



# An Effectiveness Evaluation on Critical Thinking Exercises in Chinese College English Textbooks

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**Abstract:** Cultivating students' critical thinking has long been the consensus reached by the international education circle and a common goal of international higher education reform. However, the training of critical thinking of college students in China started late, and no mature talent training system has been formed in higher education. This study analyzes the effectiveness of textbook exercise design, with a view to contributing to college English textbooks and teaching reform, so as to help Chinese students develop critical thinking. In this study, exercises in *New Horizons College English* were selected for discourse analysis, and the Delphi Panel's Dualistic Model was used as a comparison for internal evaluation. Moreover, taking a Chinese university as an example, questionnaire survey are used to conduct external evaluation of textbook exercise design, found that: (a) Exercises in Chinese college English textbooks correspond to the cognitive skills mentioned in the Dualistic Model, which is helpful to the training of students' critical thinking; (b) There are also some problems, such as the imbalance of skills training and the homogenization of questioning methods; (c) Students of College English generally have a high recognition of the importance of critical thinking and textbook design, but believe that textbook design, course teaching and assessment need to be reformed. The reform of textbook compilation should pay attention to the related problems to improve, and in the concrete teaching practice, the further optimization of teachers' ability, teaching design, assessment and evaluation will effective.

**Keywords:** Chinese College English, Textbook, Critical Thinking, Exercise Design

## Introduction

With the acceleration of the process of global economic integration, the focus of international competition is gradually shifting to talent competition. Innovative spirit and ability is recognized as one of the characteristics of outstanding talents, which requires attention to the cultivation of critical thinking ability<sup>[1]</sup>, while higher education, as an education aimed at cultivating senior professionals, has an unshirkable responsibility on it. The First World Conference on Higher Education issued *Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action* in 1998, which pointed out that: "Institutions of higher education must educate students to become knowledgeable and highly motivated citizens. They are able to critically think and analyze problems." Chinese college English is a compulsory public basic course and core general course for most non-English majors in universities, which plays an irreplaceable role on achieving the organic unity of instrumental and humanistic characteristics.<sup>[2]</sup> Textbook, the teaching material, is the materialization of the teaching concepts, the concrete embodiment of the course teaching objective and the carrier of the teaching content. The compilation and development of Chinese college English textbooks should not only meet the new needs of the current national and social development for talent cultivation, but also be conducive to the realization of the goal of cultivating innovative talents' English application ability in the new era.<sup>[3]</sup> Under the guidance of the new concept, college English teaching and textbook design pay more attention to the cultivation of critical thinking. In teaching practice, however, the course is set around language skills, and the assessment method is mainly various English level tests.<sup>[4]</sup> Chinese college students develop a weak sense of critical thinking ability, which makes it difficult for them to effectively improve their comprehensive application abilities of English.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Literature Review

In the early 20th century, Dewey first put forward the concept of reflective thinking in his book *How We Think*, which is seen as the origin of the concept of critical thinking as a skill. As for the definition of critical thinking, in different historical periods, different experts and scholars have different perspectives. In the early stage of research, its definition mainly includes critical thinking at the level of people's cognition and skills. Glaser<sup>[6]</sup> defined it as an organism of attitude, knowledge and skills. According to Ennis<sup>[7]</sup>, critical thinking is the correct evaluation of ideas. However, these early definitions of critical thinking were too simple and superficial, and lacked a view of its complexity and dynamics. In the 1980s, the connotation of critical thinking has been deeply developed, and scholars have put more emphasis on the process, mode and reflective thinking of critical thinking. Scriven and Paul<sup>[8]</sup> in 1987 stated that critical thinking is the abstraction, use, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information obtained or produced through observation, experimentation, reflection, reasoning, and communication; Lipman<sup>[9]</sup> pointed out it is a way of thinking that follows

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certain rules and guides beliefs and behaviors in a skillful and organized way. In the 1990s, scholars expanded its meaning and emphasized thinking content, meta cognitive ability and thinking tendency. As Facione<sup>[10]</sup> said that, “Critical thinking is a purposeful, self-calibrated judgment. Such judgments may take the form of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and the explanation of the evidence, concept, method, standard, or context on which the judgment rests”. Jones and Ratcliff<sup>[11]</sup> believed that critical thinking is the meta cognitive ability to control thinking; Ruminski and Hanks<sup>[12]</sup> combined critical thinking with practicality of problem solving, and understood it as high-level thinking ability and way of thinking to face problems, find solutions and reason. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the definition of critical thinking tends to be more detailed and academic. Halpern<sup>[13]</sup> defines it as the ability to analyze, integrate, and evaluate information and the tendency to use these abilities. Paul and Elder<sup>[14]</sup> proposed that critical thinking is self-guided, self-restrained, self-supervised and self-corrected thinking that follows strict standards and flexibly applies.

The research on critical thinking in China started at the end of 1980s, which started later than that in foreign countries and mainly relied on the translation of relevant foreign works. In a short period, however, Chinese scholars have conducted research on the importance, necessity, lack of current situation, training mode and other aspects of critical thinking, and made many achievements. Liu<sup>[15]</sup> in 2000 pointed out that it refers to personal judgment on the authenticity, accuracy, nature and value of what has been learned, so as to make reasonable decisions about what to do and what to believe. Zhong<sup>[16]</sup> believed that “critical thinking refers to thinking in which problems are found for certain things, phenomena and assertions and assertions are made according to their own thinking logic” From the review of critical thinking at home and abroad, the study of critical thinking will have different interpretations in different stages of development. Critical thinking is a universal human phenomenon, but there are many unknowns as to how skills and tendencies may be manifested in different places by people of different traditions and cultures.<sup>[17]</sup>

Chinese college English teaching and textbook reform have paid more attention to the cultivation of students’ critical thinking. Taking the college English guidelines in the 1980s as an example, the teaching goal at that time was to “enable students to have the ability to read English books and periodicals related to their major smoothly” so that “they can use English as a tool to obtain the information they need for their major”. It can be seen from that English was only used as a tool to acquire professional knowledge. With the change of times, talent cultivation and the development of China’s research on college foreign language teaching, however, we can see the attention to critical thinking in national policies and teaching guidelines. *The Outline of the National Medium and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* clearly states that “We should put ability first. Focus on improving students’ learning ability, practical ability, innovation ability”. China’s newly revised *College English Teaching Guidelines* in 2020 has added the requirement for critical thinking ability.

Some researchers conducted analysis of research papers on college English textbooks published in major foreign language journals. Huang and Yu<sup>[18]</sup> said there is relatively little research on college English textbooks, but it has increased slightly since 2000, among which there is insufficient research on learning subjects and a lack of empirical research. Yang and Chen<sup>[19]</sup> stated that research direction “focus on compilation, neglect evaluation”, and no theoretical system has been formed. The existing researches on Chinese college English teaching materials mostly focus on language, culture and communication, and few involve the cultivation of critical thinking. While, the research on the combination of textbooks and critical thinking is insufficient.

### **Description of the Study Area:**

Critical thinking: Drawing on an official definition published by the American Philosophical Association (APA) in 1990, this study defines critical thinking as purposeful, self-regulated judgment, including critical thinking skill and critical thinking disposition.<sup>[20]</sup> College English textbooks are important materials to organize courses and implement teaching, as well as the main source and important channel for students’ language input, cultural learning, ability cultivation, world view, outlook on life and value shaping. The exercise design of Chinese college English textbooks on critical thinking directly acts on cultivation, so it is of great significance to evaluate its effectiveness.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

This study is about the design of critical thinking exercises in college English textbooks. The importance of critical thinking puts forward new requirements for the cultivation of talents in universities. It is of great significance to focus on the research from the most common teaching materials that can directly affect students’ ability training. Therefore, this research chose this perspective to make up for the gap in the research field.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Does exercise design of Chinese college English textbooks effectively cultivate students’ critical thinking ability?
2. How do Chinese college students evaluate critical thinking and its exercises in Chinese college English textbooks?
3. What are the insufficiencies in the design of college English textbooks and what can be improved in college English teaching in China?

### **Research Approach:**

#### **Research Materials:**

This study uses *New Horizon College English (Reading and Writing Course 1)* as the research material for internal

evaluation, which is used for textual analysis and quantitative statistics of exercise design. It is chosen as the research material because it has a broad application basis in college English teaching in China<sup>[21]</sup>, and is also suitable for foreign language teaching for Chinese college non-English major students and the research theme of this study. Specifically, in the latest revised version of the third edition this study chosen, a special design section for critical thinking training has been newly introduced to the exercises.

**Participants:**

The study object of external evaluation of teaching materials are Chinese college students. As the students who have experienced college English education, their attitude is an important reference for the reform of teaching and teaching materials. This study selected a “double-first-class”(first-class universities and disciplines of the world) university in Southwest China to issue questionnaires to all non-English major students. After processing the collected data, all together 129 respondents were involved in this study.

**Instruments for the Study:**

The main instruments of this study are text analysis tools and questionnaires constructed from the theoretical model of critical thinking. In this study, Delphi Panel’s Dualistic Model is used to analyze the problem design of critical thinking ability in college English textbooks, and the text analysis of the problem design corresponds to the cognitive skills in the model. The following table is an analysis sample based on the theoretical model and text analysis of one Chinese college English textbook.

Skill	Sub-skill	Chinese college English textbook question
Interpretation	Categorization	How do you <b>define</b> a hero?
	Decoding	What <b>role</b> do you think a university education will play in your life?
	Significance	What do you think it <b>means</b> ?
Analysis	Clarifying Meaning	Some young people refuse to take their parents’ advice. <b>How do you think about it?</b>
	Examining Ideas	In your opinion, <b>why</b> do people tell lies?
	Identifying Arguments	Nowadays, young people are too busy to spend time with their parents. <b>How do you see this phenomenon?</b>
Evaluation	Analyzing Arguments	<b>Some people predict</b> that .... <b>How do you like this idea?</b>
	Assessing Claims	<b>Which three of the following qualities best characterize</b> the spirit of sports?
Inference	Assessing Arguments	Do you agree with ...? <b>Why or why not?</b>
	Querying Evidence	Do you think ...? <b>Why or why not?</b>
	Conjecturing Alternatives	<b>Can</b> the older generation be true friends with the younger generation?
Explanation	Drawing Conclusions	<b>What is</b> an ideal parent-child relationship <b>in your mind?</b>
	Stating Results	Do you think...? Please <b>explain</b> .
	Justifying Procedures	Do you think ...? <b>Give your reasons</b> .
Self-regulation	Presenting Arguments	Do you <b>consider yourself</b> an honest person?
	Self-examination	<b>If you were a parent, would you</b> treat your child(ren) the way your parents treated you?
	Self-correction	

Table 1: An analysis sample of exercises involved in each cognitive skill

Moreover, this study used a self-designed questionnaire (Cronbach  $\alpha \approx 0.96$ ), which has been tested for reliability, to investigate the effectiveness of Chinese college English teaching materials and teaching in cultivating students' critical thinking. The questionnaire consists of 18 items, each of which uses a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1(“I completely disagree”) to 5(“I completely agree”), and mainly investigates from the following three dimensions, namely: (a) Chinese college students' understanding of critical thinking (3 items), (b) Chinese college students' external evaluation of the cultivation of critical thinking ability in college English textbook exercises (10 items, which are designed according to the skills and emotional tendencies mentioned in Wen's hierarchical model<sup>[22]</sup>), (c) Chinese college students' views on the cultivation of critical thinking ability in college English teaching (5 items). In the data analysis of the scale, the values of each item will be accumulated and averaged, and the resulting mean will be classified into different levels.

**Procedures:**

In general, systematic evaluation of English textbook includes internal evaluation and external evaluation, so this study evaluates the selected exercises from this two dimensions. Based on the analytical framework constructed by the Delphi

Panel’s Dualistic Model, this study selects exercises in *New Horizon College English* for text analysis as the source of internal assessment. This study use the Questionnaire Online App, the respondents were given the questionnaire through giving the link. The external evaluation of Chinese college English mainly depends on the analysis results of the self-designed questionnaire, which is sent to the respondents through an online App with its link.

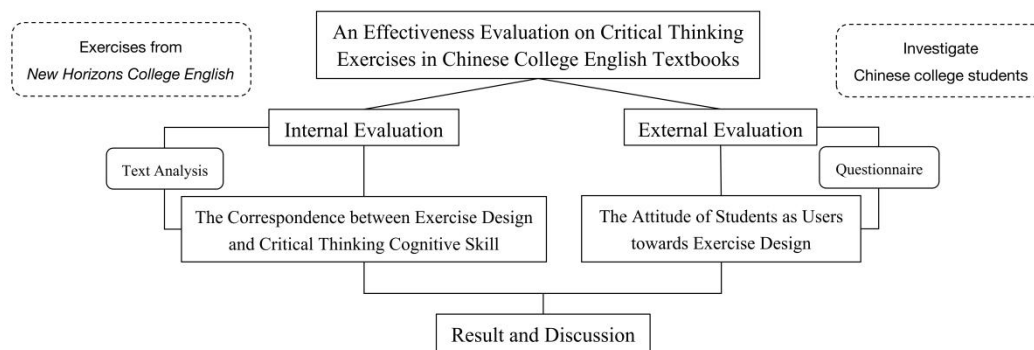


Figure 1 Research framework

### Internal Evaluation Result

Internal evaluation is to test the degree of fit between exercise design and the theoretical model of critical thinking cognitive skills through text analysis, so as to assess the extent to which exercise design can meet the objectives of critical thinking ability training, and find existing problems and improvement directions. According to the above steps, this study analyzes 76 questions in “Critical Thinking” part of *New Horizon College English (Reading and Writing Course 1)* and the statistical results are as follows. It should be noted that each problem in the textbook exercises corresponds to at least one cognitive skill training, that is, it may not only correspond to one. So the frequency of skill correspondence is calculated in the analysis, the sum of the frequency of each skill exceeds the total number of exercises, and the frequency of a single skill does not exceed the total number.

Skill	Frequency	Proportion
Interpretation	14	18.42%
Analysis	38	50%
Evaluation	38	50%
Inference	38	50%
Explanation	68	89.47%
Self-regulation	8	10.53%

Table 2: The frequency and proportion of exercises involved in each cognitive skill

### Existing Problems in Textbook Exercises Involving Critical Thinking Cognitive Skills:

From the data statistics and comparison, it can be concluded that there is a big difference and a large gap in the frequency of exercises involved in different cognitive skills. The number of exercises related to “self-regulation” was the least, with only 8, accounting for 10.53%. There are also fewer exercises related to “interpretation”, with 14, accounting for 18.42%. The frequency of exercises related to other skills is higher, accounting for a considerable proportion basically more than half. Based on the above findings, this study makes an in-depth analysis of the relatively small number of “interpretation” skill and “self-regulation” skill, summarizes the characteristics of several skills that account for a large proportion, and discusses the problems in exercise design.

Further text analysis and data statistics are carried out for exercises involving self-regulation skill and interpretation skill. There are a total of 8 exercises related to “self-regulation” and 14 exercises related to “interpretation”. Self-regulation skills have two sub-skills, including “self-examination” and “self-correction”. In the textual analysis, keywords “If you were...”, “Have you ever...”, “Do you have...”, “consider yourself” are used as skills training markers. While interpretation skill have three sub-skills, including “categorization”, “decoding significance” and “clarifying meaning”. In the textual analysis, the following keywords “define”, “characterized”, “regard as”, “be considered” are used as indicators of categorization skills. “Role”, “benefit”, “better”, “important” are seen as symbols of decoding significance skills. Key words to clarify meaning skills include “understand” and “mean”.

Unit	“Self-regulation” skill		“Interpretation” skill	
	Example	Frequenc	Example	Frequenc

	y	y
1	0	How do you <b>understand the statement</b> "..."? 3
2	4	<b>If you were</b> the daughter, what response would you have when you read the article? <b>Did</b> the two stories in this unit help you understand your parents' love <b>better</b> ? 1
3	1	<b>If you</b> have friends who have Internet addiction disorder, how would you help them? 0
4	0	How do you <b>define</b> a hero? 4
5	2	<b>Have you ever</b> played in any competitive team sports? <b>How did you</b> handle the pressure? A former coach of Huston Rockets once said, "..." <b>What do you think it means?</b> 3
6	0	0
7	1	Why is it <b>important</b> for us to be polite and kind to others? 2
8	0	What <b>qualities</b> are your friends <b>supposed to</b> have? 1
<b>Sum</b>	8	14
<b>Proportion</b>	10.53%	18.42%

Table 3: Exercises involving "self-regulation" skill and "interpretation" skill

Summarizing the above findings, we can find out a key common problem: the total number of exercises in self-regulation and interpreting skills training is small and the distribution of each unit is uneven. Through the statistics of the self-regulation skill involved in each unit, we can see that half of the units did not involve the training of this skill and half of the questions focus on one unit. According to the statistics of interpretation skill involved in each unit, we learned that two units (unit3&unit6) do not deal with this skills, and three units (unit1&unit4&unit5) cover more than 70% of the total number of "interpretation" skill exercises.

#### Existing Problems in Textbook Exercises Involving the Way of Asking Question:

In the process of text analysis, this study found that there are many frequently repeated words in the exercise design of college English textbooks, which indicates another existing problem: the type of questioning is relatively simple and the skills training are not targeted strongly. For example, exercises repeatedly use "Do you think...?", "Do you agree...?", "How do you like...?", "How do you think about...?" to ask students what they think of a certain thing or phenomenon or an existing idea, which is to asking for the personal opinion or attitude. And "Why or why not?", "Why...?", "explain", "reason" are used to let students explain reasons. So, this study summarize the questions that contain these sentence patterns as questions of "view" and "reason". The following table shows the data statistics of related problems in 8 units in the selected textbook. We can see about 40% of the exercises asked students' "view" and "reason". Among them, such questions as "Do you think...?" occurred 15 times, accounting for 19.74%. and such questions as "Why or why not?" occurred 18 times, accounting for 23.68%. These above examples further confirm the simple repetition and weak pertinence of the way of questioning in the exercise design of Chinese college English textbooks.

Unit	"View" exercises	"Reason" exercises	V&R exercises
1	2	1	1
2	3	3	1
3	5	4	4
4	5	5	5
5	2	3	1
6	6	5	5
7	3	6	3

	8	4	5	3
<b>Sum</b>		30	32	23
<b>Proportion</b>		39.47%	42.1%	30.26%

Table 4: Exercises related to “view” and “reason”

### External Evaluation Result

The external evaluation is to check whether the college English teaching materials can really meet the needs of students and teachers. This part is conducted in the form of a questionnaire survey, in which 18 questions investigate students' understanding and attitude from three dimensions, including the investigation of students' understanding and awareness of critical thinking, and their views on the cultivation of critical thinking ability in college English textbooks exercises and teaching practice. The collected data were entered and analyzed by using SPSS 25. Descriptive statistics on the data are utilized to answer the above research questions of this study through relevant mean analysis.

#### Students' Understanding and Awareness of Critical Thinking:

Core Index	Mean	Level
concepts and characteristics	3.49	SWH
significance	3.71	H
promotion ways	3.16	SWH
<b>Composite Mean</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>SWH</b>

“Legend: 4.51 – 5 = Very High (VH); 3.51 – 4.5 = High (H); 2.51 – 3.5 = Somewhat High (SWH); 1.51 – 2.5 = Slightly High (SLH); 1 – 1.5 = Not at all High (NH) ”

Table 5: Levels of Non-english majors' understanding and awareness of critical thinking

The composite mean of students' understanding of critical thinking is 3.45, which is in the SWH level. Specifically, the mean of “significance” is 3.71, which is in the H level. The mean of “concepts and characteristics” is slightly lower, at 3.49. In particular, the mean of the item “promotion ways” is the lowest among all 18 items, with 3.16. This shows that most students have a certain understanding of critical thinking and hold a positive attitude, but there are still great deficiencies in critical thinking and its cultivation. The actual situation is far from satisfying the requirements of training objectives and teaching guidelines.

#### Students' Attitude to the Cultivation of Critical Thinking in College English Textbook Exercises:

Core Index	Mean	Level
focus on critical thinking cognitive skills	3.64	H
helpful to analytical ability	3.54	H
helpful to inferential ability	3.50	SWH
helpful to evaluation ability	3.61	H
focus on critical thinking affective disposition	3.60	H
helpful to curiosity	3.45	SWH
helpful to self-confidence	3.71	H
helpful to open-mindedness	3.56	H
helpful to integrity	3.59	H
helpful to persistence	3.50	SWH
<b>Composite Mean</b>	<b>3.57</b>	<b>H</b>

“Legend: 4.51 – 5 = Very High (VH); 3.51 – 4.5 = High (H); 2.51 – 3.5 = Somewhat High (SWH); 1.51 – 2.5 = Slightly High (SLH); 1 – 1.5 = Not at all High (NH) ”

Table 6: Non-english majors' attitude to college English textbook “critical thinking” exercises

The composite mean of students' attitude to the cultivation of critical thinking in college English textbook exercises is 3.57, which is in the H level. Overall, except for items of “inferential ability”, “curiosity” and “persistence”, the remaining items remained at the H level, with the highest mean being 3.71 and the lowest 3.54. To sum up, it can be seen from the data that students' external evaluation of the effectiveness of textbook exercise design is generally positive. While there are some students still express that the college English textbooks exercise design fails to cultivate critical thinking cognitive ability and emotional tendency, in particular, the cultivation effectiveness of “inferential ability”, “curiosity” and “persistence” are not marked. It may be due to the neglect of relevant items in the textbook design, but it may also be because these abilities and affective disposition are difficult to train or belong to a more abstract level, which is relatively difficult for students to intuitively perceive.

#### Students' Attitude to the Cultivation of Critical Thinking in College English Teaching:

Core Index	Mean	Level
necessity and importance	4.29	H

effectiveness of accomplishing teaching objectives	3.33	SWH
teaching methods are helpful	3.71	H
assignments are challenging and helpful	3.60	H
assessment system is helpful	3.47	SWH
<b>Composite Mean</b>	<b>3.68</b>	<b>H</b>

“Legend: 4.51 – 5 = Very High (VH); 3.51 – 4.5 = High (H); 2.51 – 3.5 = Somewhat High (SWH); 1.51 – 2.5 = Slightly High (SLH); 1 – 1.5 = Not at all High (NH)”

Table 7: Non-english majors’ attitude to critical thinking cultivation in college English teaching

The composite mean of students’ attitude to the cultivation of critical thinking in college English teaching is 3.68, which is in the H level. The mean of “necessity and importance” is 4.29, which is the highest in the whole items, while the mean of “effectiveness of accomplishing teaching objectives” is 3.33. It indicates that integrating critical thinking into college English teaching is an ideal expectation, which is far from the reality realized in the actual teaching process. Based on this, It is imperative to reform the cultivation of critical thinking in college English teaching. The mean of the remaining three items were 3.71, 3.60 and 3.47 respectively from the three aspects of “teaching methods”, “assignments” and “assessment system”. It implies that students' dissatisfaction with college English teaching also guides the direction of college English teaching reform, and the assessment system, as a “baton”, should be innovated in form and content.

## Discussion

Exercises are the direct materials for students to acquire knowledge, train ability and cultivate temperament. In the compilation and design of college English textbooks, it is of great significance to integrate appropriate critical thinking ability into them. Meanwhile, in the whole process of college English teaching, it is vital to strengthen the supporting system. Through the internal and the external evaluation, we can see exercises in mainstream Chinese college English textbooks correspond to the cognitive skills, which is helpful to the ability training and of students' cultivating. But there are also some problems, such as the imbalance of skills training and the homogenization of questioning methods, which not only needs to overcome these rigid shortcomings in the subsequent textbook compilation reform, but also needs teachers to play an important role as the main organizer of teaching to mediate.

In the specific teaching practice can be improved from the following aspects. First, teachers should improve their problem awareness and critical thinking ability. Universities and other institutions of higher education should attach great importance to the professional development of teachers, increase the opportunities for teacher training, build platforms for teaching experiences exchange, purchase necessary facilities and learning materials, and serve to improve the professional level of teachers from multiple angles. At the same time, the teaching design should pay more attention to the problem and situation. Only when teachers are good at asking questions, can they fully stimulate students' thinking and improve their critical awareness and abilities.<sup>[23]</sup> Finally, attention should be paid to the use of assessment. Traditional teaching model emphasizes summative evaluation and neglect formative evaluation. So it is necessary to flexibly adopt teacher evaluation, peer evaluation and self-evaluation in every link of teaching, and adopt multi-level and multi-subject teaching evaluation activities.<sup>[24]</sup>

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