College English curriculum (Dong, 2003; Yang & Gao, 2014). Reading is viewed as a primary source of language input and a basis for language development in writing, listening, and speaking. As Meng (2009) states, "English instruction at the university level is largely devoted to reading as it has been intricately intertwined with language teaching itself" (p132). A nationwide online survey of 530 Chinese universities revealed that reading is listed as the top language skill in College English teaching (Wang & Wang, 2011). Both teachers and students give primacy to the teaching and learning of English reading. In addition, the close relationship between reading and CT is recognised by Chinese researchers (Qi & Zhang, 2014). Ma and Pan (2014) assert that one vital role of college EFL reading instruction should be enhancing the application of CT skills, and that students' CT can be "cultivated in the process of critical reading" (p.77). By teaching and encouraging students to question, analyse, evaluate, and respond to the English text, teachers can help EFL learners to develop their language proficiency, critical reading and CT skills simultaneously (Zhang, 2008).

Although some progress has been made over the past decade, CT instruction and research in Chinese EFL are still in the initial stage (Sun, 2015). It was not until 2014 that the first national CT training workshop for EFL teachers was held in China. Teachers are regarded as the “front line change agents” in translating the innovative ideas into classroom practice, and “what these change agents believe and do can profoundly affect the extent to which educational change is carried out in practice” (Gu, 2005, p.303). With a growing demand for CT in the tertiary EFL teaching in China (Han, 2012; Sun, 2015), exploring teachers’ conceptions and practices with reference to CT instruction is particularly significant in illuminating the real state of CT instruction in English language teaching from an insider (emic) perspective and contributes to teacher development in the new context of English teaching reform.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Although the ability to think critically is recognised as a crucial skill for English language learners at the tertiary level, scholars and researchers have expressed concern that CT is neglected in EFL classrooms in China (Gao, 1999; Han, 2012; He et al., 1999; Sun, 2011; Wang, 2013; Wei, 2012; You, 2004). Chinese EFL teaching, as remarked by Huang (1998, 2010), generally put undue emphasis on linguistic knowledge and correct language form while giving scant attention to learners’ CT development in analysis, inference, and evaluation. In college EFL reading classes, primacy is given to vocabulary, grammar or detailed information of a text; in contrast, CT activities, such as the analysis of argument process and the critical evaluation of author’s viewpoint, are generally ignored (Li, 2002; Ma & Pan, 2014).

The traditional EFL teaching with over-emphasis on linguistic details and literal understanding has impeded students' progress in CT (G. Tang, 2009; Tang, 2016; Tian, 2012). Due to inadequate exposure to CT practice, Chinese EFL learners at the tertiary level are found to be weak in making critical analysis of what they read (Li, 2003; Lin, 2008; Wang, 2012), lacking general critical reading ability (Zhou, Jiang, & Yao, 2015), or deficient in expressing their ideas logically and convincingly in writing (Wen & Liu, 2006). With marginal prior experience in CT, Chinese university graduates, when going abroad for further studies in Western countries, are also reported to have difficulties adapting to English academic reading and writing where CT is clearly required and needed (Tian, 2008).

In view of the importance of empowering college students to be both proficient language learners and critical thinkers, EFL teachers in China are expected to move away from the traditional teaching approach and integrate CT into their regular teaching practices (Gao, 1999; Han, 2012; Huang, 1998, 2010; Li, 2016; Sun, 2015; Wen, 1999). However, the extent to which Chinese EFL teachers are implementing CT instruction and how they do it have rarely been empirically explored. Although there are widespread complaints about the lack of CT in Chinese EFL classrooms, it is worth noting that much of the evidence comes primarily from personal impressions. Further insights into teachers' actual classroom practices pertaining to CT are needed especially in the changing educational context in China.

Research suggests that teachers' conceptions exert a direct impact on their classroom practices (Borg, 2006; Zhang, 2005; Zhang & Liu, 2014; Zheng & Jiang, 2005). Teachers' conceptions of what CT means and how to integrate it in the subject teaching influence their

CT teaching practices (Ab Kadir, 2017; Zohar, 1999) and “may have enormous instructional consequences” (Li, 2016, p.275). In addressing the issue of integrating CT in Chinese EFL classrooms, Wen (1999) asserts that genuine improvement in CT instruction will not occur unless teachers know the essence of CT and recognise the real need to engender it among EFL learners. Teachers who do not value CT or have not a substantive concept of CT are less likely to foster it with deliberate efforts in actual classroom practices (Sun, 2011). To prompt more changes at the classroom level concerning CT instruction, a useful starting point is to understand teachers’ related conceptions (Hu, 2011). Over the past decade, there has been much discussion on the importance of making CT an integral part of Chinese EFL teaching (Gao, 1999; Han, 2012; Huang, 1998, 2010; Sun, 2015; Wen, 2008), and various ways to develop CT in English classes have also been recommended (Han & Yi, 2009; Huang, 2010; Li, 2011; Peng, 2000; Sun, 2015; G. Tang, 2009; Xu, 2011; Wen, 1999; Zhang, 2007). However, published research on Chinese EFL teachers’ conceptions of CT instruction is hardly found (Li, 2016).

In addition, studies in the global context indicate that multiple factors in the teaching context, such as curriculum and test, also influence the implementation of CT instruction in the English language teaching (Jantrasakul, 2004; Mok, 2008). Considering the contextual dimensions of teaching helps to better interpret the complex relationship between teachers’ conceptions and practices (Phipps & Borg, 2009). In Chinese EFL, few attempts have been made to examine the impact of the teaching context on teachers’ classroom practices pertaining to CT instruction (Tian, 2008).

Teachers play a pivotal role in bringing about educational changes and developing CT in Chinese EFL teaching (Gu, 2005; Sun, 2011). Initiatives to promote improvement in



what teachers do in the classroom are less likely to succeed without an understanding of what they know, believe, and actually do in the local teaching context (Hu & McGrath, 2012; Lou & Liao, 2005). In China, EFL reading classes are regarded as an ideal platform to enhance learners' ability to read and think critically (Chen, 2015; Hong & Ye, 2011; G. Tang, 2009; Qi & Zhang, 2014; Wang, 2012). However, teachers' conceptions and practices regarding the integration of CT in reading classes have been awarded little empirical attention. This study, therefore, attempts to address the gap by exploring Chinese EFL teachers' conceptions and practices in relation to CT instruction in reading classes while also taking the contextual factors into account.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The primary purpose of this study is to explore Chinese college teachers' conceptions and practices regarding the integration of CT in EFL reading classes. It has the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate the teachers' conceptions of the integration of CT in Chinese EFL reading classes.
2. To examine the extent to which the teachers integrate CT in their reading classroom practices.
3. To explore how the teachers integrate CT in their reading classroom practices.
4. To investigate the contextual factors that influence the teachers' integration of CT in Chinese EFL reading classes.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

The present research attempts to address the following questions:

1. What conceptions do the teachers hold about the integration of CT in Chinese EFL reading classes?
2. To what extent do the teachers integrate CT in their reading classroom practices?
3. How do the teachers integrate CT in their reading classroom practices?
4. What are the contextual factors that influence the teachers' integration of CT in Chinese EFL reading classes?

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

By exploring teachers' conceptions and practices regarding the integration of CT into Chinese EFL reading classes, this study provides insights into the relationship among teachers' conceptions, practices and the contextual factors. The findings of this study are significant in the field of English language teaching in China in at least four ways.

First of all, this study is significant because it helps to fill the gap in the research on Chinese EFL teachers' conceptions and classroom practices in relation to CT instruction. In the existing research, there is widespread concern that CT is neglected in Chinese EFL teaching, especially in reading classrooms (Huang, 1998, 2010; Sun, 2011; G. Tang, 2009; Wang, 2013; Wei, 2012); however, systematic empirical studies based on actual classroom observation on this area are rare. The present study thus contributes to this issue by examining Chinese EFL teachers' actual classroom practices related to CT instruction in reading classes. Additionally, among limited empirical research (Jantrasakul, 2004; Mok,

2008) on English language teachers' conceptions of CT instruction in Asian context, little has been found in Chinese EFL context. By exploring what teachers know and believe about CT instruction in Chinese EFL reading classrooms, the study aims to fill this void.

Secondly, this study is beneficial to other researchers by clarifying the usefulness of Facione's CT Model (Facione, 1990b) and Barrett's Reading Taxonomy (Smith & Barrett, 1979) in identifying CT-related activities in English reading classrooms. Language researchers and educators may find it helpful to employ the theories in assessing or analysing CT elements in class activities in other contexts. The classroom observation checklist in this study, which was developed primarily on the basis of the above two theories, may also be used or adapted by other educators and researchers.

Thirdly, the study can provide useful insights for frontline EFL teachers. Through detailed description and analysis of the participating teachers' classroom practices concerning CT instruction, this study reveals the class activities and teaching strategies that the teachers employ to develop students' CT in the reading class as well their underlying rationales. The results may act as a mirror for other teachers to reexamine their own teaching practices and reflect on their beliefs behind them, and thus help to raise their awareness of the role of CT instruction in Chinese EFL teaching. This awareness can further serve as a source of motivation for EFL teachers to search for more alternative ways of incorporating CT in their own classroom practices.

Fourthly, the findings of the study will contribute to the teacher education and development programmes in China. There is a move in China to encourage teachers to incorporate CT in EFL teaching, and the first national CT training workshop for EFL

teachers in China was held in 2014 (Foreign Language Teacher Development Website, 2014). By taking a closer look at Chinese EFL teachers' conceptions of CT instruction and their current classroom practices, this study offers teacher educators an in-depth understanding of how well teachers are prepared and what professional help they may need in developing CT in Chinese EFL context. Such insights will provide a necessary basis for making further informed decisions about what courses or content should be included in teacher education and development programmes, and thus make teacher education more feasible and ultimately more productive.

Lastly, this study can generate implications for policymakers and curriculum designers. In the course of English language teaching reform in China, there is an increasing demand for EFL teachers to integrate CT into their regular teaching (Huang, 2010; Sun, 2011; Wen, 2008). To bring about substantial changes in EFL teaching, policymakers must know frontline teachers' conceptions of CT instruction as well as how their conceptions might influence their practices so that better actions and measures can be taken. Moreover, by elucidating the potential contextual factors that may affect teachers' integration of CT in reading classes, this study provides insights that curriculum designers can draw upon to make up well-defined guidelines and practical curriculum design for EFL teaching. In addition, it can also help policymakers and school administrators to rethink their role in establishing an environment conducive for teachers to incorporate CT in Chinese EFL teaching.