

# A Research on the Predicament and Improving Strategies of China College Entrance Examination Thinking in IELTS Reading—Comparative Analysis of Chinese College Entrance Examination English Reading and IELTS Reading

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## Abstract

Over recent years, the mainland examination cohort has revealed a gradual trend of getting younger. More and more high school students are attempting to apply for undergraduate degrees in foreign universities, leading to an increasing trend of taking the IELTS examination. This article examines the challenges of candidates tackling IELTS English reading within the context of college entrance exams. It explores the thought processes of Chinese candidates and discusses strategies for enhancing the accuracy of IELTS reading, providing valuable references for the advancement of English education in China, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, and thus fostering well-rounded talents in the country.

**Keywords:** College Entrance Examination thinking, College Entrance Examination English reading, IELTS reading, problem-solving strategy

## 1. Introduction

Chinese education has traditionally emphasized examination-oriented learning. A clear distinction exists between the Chinese College Entrance Examination and the international exam, IELTS, particularly in the English reading section, where Chinese candidates often fail to secure high scores due to differing or deficient thinking strategies. This realization has inspired a comparative analysis of IELTS reading characteristics, offering constructive guidance for Chinese candidates to improve their reading

capabilities, alter their mindset, and develop their critical English skills. In recent years, educators have committed to studying the New College Entrance Examination or the core competencies of IELTS. Owing to limited research on the interconnection between the two, the comparative differences, and the impact of the long-established thought processes of Chinese examinees on their skill gaps, we've taken a study of their comparison and challenge strategies as a vantage point, aiming to contribute to the development of Chinese

English interdisciplinary talents.

## 2. Literature Review

Liu and Zhao (2016) (Liu, Y.H & Zhao, P., 2016) indicated that the College Entrance Examination thinking refers to students' problem-solving abilities in the College Entrance Examination, primarily influenced by school education, family education, and social environment. They advocate for the enhancement of students' thinking capabilities and overall quality, and for the design and evaluation criteria of College Entrance Examination questions to cultivate this thought process. Chen (2018) (Chen, Y.Z., 2018) proposed various solutions, including reinforcing students' understanding of foundational knowledge, cultivating their problem-solving abilities, and emphasizing the development of their innovative thinking.

Regarding English reading in the college entrance exam, Mei and Rong's (2018) research suggests that introducing mind mapping and problem-solving strategies into English reading education can enhance the cultivation of students' critical and creative thinking levels (Mei, X & Rong, Z., 2020). Zhang (2020) endorses skimming the entire article first and then concentrating on the full text. This method allows students to grasp the main idea quickly, facilitating smoother access to relevant information in subsequent readings (Zhang, Q., 2021).

Numerous scholars have conducted extensive research on the correlation between IELTS reading and students' thinking quality. For instance, Siregar and Tambun (2021) discovered that suitable application of various reading strategies can effectively boost students' reading efficiency and further encourage the cultivation of their thinking quality (Siregar, M & Tambun, N., 2017). Additionally, Sun's (2018) research indicates that participation in IELTS reading training and examination can significantly enhance students' cultural literacy and multicultural awareness in non-English-speaking countries (Sun, S.Q., 2018).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Literature Investigation

This study consolidates information from databases such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure, Web of Science, and Google Scholar to survey literature on the influence of

thinking quality on English College Entrance Examination reading and IELTS reading. The goal is to explore the development and features of Chinese candidates' thinking processes during the Chinese College Entrance Examination, and to understand the aims of the new English curriculum standards and the specific requirements for reading comprehension in alignment with official documents. The relevant principles will be applied and empirically demonstrated in an attempt to identify the main difficulties of Chinese candidates in IELTS reading and to propose practical and effective solutions.

### 3.2 Field Research

The experiment randomly selected reading comprehension questions from classic English simulation tests of recent Chinese college entrance exams, ensuring coverage of all types of examination, including detail location, main idea, inference, and judgment. It also included the reading section from Cambridge IELTS 4-17. The experiment further selected Jiangsu Province, recognized for its comprehensive education and English education, and distributed these reading comprehensions to some senior students in Nanjing and Wuxi high schools to present and analyze their results. This can provide new findings and partial evidence for the research.

### 3.3 Teacher Interviews

The study not only conducted fieldwork in Chinese senior high schools but also interviewed experienced teachers working at the forefront of English teaching to understand the strategies of teaching English reading in the context of the new standard and the common issues and characteristics of Chinese students in reading for the College Entrance Examination. Interviews were recorded, textual data compiled, and teachers' opinions and feedback were incorporated throughout the study.

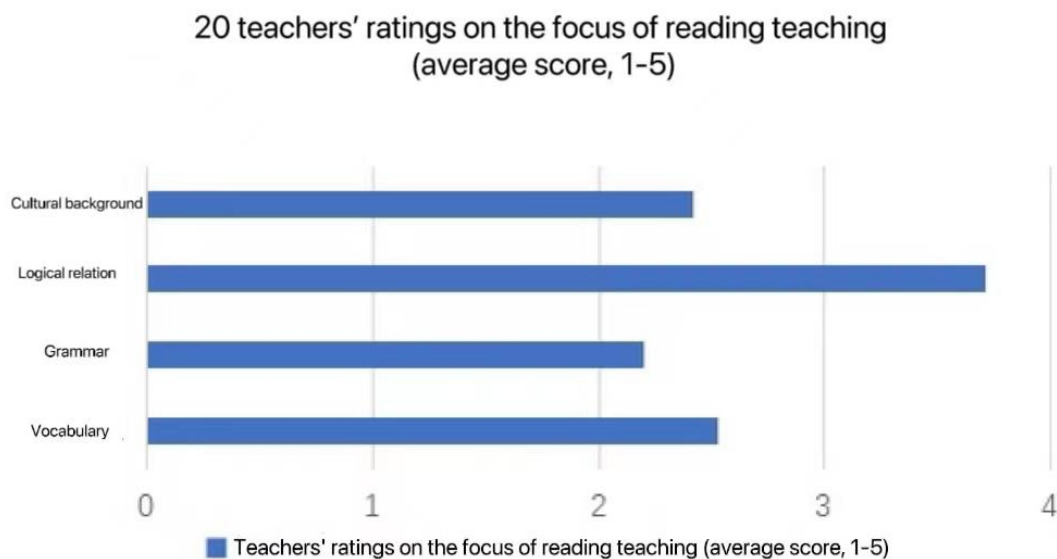
## 4. Teaching and Training English Reading in the Context of Chinese College Entrance Examination

According to the New English Curriculum Standard for Senior High School (2017 edition), the English curriculum content comprises six elements: theme context, text type, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. Among them, three aspects—theme context, text type, and cultural knowledge—are closely related to reading. The

theme context is primarily divided into human and self, human and society, human and nature, which covers 32 sub-themes. Text types involve narrative, argumentative, expository, and practical writing. Drawing on discourse knowledge, the new curriculum standard focuses on writing purpose, basic format and language features, explicit cohesion and coherence means, sentences in different positions, and contextual output. Cultural knowledge encompasses Chinese and foreign cultures, material and spiritual cultures, and requires an understanding of other countries' holiday customs, mainstream sports, art, social interaction, and so forth. The objective of English teaching in senior high school expects students to be familiar with various styles, topics, to acquire corresponding vocabulary, to conduct thorough discourse analysis and understanding, and to also possess a certain level of cultural awareness and cross-cultural competence.

This survey also integrates teachers' English

reading teaching strategies and teaching concerns. The design of teachers' reading lesson plans typically consists of three sections: before reading, during reading, and after reading. Through the introduction of relevant topics, the combination of skimming and intensive reading, detailed tables, open-ended questions, and scenario simulations, students progressively enhance their thinking quality from understanding the text and comprehending it to thinking critically about it. Concurrently, teachers pay different degrees of attention to vocabulary, grammar, logical relationships, and cultural contexts during the teaching process. Teachers emphasize locating keywords in the original text and inferring the meaning of words based on their formation or the meaning of adjacent sentences during their reading practice. Nonetheless, finding a uniform approach to questions regarding the main idea proves to be challenging. This task usually involves identifying the corresponding sentence and the content that signifies a shift.



**Figure 1.** Teachers' Ratings on the Focus of Reading Teaching (Average Score, 1-5)

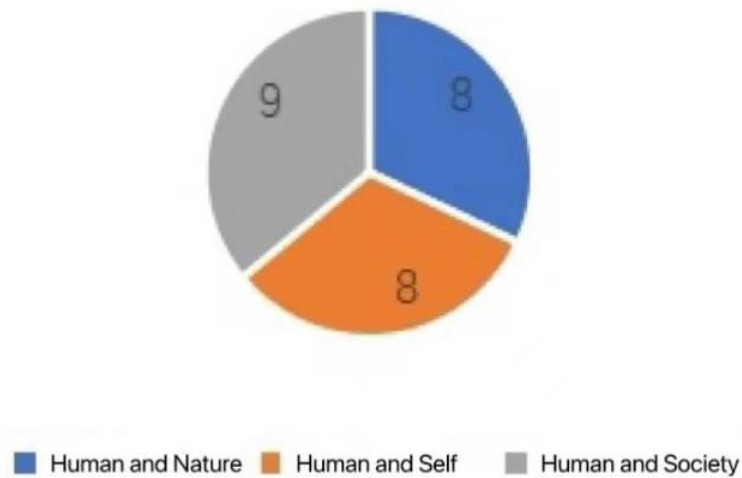
However, a discrepancy exists between students' actual issues and their expectations. First and foremost, both the college entrance English examination and the English test impose a strict time constraint, forcing students to read the article, comprehend the question's meaning, and respond to the question swiftly. This urgency heightens the difficulty of answering questions and somewhat impacts the students' evaluation and assessment. Furthermore, the College Entrance Examination reading covers a broad

range of areas, including information retrieval, reasoning, judgment, summarizing, analysis, and evaluation. (Wang, Y.P & Dai, H.Y., 2022) It assesses not only the students' low-level cognitive skills such as memory, understanding, and application but also emphasizes higher-level cognitive skills like analysis, evaluation, and creation. Thus, it sets high standards for students' comprehensive cognitive abilities. This assessment is conducted in the form of multiple-choice questions in reading tests, and

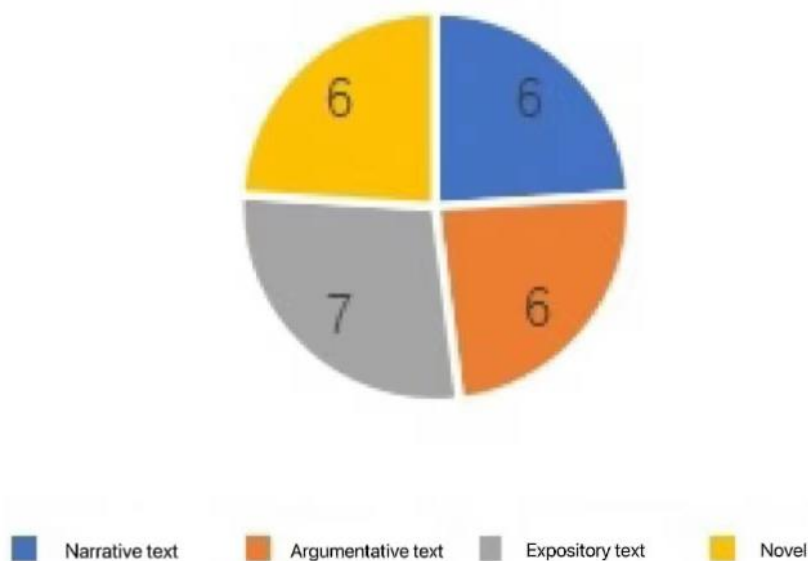
students may grapple with the provided approximate options. Long-term training and the teachers' instructional approaches allow students to develop their reading methods and habits, eventually leading to the formation of a College Entrance Examination mindset for reading.

In this experiment, an output test was conducted to probe the College Entrance Examination reading mindset after investigating the input (training and teaching) of English reading in senior high schools. The study, which lasted

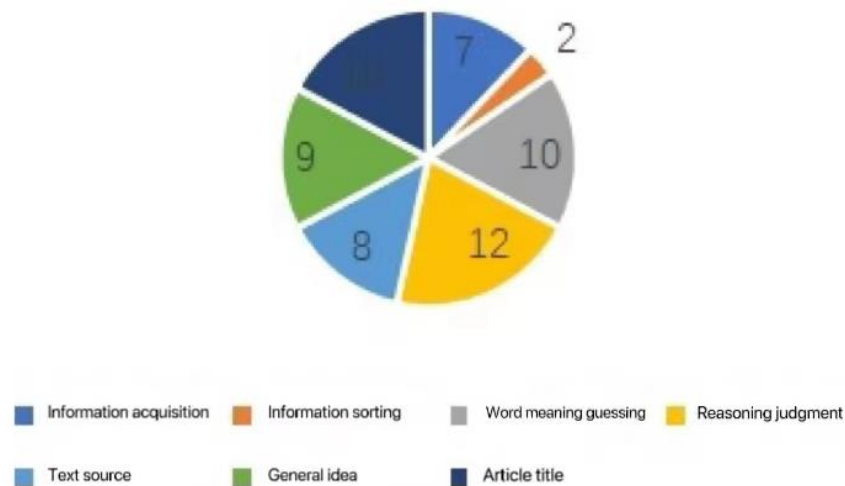
three months, involved 210 senior students in Nanjing and Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. The chosen high school ranks in the upper-middle level of Jiangsu Province, with all students belonging to the school's key classes and possessing a solid English foundation. 25 reading comprehension articles were selected from 16 provinces. All the questions in the various national College Entrance Examination simulation papers were multiple-choice. This paper analyzes the text's theme and type and investigates the question and answer types.



**Figure 2.** Quantitative Distribution of Discourse Themes



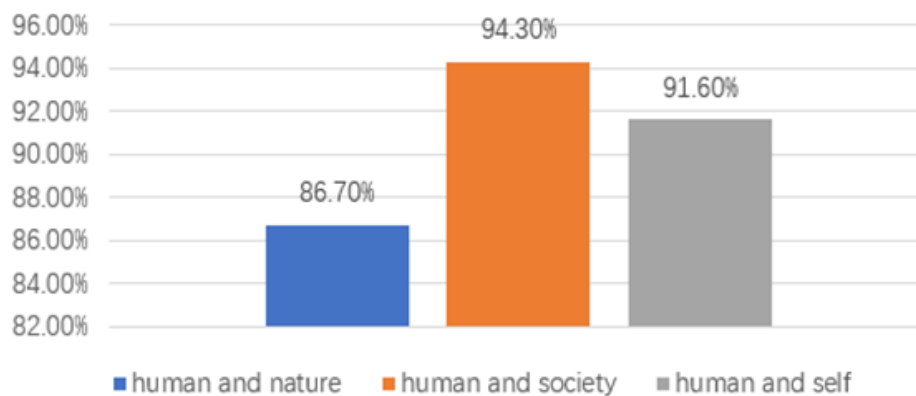
**Figure 3.** Quantitative Distribution of Discourse Types



**Figure 4.** Quantitative Distribution of Examination Content

The selection of the simulation questions for the College Entrance Examination encompasses all the discourse themes, styles, and examination

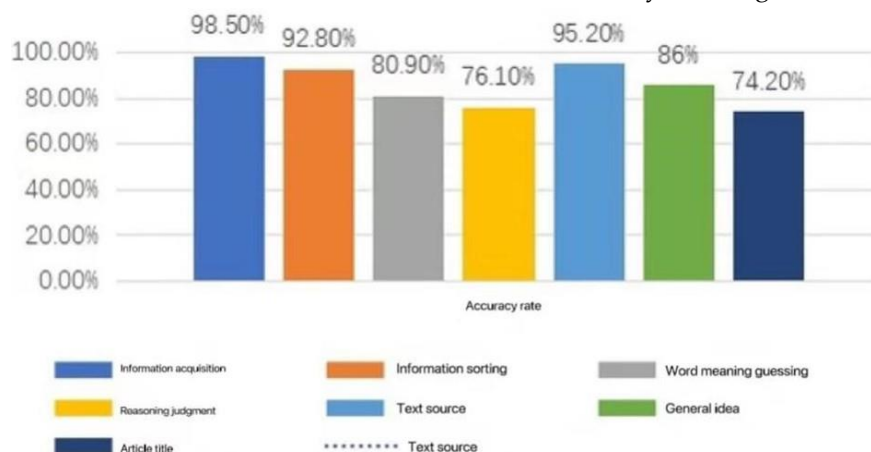
contents in the new curriculum standard. The number is evenly distributed, and the scope is comprehensive and convincing.



**Figure 5.** Statistics on the Accuracy Rate of Each Discourse Theme

Among the three types of discourse themes, students exhibit a preference for the theme of “human and society” because it is primarily presented in the form of novels and narratives,

making the general idea clear. However, the “human and nature” theme is mainly displayed in expository texts, which often contain new words, thereby affecting details and judgment.



**Figure 6.** Statistics on the Accuracy Rate of Each Question Type



According to the findings, students show high competence in completing information acquisition questions. In contrast to simple information retrieval, information organization demands quick information extraction and logical ability, where more students tend to err. The text's source also proves easy for the students. While dealing with such questions, students merely need to determine the style and then locate the corresponding media in the options. However, the most challenging types are reasoning and topic headings. Reasoning problems require merging multi-level information from the article. The reasoning topics of this research encompass word meaning reasoning, plot reasoning, and psychological activity reasoning. Students' incorrect choices are almost entirely concentrated in one option, with indecision frequently observed between two choices. The main idea merges micro and macro elements and necessitates some reasoning ability. The article's title not only encapsulates the full text's main idea but also skillfully displays the theme. This kind of topic usually provides four options related to the article's content, demanding not just deep thinking about the theme from students but also a certain level of literary accomplishment and aesthetic awareness. These results indicate that students are comfortable with single information retrieval questions and can grasp the article's general idea, but they often struggle to make clear decisions about speculative, deep reasoning.

### **5. The Formation of Thinking Mode of the College Entrance Examination for English Reading**

Based on the above outcomes, the causes are further dissected in detail. In the context of exam-taking, students resort to mechanical repetition to master knowledge and solve problems, and they also employ imitation and memorization to study or cope with exams. Over time, what they have learned and memorized subtly influences their cognitive development. In China, the College Entrance Examination is challenging, and time is constrained. Consequently, comprehensive reading is time-consuming, and students need to quickly peruse the article to answer the questions. During reading training, students may experience panic and are compelled to respond to questions via paragraph topic sentences and related information sentences in time-critical situations. Once this habit forms,

candidates may not thoroughly comprehend the article to a certain extent. They might overlook the role of other key details in the article's progression and make errors on issues requiring a deep understanding. Students also tend to lack a sense of critique and verification post-reading and seldom question their answers, deepening stereotypical thinking.

The survey results suggest that teachers generally consider logical relationships crucial in reading and enhance students' comprehension of the article through various teaching activities. However, these questions in the process are directive, and the logical chain is straightforward. Students can answer questions based on consensus or some tips, and they don't pay enough attention to the cultivation of critical thinking. Teachers' assessments are influenced by class time, resulting in relatively simplified guidance for students' answer formulation. After students respond, they make corrections based on the teachers' answers, without any subsequent diversified thought expansion. This teaching approach neglects the fact that students are the primary constructors of meaning.

### **6. Difficulties Faced by Chinese Candidates in IELTS Reading**

#### *6.1 Examination Content of IELTS Reading*

IELTS reading generally includes three articles, spanning a wide range and providing numerous cues. Typically, there are comprehension questions, true or false questions, paragraph detail questions, matching questions, and vocabulary-filling questions.

The first type is the judgment question, designed to assess students' understanding of sentences and their capacity to determine the central expression and comprehend the sentences. The focus is on discerning whether the topic and the original sentence align. If they are supportive, choose T; if they are exclusive, choose F. If they concern different things, the relationship cannot be determined.

The second type is the fill-in-the-blank question. This question type targets the sentence's details, paying greater attention to the segmentation of the article's sentence details. The question presents most information of the sentence, and the missing information (1-3 words) requires students to return to the original text, based on the known information, and analyze the semantic association between the known information and the unknown space from the

sentence's perspective.

The third type is the detail matching question, which matches the corresponding person with their theoretical viewpoint according to the corresponding expression in the article, or some classified information needs to correspond to the original text one by one.

The fourth is the multiple-choice question, which clarifies what the problem is and how to return to the text to solve it. This demands students compare process expressions rather than similar words.

The fifth type is the paragraph detail question, which assesses students' ability to summarize paragraph structure. Students are required to match the option structure with the paragraph structure and understand the relationship between multiple sentences.

The last type is the paragraph matching question, which examines whether students can analyze the article's structure with paragraphs as the basic unit and clarify each paragraph's general idea and the connections and differences

between paragraphs.

## 6.2 Common Errors of Chinese Candidates in IELTS Reading

We administered IELTS reading test to the same group of students, distributed three sets of test questions, and collected 205 valid results. After analyzing the students' accuracy, we identified several intensive problems and drew the following table. The results show that the issue lies in skimming and overlooking essential details. There are six aspects: misunderstanding of logical relationship reporting, unrecognized synonymous substitution, weak reasoning ability, insufficient time, and unfamiliar subject words, with weak reasoning ability being the most intensive problem. Students often hastily judge without carefully comparing the differences between the body and the original text. They also struggle with different grammatical sentence patterns and the corresponding transformation between unfamiliar vocabulary phrases, leading to misunderstandings.



**Figure 7.** Types of Concentrated Errors in IELTS Reading

## 6.3 Dilemma of the College Entrance Examination Thinking in IELTS Reading

Through quantitative analysis of the incorrect types of IELTS reading answers from Chinese students, it's evident that the errors reflect the shortcomings of comprehensive international English reading under the long-term thinking mode of Chinese candidates. Chinese students

find it challenging to actively contribute to constructing the text's meaning and leverage existing information to understand and speculate effectively. This issue relates to China's long-standing learning style of mechanical repetition, imitation, and fixed thinking. Students primarily rely on matching paragraph topic sentences with related information

sentences, leading to anxiety when encountering extensive complex information in IELTS reading. It is difficult for them to fully comprehend the features of things or events described by the subject in the reading and may overlook key details due to a lack of critical consciousness, impeding deeper understanding.

While the concept of Relevance Theory is not unfamiliar in China's middle and high school English teaching, students struggle to maintain a consistent problem-solving level due to a lack of systematic analysis (Wang, L., 2010). This theory clearly highlights the predicament Chinese students face when dealing with judgment questions in IELTS reading. Students frequently mix up "false" and "not given" questions in judgment questions due to misunderstandings. They often consider uncertain elements as nonexistent or incorrect. The information not mentioned in the article may be right or wrong because of its uncertainty, leading to thinking errors among Chinese students as they struggle to connect the body to the original text and disregard other possibilities garnered from systematic analysis. Moreover, Chinese candidates still grapple with vocabulary or cultural background problems. Given the increasingly academic nature of IELTS reading topics, students often fail to identify synonymous substitutions because they're unfamiliar with the cultural background or thematic vocabulary.

## **7. Improvement Strategies for IELTS Reading**

### *7.1 Mastery of IELTS Reading Answering Skills*

The sequence of most questions often aligns with the text's order. The answer to an article's first question is typically found at the text's beginning. Occasionally, some paragraphs don't contain any body information. Students can use the questions' keywords to locate the relevant content in the text. During IELTS reading, students often first skim the text to familiarize themselves with the general idea and subject matter, and then they revisit the original text to find specific information using the item stem's conspicuous keywords.

Students need to understand the questions' order. The topics of IELTS reading are divided into sequential questions and disordered questions. Students can quickly locate and answer sequential questions using the principle of synonymous substitution. For disordered questions, students can read multiple questions

at once, immediately verify whether there are corresponding options after reading each paragraph, and then continue to read more questions after completing a single option. A disadvantage of Chinese candidates in exam-oriented education is their familiarity only with the inherent types of questions in English reading, thus they struggle with complex IELTS reading questions. By presenting candidates with the method: same questions solved in different ways, they can broaden their thinking and reduce their reliance on a single method (Ye, Z.M & Guo, G.W., 2015). Taking multiple-choice questions in IELTS reading as an example, through careful analysis and summarization, we find that candidates can either use the conventional exclusion method or treat it as a "true or false" question, applying relevance theory to match the logical and pragmatic relationship between the original information and the item stem information. Candidates need to understand that different methods of the same question do not exist independently but can be applied jointly for the same question.

### *7.2 Construction of a Comprehensive and Profound Cognitive System*

Under the examination-oriented English education in China, Chinese candidates often have the mindset of reading the entire text when answering questions. Comprehensive cognition, however, is not just about reading the full text, but rather the development of a matching thinking ability that can comprehend the structure and meaning of the article holistically. Based on Western linear thinking, we can intuitively discern that there is no non-linear thinking in IELTS reading. A close relationship exists between paragraphs and sentences. Therefore, Chinese candidates can abandon the rigid thinking of reading the entire text when answering questions and understand the author's writing conception and purpose when practicing IELTS reading. In this process, students can use the time saved to construct relevant cognition by Relevance Theory or specific key details of information to understand the whole passage, and gradually progress towards the main idea.

Self-directed exploration is an effective method for cognitive construction. In regular reading teaching and training, teachers should stimulate students' subjective initiative, consciously cultivate innovative thinking, and transition students from passive thinking to active



exploration. The outcome of students' work is closely tied to the process, which should be multidimensional rather than preset. Otherwise, it constitutes mechanical repetition. Teachers should guide students to employ scenario presets and reverse thinking, which will positively impact students' information processing during reading and encourage them to produce results that align with the topic. In addition, increasing reading volume contributes to the breadth and depth of thinking. Students should consciously select not only longer texts but also ones with a certain level of difficulty and vocabulary. By maintaining an efficient training frequency on this basis, they not only improve their reading ability (reading volume per unit of time) but also gradually move away from antiquated thinking to reach a new level.

### 7.3 Establishment of Cultural Consciousness in Reading

Possessing the corresponding cultural background knowledge aids students in correctly understanding the author's writing intention and the connotation of specific details. The expression of different cultures increases the difficulty of text comprehension. Although candidates can still speculate through key information and the article's context, it can influence the processing and thinking direction of the candidates. Cultural speculative ability is also a deep-rooted thinking ability. Teachers can allow students to understand their cultural connotations through different cultural phenomena during the reading teaching process and analyze the root causes of differences. Students can accumulate cultural information, such as cultural vocabulary, in reading and comprehend the author's intention.

## 8. Conclusion

Whether it is the College Entrance Examination English reading or IELTS reading, the thinking quality of the respondents is crucial. Students aiming for high marks on the IELTS test should discard stereotyped thinking, who should not only master reading skills and find efficient reading strategies, but also be adept at summarizing and reflecting during exercise training. For the root causes of errors, candidates can attempt to think in multiple dimensions against the original materials. Similarly, they need to read more books and seek more challenging and in-depth reading materials to accumulate a richer cultural

knowledge and better understand the text's meaning.

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