

A Review of Research on English Reading Teaching from the Perspective of Activity-based Teaching Method

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[**Abstract**] This study reviews research on activity-based teaching method in English reading teaching both domestically and internationally. The findings indicate that activity-based teaching method not only helps students better understand classroom material, enhances classroom efficiency, and improves their English learning and application skills in reading, but also fosters the integration of language knowledge and skills. Additionally, it strengthens cultural awareness, optimizes critical thinking, and promotes independent learning, thereby facilitating the effective development of core competencies. Furthermore, English reading teaching that employs activity-based teaching method is beneficial for analyzing and designing teaching activities, enabling students to acquire, interpret, and evaluate the meaning of texts, express their own opinions and intentions, and cultivate diverse and critical thinking skills, ultimately enhancing their core literacy.

[**Key words**] activity-based teaching method; English reading teaching; English learning; application skills; core literacy

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1 Introduction

English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) introduces a new approach to learning English: the activity-based teaching method. This method can also be applied to English reading teaching in junior high schools, providing a valuable reference for junior high school English educators. Additionally, the new curriculum standards present a framework for core literacy. This framework comprises four essential components of English subject literacy: language proficiency, cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, and learning strategies. Furthermore, the curriculum structure, content, academic achievement standards, and performance levels in specific areas have been revised in accordance with the core literacy framework for English subjects.

English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) advocates for a theme-oriented and activity-based teaching approach aimed at enhancing students' language proficiency, cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, and overall learning abilities. In a theme-oriented English classroom, negotiation and exploration of meaning are the primary tasks. Consequently, instructional objectives are integrated to facilitate the exploration of meaning within the context of specific topics. Teaching activities are no longer solely focused on a text, passage, new vocabulary, or specific grammatical structures. Instead, language learning transcends the mere acquisition of vocabulary or grammatical forms; it emphasizes a deeper understanding of the themes presented through the selected texts.

Teachers should provide students with opportunities to learn and utilize the language to gather information, develop new knowledge structures related to the topic while acquiring the language, internalize these structures and

the language through various situational activities, and engage in critical and creative thinking about the knowledge they have learned. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to apply this knowledge in new contexts to solve unfamiliar problems. Activity-based teaching method incorporates activities that foster understanding, application, and critical and creative thinking, thereby assisting students in building character and equipping them with the essential competencies required in the future world.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research on activity-based teaching method and English reading teaching within the academic community, leading to a more refined theoretical framework. This paper conducts an action research on the implementation of activity-based teaching method in junior high school English reading teaching, moving away from outdated teaching concepts and offering practical insights for the diverse development of English reading teaching.

2 The theoretical significance of activity-based teaching method

This paper primarily discusses the significance of the activity-based teaching method in English reading teaching for junior high school students from two perspectives: theory and practice.

Bright (1970) asserted that language learning is impossible without reading. Similarly, Strang (1978) suggested that reading is essential for language acquisition. Teaching reading in English significantly enhances students' language abilities and is a crucial method for developing core English literacy. However, numerous challenges and issues persist in the effort to improve students' English reading skills.

From the perspective of individual students, a lack of vocabulary and reading skills can easily foster a fear of reading, leading to a loss of confidence in English literacy. From teachers' perspective, although the English education environment is evolving rapidly, the teaching responsibilities remain burdensome. Educators must effectively impart knowledge and skills to students within a limited timeframe. Furthermore, some teachers lack a deep understanding of new teaching concepts and continue to rely on traditional reading instruction methods, neglecting the comprehensive development of students' core competencies.

Reading is an essential method for individuals to acquire knowledge. In language learning, reading serves as the foundation for all other skills, and strong reading abilities facilitate the mastery of the target language. Currently, the significance of English reading is increasingly evident, prompting researchers in the field of education to actively integrate various theories and strategies into reading instruction. Their goal is to thoroughly investigate the effectiveness of these approaches in practice.

This study focuses on English reading teaching in junior high schools, aiming to investigate whether the implementation of the activity-based teaching method can effectively enhance students' English reading performance. The goal is to provide new insights for the innovation of English reading teaching models. In terms of theoretical research, since the activity-based approach was introduced in 2018, there have been limited studies on its application in instructional design. The activity-based teaching method is a novel concept proposed by Chinese education experts, and there is a scarcity of relevant research in China, let alone internationally. Consequently, there is a lack of exploration regarding the practical implications of English language learning activities.

As a learning tool for language learners, reading plays an irreplaceable role in the learning process. Therefore, the study of reading theory is an indispensable guide for language teaching and other related subjects. Since the research on reading theory in China started late and the speed is relatively slow, although the development has made some remarkable achievements, there is still a certain gap compared with the similar research abroad. Therefore, the activity method of English learning still faces obstacles in the practice of reading teaching and lacks effective methods and strategies.

3 The practical significance of activity-based teaching method

The word "activity" is derived from the Latin word "act", the primary meaning of which is "to do", i. e. "to be". Thus, the word "activity" refers to practice and action. The word "activity" is widely used and has different

meanings in different regions. In education, Rousseau argued for “valuing the activity of the child”, while Dewey associated “activity” more with philosophy and psychology.

Hammer (1983) argued that activity describes what happens in the classroom. Importantly, he is not talking about the learning of the language program, but what the students do. Wilson (1986) is more concerned with appropriate patterns of behavior that students master with the help of teachers. Nunan (1989) argued that learners should engage in classroom activities and interact with new knowledge in the target language. In addition, students should focus on meaning rather than form.

According to Brown (1991), classroom activities are tasks based on the understanding and are the generation and interaction of the target language. It is also one of the forms of language learning. Listening and speaking are activities. Competitions and games are also activities. Scholars and experts continue to deepen and enrich the connotation of “activity” in the process of research.

Li (1979) pointed out that former Soviet psychologists Leonidev, GariPelin and Tarekina put forward the activity theory of learning, pointing out that students are the core of learning activities, and their unique personalities will be displayed in the process of participation, which needs to go through a certain stage before achieving the goal.

Therefore, teachers should try their best to avoid aimless teaching, carefully select and use efficient and controllable teaching strategies, respect students’ learning characteristics, and guide students to master knowledge and skills step by step, so as to improve the effectiveness of teaching. In 1978, Vygotsky’s proposal formally established the academic status of activity theory. He believed that subject, object, tool, rule, community and division of labor are the basic elements of a complete activity system.

Based on the activity theory, Yang (2005) conducted an in-depth exploration, systematized the concept of instructional design based on learning activities, and wrote the book *Instructional Design Theory with Learning Activities as the Core*, which provides valuable guidance and reference frame for the activity design in instructional design. Lu (2012), on the other hand, re-examined the design of curriculum learning activities from the perspective of activity theory. He emphasized that the field of education should face up to the problems existing in the current learning activities, such as the absence of the subjectivity of activities, the uniformity of activity media (tools) and the closed process of activities.

The introduction of activity theory and learning activity theory adds a new dimension and practical application to the concept of “activity” in the field of education. In spite of this, there are still some deficiencies in the design of learning activities in English teaching practice. In the specific teaching of English reading, English reading learning activities are required to be diversified, relevant and logical. As a result, some domestic experts and scholars put forward the guiding concept of “activity-based method” to guide English teaching.

4 Relevant domestic and international studies based on activity-based teaching method

In 2018, several Chinese scholars began to pay initial attention to the active method. Subsequently, it has gradually been sought after by researchers in the field of teaching.

We used the keyword “active method” to search documents in CNKI, and obtained 515 documents, including 31 master’s and doctoral theses, as of October 31, 2024. Then, we searched for “active method and reading instruction” and found 279 articles, including 14 master’s and doctoral theses.

The application of active method in English reading teaching has become a research hotspot since 2013, and is still the focus of research today. Through the analysis of the collected data, it can be found that the previous research mainly involves what is the active method, why the active method is needed and how to implement the active method effectively.

4.1 Relevant overseas research

The “activity-based approach” is first mentioned in the 2017 Edition of the *English Curriculum Standards for*

Secondary Schools (Revised in 2020). Although there is no research on the concept abroad , research on activity-based learning can be traced back to the “learning by doing” theory proposed by John Deavey in the 20th century , based on a critique of traditional schooling. He believed that learning by doing is also through activity and experience , and that education is the development of life and experience. Activities combine what students learn in school with real life.

With the development of educational research , Carino (1988) argued that activities are the core unit that integrates curriculum standards and classroom instruction. In second language acquisition , activity – centered teaching and learning can facilitate the communication among students. Brown (2001) argued that the design of reading teaching activities should be based on learning objectives because all activities are designed to achieve learning objectives. Victoria (2018) argued that activities have become analytical tools in recent years , reflecting the importance of conducting investigations into teaching and learning.

In recent years , more and more western countries and some developed Asian countries have conducted research on foreign language activity curriculum. For example , in the study of foreign language curriculum , the United States emphasizes the principal position of students. In the practice of using foreign languages , students can design and implement various activities independently with the help of online learning resources , so as to deeply learn foreign language courses and actively participate in practice. In the UK , it is recommended that the standards and content of foreign language activity courses should be based on political , moral , social and humanistic perspectives.

The education approach proposed by the Australian Centre for Curriculum Design in 1988 emphasizes the use of linguistic forms in activity teaching. Since the introduction of the Integrated Learning Time curriculum in 1998 , Japan has actively integrated its views and methods with the English curriculum. In 1991 , Singapore implemented an integrated approach , which is also activity-centered.

4.2 Relevant domestic research

Qian (1981) summarized foreign research into two ways of thinking : one is reading as the core of teaching , the other is reading as an auxiliary means , and elaborated on the nature of reading teaching , and the selection and arrangement of reading materials. Li (1993) discussed the teaching practice of reading for English majors in the context of three decades of international reading theory. Yao (2003) compared Chinese reading with foreign language reading research and collated the four stages of English reading research since the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

Zeng (1992) proposed that the discussion of reading in China can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. Ancient sages such as Confucius , Mencius and Xunzi all discussed the act of reading , including “the essence , process , principle and method of reading , as well as the main content , object and ontology of reading” , which not only opens a precedent for the study of reading in ancient China , but also lays a solid foundation for its subsequent development.

From the pre-Qin period to the Ming and Qing dynasties , there was a lot of discussion about reading , but most of which is scattered in other literatures , and academic papers and articles that specifically and systematically expound the reading theory are particularly scarce. By the end of the 1980s , Zeng and other scholars discovered this problem and made continuous efforts to establish the study of reading as an independent discipline , and clearly put forward the name of “reading science” .

In order to solve the main problems in English reading teaching , Wang (2005) pointed out that due to the influence of examination education and traditional reading teaching mode , there are still some problems , such as obsolete reading materials , single form , insufficient use of students ’ non – verbal intelligence , and ineffective development of reading methods and skills.

Zhang (2009) discussed how to help students deeply understand reading materials from the perspective of

context analysis, and suggested that in English reading teaching, students should pay attention to developing comprehensive reading skills and strategies, and improve the design of reading activities.

Wang (2015) emphasized the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered, from fragmented learning to integrated, contextualized and structured learning, and from subject knowledge orientation to subject education orientation. In order to enhance their comprehensive learning ability, students need to construct a new cognitive framework, establish correct cultural values, and strive to achieve balanced and coordinated development in language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. It can be seen that if teachers want to practice the active method, they should focus on improving students' learning ability. The practice of active method needs the cooperation and continuous improvement of all departments.

Ji et al. (2018) proposed that school leaders should give teachers a certain amount of time to slowly change their teaching concepts and help them form an awareness of active methods.

English teachers should design comprehensive activities that integrate the six major components of thematic context, communication mode, language element, cultural accomplishment, language skill and learning strategy. Education and training departments should conduct workshop training based on an active approach. Education research departments should organize university experts and teaching and research personnel to engage in teaching and provide professional guidance on active method for English teachers. The education evaluation department should explore the evaluation reform based on active method.

According to Zhang (2019), the comprehensiveness of activity is reflected through the integration of six elements of the curriculum content: the comprehensiveness of language skill improvement and the comprehensiveness of the development of subject core literacy; the relevance of the activity is reflected in the unity of the theme background, the close connection with students' actual life and the internal logical relationship between the learning activities; as for the practicability of activities, it is not only reflected in the main role of students participating in learning activities, but also in the applicability and transferability of activity tasks.

The active method inspires us that the goal of English classroom teaching should be to cultivate students' cultural literacy, the teaching method should be active, and the teaching activity should be contextualized.

Ge et al. (2020) believed that the "comprehensive and focused" practice principle advocated by "a comprehensive perspective on English reading teaching" can be a way to implement the active method. When designing English reading activities, the starting point and end point should be the exploration of the meaning of the theme, and the following principles should be followed: (a) promoting thinking training with main line questions; (b) focusing on the selection of text content; (c) entering into meaning inquiry through high-level questions.

The activity-based approach is the main channel to achieve the core competence of English curriculum. It provides the guiding principle for teachers to design teaching activities, systematically and comprehensively combines six elements including theme background, literature type and language knowledge, and realizes the core competitiveness of English curriculum through activity learning.

By reading and reviewing the different views of famous experts at home and abroad on this issue, we can realize the importance of teaching activities. It enables students to better understand and construct information and connect classroom learning with real life.

5 Changes in English reading teaching in China in the last decade

With the development of globalization, the status of English has become more prominent, and more and more domestic scholars have begun to study the reading teaching.

Zhang (2014) put forward the concept of graphic interactive visualization based on graph theory, and concluded that this model can effectively enhance teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction, thereby improving students' thinking ability and optimizing the effectiveness of English reading teaching.

Yan (2018) analyzed the current situation of English reading teaching, revealing that students are in a passive

position in the teaching process, and their emotional development and thinking ability cultivation are insufficient. To this end, he proposed the introduction of scaffolding reading teaching mode in English classrooms, and expounded its application value from three dimensions. At the same time, he tried to use the “five-step” strategy, and combined specific cases to show how to apply this theory in English reading teaching.

Wu et al. (2019) proposed a strategy for English reading teaching based on the CAPS model, emphasizing that teachers should design key problems in learning tasks for students according to the content of reading materials, construct problem-solving scaffolds, and integrate problem-solving strategies, with the aim of stimulating students' active learning and improving their reading skills.

With the deepening of the new curriculum reform in recent years, a new focus has emerged in the field of English reading teaching and research, that is, more and more researchers have begun to integrate the cultivation of core literacy into reading teaching.

Wang (2017) integrated the concept of core literacy with English reading teaching, emphasizing that teachers should set teaching goals and plan teaching activities around the development of students' core literacy, and put forward suggestions for the improvement of English reading ability, emphasizing that while improving reading skills, we should also pay attention to the cultivation of literacy.

Rao (2018) advocated that English reading teaching should adhere to the student-centered principle, rely on reading texts, and devote to cultivating students' core literacy. He emphasized that English reading teaching activities should be flexible and creative.

Wang (2019) advocated that teachers should continue to learn and think deeply, and explore teaching methods that meet the needs of cultivating core literacy, with the aim of improving the effectiveness of classroom teaching and ensuring the full implementation of core literacy. He elaborated on the characteristics of English reading teaching under the framework of core literacy, and put forward targeted improvement strategies based on this, in order to optimize the effect of English reading teaching.

To sum up, foreign research in the field of English reading teaching started relatively early, and the theoretical research results are fruitful, while the relevant research in China started slightly later. But based on foreign research, the content of relevant research in China has also kept up with the times and fits the current educational and economic contexts.

6 Conclusion

Through a review of relevant research on activity-based teaching method in English reading teaching both in China and at abroad, we find that this approach can significantly enhance students' understanding of classroom material, improve overall classroom efficiency, and bolster their English learning and application skills from the perspective of practice. Additionally, it promotes the comprehensive development of language knowledge and skills, fosters cultural awareness, enhances critical thinking abilities, and improves learning capacity, ultimately facilitating the effective development of core competencies.

In addition, activity-based English reading teaching facilitates the analysis and design of teaching activities, allowing students to acquire, analyze, and evaluate the nuances of discourse. This approach encourages them to articulate their personal opinions and intentions, fosters diverse and critical thinking skills, and ultimately enhances the efficiency of English learning. We hope that this study will serve as a valuable reference for English reading teaching in junior high schools.

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