

The Practice of Implementing the Activity-based Approach to English Learning in Senior High English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: *The activity-based approach to English learning emphasizes exploring thematic meaning and carrying out integrated, relevant, and practical learning activities. Improving the application efficiency of the activity-based approach is the key to the implementation of English subject core competencies. This paper aims to explore how to apply the activity-based approach in senior high English reading teaching. Based on the reading teaching example of Unit 4 Natural Disasters: Reading and Thinking: The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep, some suggestions are put forward: focus on the hierarchy of activities and point to English subject core competencies; activate students' real reading experience and point to thematic meaning.*

Keywords: *Senior High School English, Reading Teaching, The Activity-based Approach to English Learning*

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards advocates that activities, as the basic form of English learning, enable students to learn and use language to understand and express meaning, cultivate cultural awareness, develop multiple thinking capacity, and develop learning ability. The activity-based approach provides a powerful platform for integrating curriculum content, carrying out in-depth teaching, and fulfilling the overall goal of the curriculum. It also provides a feasible way to change students' learning styles and improve the effectiveness of English teaching and learning^[1]. As the main way of language input in senior high English teaching, reading teaching plays an important role in practicing the activity-based approach and improving students' core competencies. However, according to the current situation of senior high English teaching, reading teaching is characterized by fragmentation and test-orientation. As a result, the implementation of the activity-based approach in normal reading teaching still faces many obstacles due to the lack of effective ways and strategies^[2]. How to deeply understand the concepts of the activity-based approach and how to implement it in senior high English reading teaching is still worth thinking about for every English teacher. Intending to explore the practical application of the activity-based approach in English teaching, this paper takes the activity-based approach in English teaching as the theoretical framework and provides a senior high English reading lesson as an instructional case.

2. The Activity-based Approach to English Learning and English Reading Teaching

It is proposed by the activity-based approach to English learning that students learn English through a series of integrated, relevant, and practical theme-based activities, where they undergo learning processes such as perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating. When going through these activities, students can use their existing knowledge, explore the meaning of different types of texts, and analyze and solve problems. Thus the students make progress in learning language knowledge, developing language skills, deepening their cultural understanding, developing multiple thinking skills, forming positive values, and utilizing learning strategies^[1].

The features of the activity-based approach to English learning are as follows. Firstly, activity is the basic form of English learning. Students' learning is regarded as the core of English learning activities. In that case, students participate in a series of activities under the guidance of teachers, such as language practice, reflection and exploration, evaluation and innovation around the course content, which makes

it much more possible to develop students' English subject core competencies. Secondly, the course content is holistic. English curriculum content is composed of six elements: thematic contexts, text types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. The six elements which are integrated closely, exist as a whole of all English learning activities, containing learning content, research object, and cognitive object^[3]. Thirdly, learning activities are designed with increasing difficulty and depth. Learning activities are divided into three levels: perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating. These three levels of activities range from text-based information input, to initial output deep into the text, and finally to high-level output beyond the text^[4].

The English reading teaching based on the activity-based approach could follow three steps. First, conduct an in-depth interpretation of the discourse. Then, formulate reasonable objectives and integrate learning content based on text interpretation and the activity-based approach. Last, design and implement teaching activities, guiding students to learn language knowledge and strategies, perceive cultural quality, and develop thinking quality through the activities of exploring the thematic meaning and text content^[5]. The English reading teaching based on the activity-based approach has great significance in guiding teachers to examine their teaching, adjust their teaching behavior, and also to improve the quality of reading teaching by designing effective and comprehensive activities.

3. The English Reading Instructional Design Based on the Activity-based Approach

Understanding the connotation of the activity-based approach in English teaching is an important part of grasping the spirit of the new curriculum standard, and how to practice the activity-based approach in teaching practice is the key to achieving the curriculum goal of the core competencies^[6]. This paper mainly discusses how to carry out senior high English reading teaching based on the activity-based approach, taking the instructional design of the reading material *The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep* from NSEFC, Book1, Unit 4 Natural Disasters as an example. As the first lesson of this module, this case includes four parts: the interpretation of the text, the analysis of the learners, the setting of teaching objectives, and the design of learning activities.

3.1. Analysis of the Teaching Material

The theme context belongs to man and nature, and the theme of the activity is "Describe a natural disaster". Students are required to read the texts to learn more about Tangshan earthquake that happened in the 1970s, explore the language features of literary journalism, and finally complete the task of describing natural disasters in their own words.

From the perspective of the writing style, the text is literary journalism. Literary journalism is an edge style between a news report and literary work, which describes real historical events and real characters. The most significant feature that makes literary journalism different from ordinary news reports is that it has a vivid description of the environment and the characters involved, and uses a variety of rhetorical devices to organize language, which is useful to stimulate readers' emotions. The text describes the disaster of the Tangshan earthquake as a whole, following the order before the earthquake, while the earthquake, and after the earthquake.

According to the text content, some abnormal phenomena that occurred before the earthquake was described in the beginning paragraph. The language is so vivid that creates a tense atmosphere before important events for readers. Starting from the second paragraph, the text focuses on the astonishing scenes when the big earthquake happened and the images of devastation and despair of the city after the disaster. The last two paragraphs naturally transition to the description of people's strong will to survive and their determination to rebuild their homes. With the support of the government and the army, people in Tangshan rebuilt their homes upon the ruins. Fortunately, the city was reborn because of people's love and unity.

3.2. Analysis of the Learners

The teaching objects are students of senior one, and most of them are interested in learning English and they have the ability to cooperate with others to finish a task. Senior one students have certain reading skills to catch both the main idea and details in a reading material, which is helpful to finish the reading activities. Since the event described in the text is what students are quite familiar with, they can say some basic information about the big earthquake before reading the text, such as time, place, and damages.

However, there are still some problems because of their limited learning experiences. Firstly, most of the students have never read literary journalism before, so it is difficult for them to explore the language features and key points of such kind of writing style. Secondly, students will meet some new words, which will make it difficult to catch the information about the damages in the earthquake. Thirdly, students tend to put their focus on catching the detailed information in the text, but their ability to integrate the information and think beyond the text is limited.

3.3. Teaching Objectives

The teaching objectives of each unit should aim to develop the English subject core competencies. The teaching objectives should be achievable, feasible, and testable. Teachers should integrate the six components of the course content with different focuses in actual teaching^[1]. Based on the analysis of the teaching material and the learners, the teaching objectives are determined as follows. By the end of the class, students will be able to catch the detailed information about Tangshan earthquake by using some reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, and they will be able to understand how the text is organized. And they will be able to learn the author's writing purpose, which is to convey "Disasters have no mercy, but we humans do". In addition, students will be able to discover the language features of literary journalism, and finally, they will describe natural disasters in their own words.

3.4. Teaching Procedures

The activity-based approach to English learning emphasizes the guidance of the thematic meaning and the integrated learning of the curriculum content, reflecting the cognitive level of learning and the essential characteristics of activities. The implementation path is from perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing to transferring and creating^[3]. The design of this teaching case is based on the concept of English subject core competencies, and mainly includes the following three stages of activities, which are designed from the shallower to the deeper.

3.4.1. Perceiving and Understanding Activities

Specifically, activities of learning and understanding mainly include text-based activities such as perceiving and noticing, retrieving and summarizing, and generalizing and synthesizing^[1].

Period 1: Perceiving and noticing

At the beginning of the class, the teacher plays a video from the film *San Andreas*, which presents some extremely striking scenes about the damages to a city caused by a big earthquake. Before playing the video, the teacher asks students to think about what will happen to a city in a big earthquake and then try to find the answers in the video. After watching the video, students are asked to share their feelings. Then, the teacher guides students to say what will happen to a city in a big earthquake with the help of pictures. Concretely, students describe the pictures of what will happen to buildings, people, railway tracks, and city in a big earthquake. The four relevant sentences are provided for them at the same time, so students just need to complete the sentences with proper phrases: Thousands of buildings will fall down; many people will be dead or badly injured; the railway tracks will be useless pieces of metal; the city will be in ruins. Since students have learned relevant words before, they are able to say the proper phrases quickly according to the video and pictures.

The justification of the design: According to the English Curriculum Standards, texts used in language teaching usually have multi-modal forms, which include spoken and written texts, as well as audios and videos^[1]. The video used at the beginning of this class, which is closely related to the reading material, is helpful to draw students' attention and make them focus on the topic "earthquake". Besides, this activity encourages students to think about what they have known about earthquakes and use their background knowledge to describe the situation in a big earthquake, as well as make preparations for reading the passage.

Period 2: Retrieving and summarizing

Activity 1: Read for main ideas

Predicting is a useful reading skill for students to perceive the main idea. Therefore, the teacher presents the title of the passage *The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep* and a picture in which people are rescuing together in ruins after an earthquake in the textbook, and students are asked to predict the main idea according to the title and the picture. When students finish their predictions, they are required to scan the text to check whether their predictions are right or not. At the same time, three dimensions are

provided for them to focus on: What happened; When did it happen; Where did it happen; What did it result in. After that, the teacher guides students to say the answers together and invites one student to try to form the main idea into a sentence. Having grasped the clear main idea of the text, students are supposed to skim the text and match the main ideas with each paragraph. During that, the teacher asks students to think about how to get the main idea of paragraphs and guides them to review the reading strategy: fetch the key information through keywords, the first sentence, and the last sentence of the paragraph. Based on the overall understanding of the discourse content, students are asked to find out the structure of the passage. After that, students are able to figure out that the text is organized in time order.

The justification of the design: The English Curriculum Standards suggests that teachers should present the basic discourse knowledge consciously so as to help students develop discourse awareness, grasp the structural features of discourse, and thus improve the ability to understand the meaning of discourse ^[1]. These activities are designed to help students gain an understanding of the discourse from an overall perspective. In addition, students should choose and use different reading skills in the process of finishing these tasks, so their awareness and skills of reading strategies can be improved greatly.

Activity 2: Read for details

Taking the structure of the reading material into consideration, the teacher guides students to do careful reading part by part, in an order before the earthquake, during the earthquake, and after the earthquake. When students read part 1, they are supposed to underline the answers to the question: What were the strange things? (Reference answers: In the village well, the water rose and fell, smelly gas came out of the well, and deep cracks appear in the well walls; In the farmyard, chickens and pigs were too nervous to eat, and dogs refused to go inside, and mice ran out to look for places to hide, and fish jumped out of the water; In the sky, there were bright lights and loud noises). Referring to part 2, students should find the damages the earthquake caused with some hints of keywords. (Reference answers: The city lay in ruins; The ground was covered with bricks; Hard hills of rock became rivers of dirt; Bridges fell down; The railway tracks became useless pieces of metal. Many animals were dead; Some people were injured and some were killed.) As for part 3, the teacher raises 2 questions: Who came to the rescue; What efforts did they make? (Reference answers: Soldiers dug out those who were trapped and buried the dead; Doctors and nurses provided medical care for people; Workers built shelters for survivors whose homes had been destroyed)

The justification of the design: The English Curriculum Standards put forward that students should develop the ability to extract the main information and opinions from the text, grasp the ins and outs of the main events, and grasp the key concepts and key details in the text ^[1]. The purpose of these activities based on the reading material is to help students catch the important details about the Tangshan earthquake. As a result, students' ability to extract and organize key information from texts can be improved.

3.4.2. Applying and Practicing Activities

The activities of applying and practicing mainly include in-depth text learning activities such as describing and interpreting, analyzing and judging, and internalizing and utilizing ^[1].

Period 1: Analyzing and judging

After the reading activities, the teacher guides students to consider what helped the revival of Tangshan city from 3 dimensions: government, the city's people, and the country's people. And students are supposed to discuss it with their partners. The supposed answers are as follows: the strong support from the government; the tireless efforts and strong will of the city's people; love and unity of the country's people. After that, the teacher asks students what implications we can learn from the passage and presents several pieces of the proverb about the thematic meaning: Unity is strength; More hands produce a stronger flame. Then, Students are supposed to read the text again and discuss the following questions with their partners: What were some of the strange things happening before the earthquake? Do you think they are warning signs? Why or why not; What does the writer mean by "slowly, the city began to breathe again"; What kind of help do you think people who have suffered an earthquake need?

The justification of the design: The English Curriculum Standards put forward that students should develop the ability to understand the explicit or implicit logical relationship in the text and understand the content of the text critically ^[1]. The activities in this period are designed to help students achieve a deep understanding of the themes, develop their ability in critical thinking, and encourage students to explore the essence behind the phenomenon of things.

3.4.3. Transferring and Creating Activities

The activities of transferring and creating mainly include reasoning and arguing, criticizing and evaluating, imaging and creating, and other learning activities that go beyond the text ^[1].

Period 1: Reasoning and arguing

In this period, the teacher guides students to discover the language features by the following chain of questions:

Q1: Many sentences in the text give us a picture of the terrible earthquake in Tangshan. Which sentences impressed you most? Why?

Q2: Numbers are widely used in the text. Why does the author mention so many numbers?

Q3: In Paragraph 1, many verbs or verbal phrases, such as rose, fell, coming out of, and ran out of are used. Why does the author use them here?

Q4: Now how do you understand the title? Do you think the title is a good one? If not, can you give another title to the text?

The justification of the design: According to the English Curriculum Standards, Being exposed to and learning different types of texts, familiarizing with the common text forms in life, and mastering the specific structure, stylistic features, and expressions of different texts not only help students deepen their understanding of the meaning of the text, but also help them use different types of texts for effective expression and communication ^[1]. The chain of questions enables students to analyze and grasp the language features of literary journalism, which is both literary and documentary.

Period 2: Imaging and creating

The teacher creates the situation: if you were a journalist, what would you talk about with survivors of Tangshan earthquake? Students will work in pairs and try to finish role play. One in the pair is supposed to be a journalist while the other one is supposed to be a survivor. And they are required to make a conversation. After students finish their interview, the teacher invites several pairs of them to present their conversation in the class. And other students should listen carefully and try to evaluate the pair's work.

The justification of the design: It was pointed out in the English Curriculum Standards that in new contexts, by using new knowledge and autonomous, cooperative, and inquiry-based learning methods, students try to comprehensively use language skills, conduct multiple thinking, creatively solve problems in unfamiliar situations, rationally express opinions, emotions, and attitudes ^[1]. The role-play requires students to summarize the content of this lesson and make clear the theme of the text. In this way, students can communicate based on what they have learned from the reading material and develop their critical thinking ability.

4. Teaching Implications

4.1. Focus on the Hierarchy of Activities and Point to English Subject Core Competencies

The three levels of activities in the activity-based approach develop from lower to higher levels, pointing to different learning goals. Text-based learning activities refer to the acquisition and understanding of information based on the text itself. In-depth text learning activities are considered to be the exploration of the connotation and thematic meaning of the discourse on the basis of learning and understanding, the internalization and application of knowledge. Learning activities that go beyond the text refer to the transfer and application of language, which points to the development of students' higher-order thinking. It is the important transformation from language ability into core competencies. However, activities at higher levels are ignored by teachers. When designing learning activities, teachers need to balance these three types of activities and focus on the objectives of the activities. And teachers should keep this question in mind: Does this learning activity point to the goals of English subject core competencies? Only with clear sense of purpose could English subject core competencies be truly realized.

4.2. Activate Students' Real Reading Experience and Point to Thematic Meaning

The design of teaching activities should be based on activating students' real reading experiences and

leading them to actively explore thematic meaning. Activities are supposed to promote students' participation in understanding, analyzing, and applying textual information. In activities designing, teachers should offer students opportunities to read independently as much as possible. As the most important task of students' language learning, the exploration of thematic meaning is closely related to the level of students' discourse comprehension, the level of thinking development, and the effectiveness of language learning. Therefore, teachers should create conditions and allow students to explore thematic meaning step by step, instead of presenting to them directly. Through active learning and exploring, students can gradually develop their learning ability and thinking quality.

5. Conclusion

The reading teaching design from the perspective of the activity-based approach places English teaching in larger themes, and carries out integrated, relevant, and practical learning activities, so that students can participate in a variety of comprehensive learning tasks such as perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating. The activity-based approach has important significance for English teaching and brings a lot of changes to teaching. Firstly, students truly become the subject of English learning in the classroom, who actively explore thematic meaning through autonomous learning, cooperative learning, and inquiry-based learning. Secondly, integrated learning is improved from purely language learning, in which students could achieve the overall acquisition and transformation of language and cultural knowledge through summarizing, refining, comparing, and evaluating. The implementation of the activity-based approach is an important way to promote the development of students' language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability. Therefore, teachers should update their teaching concepts and actively carry out teaching practice following the activity-based approach, so as to improve students' English subject core competencies.

Acknowledgements

This work is financially supported by the 2019 Degree and Postgraduate Education Teaching Reform Project in Jiangxi Province (JXYJG-2019-173), authors are thankful for the support.

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