

The Application of Dewey's "Education as Life" in Senior High School English Reading Teaching

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Abstract

Under the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition, 2020 Revised), educators are required to select reading materials that encompass a diverse array of authentic texts. John Dewey's concept of "Education as Life" advocates that education should be closely connected with life. Nevertheless, at this juncture, some senior high school English reading classrooms still lack authenticity and remain detached from students' lived experiences. This paper begins by elucidating the content of Dewey's concept of "Education as Life." It then assesses the feasibility of integrating this concept with senior high school English reading teaching. Finally, it takes the reading text *The Freshman Challenge* from Unit 1 of the 2019 New Edition Senior High School English Textbook (Compulsory Book 1) published by People's Education Press (PEP), as the case to elaborate the specific strategies of Dewey's "Education as Life" in senior high school English reading teaching. The application of Dewey's concept of "Education as Life" in senior high school English reading teaching can facilitate students' comprehensive integration of language learning and real-life experiences, while also enhancing their practical utilization of language and ability to adapt to society.

Keywords

Dewey; Education as Life; Senior High School English; Reading Teaching

Introduction

The famous American educator John Dewey, based on a profound analysis and criticism of the serious disconnection between traditional education and social reality and children's real lives, put forward a series of educational theories with far-reaching influence and practical value based on the philosophy of pragmatism and functionalist psychology. These theories have played a significant role in reforming the old education system and building a new education model in the United States. Among them, the concept of "Education as Life" profoundly reflects his unique insight and precise grasp of the inseparable connection between education and life. At present, as senior high school English education is deeply influenced by the examination system, some teachers, to pursue the effectiveness of teaching, tend

to adopt the traditional way of lecturing and indoctrination to improve students' test-taking skills, especially in the language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing. This teaching method often ignores students' real-life needs, fails to effectively promote the application of what they have learned in real-life contexts, and fails to pay sufficient attention to students' prior knowledge and learning experiences. Against this background, the concept of "Education as Life" provides new perspectives and methods for solving the problem of the disconnection between English teaching and students' real lives.

1. The Relevant Content of Dewey's "Education as Life"

1.1 The Historical Context

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States was in the midst of a critical phase of transition in industrial development. Industrialization during this period rapidly accumulated abundant material capital, but at the same time triggered a series of social, cultural, and educational challenges. The level of cultural development failed to keep pace with economic development, and the contradiction between the two became more and more pronounced. At that time, the American education system still followed the old framework of the British and French colonial periods, and the school system and teaching methods were stereotypical and rigid, which were not only out of touch with the reality of the society and lacked authenticity but also failed to fully take into account the actual needs of children's physical and mental development. At the same time, various social problems emerged one after another, and the call for educational reforms from all fields of society became increasingly loud. It is in this complex and urgent background of the times that Dewey, based on the theory of pragmatism, creatively put forward the concept of "Education as Life" and made a comprehensive and in-depth elaboration on education, school and the content of teaching materials, obtaining the wide recognition and positive response of the society, reflecting its far-reaching contemporary value and practical significance.

1.2 The Core View of Dewey's "Education as Life"

1.2.1 The Integration of School Education with Social Life

Dewey was deeply aware of the inextricable relationship between education and social life, and he advocated that education is deeply rooted in social life and must be closely integrated with it. In his influential article, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey specifically discussed the theme of "Education is a necessity of life", and made a detailed explanation and analysis of the connection between the two. At the same time, he made a profound criticism of traditional education, pointing out that traditional education is disconnected from social life, and considered that this mode of education, which is detached from social life, fails to enable students to apply the knowledge they have learned to the practice of life. In *Democracy and Education*, he pointed out that "the purpose of schooling is to ensure that education is continued by organizing the forces that ensure growth, so that

people will be happy to learn from life itself, and will be happy to make the conditions of life into a realm in which one learns in the process of living, which is the best product of schooling.” The link between education and life can encourage children to effectively apply the knowledge and skills they learn in school to practical situations, to solve concrete problems in real life and to put what they have learned into practice. For this reason, Dewey put forward the concept of “Education as Life”, and on this basis deepened the concept of “School as Society”, emphasizing the inextricable and close connection between the formal education system and daily life in society.

1.2.2 The Focus on the Growth of Children’s Individual Experiences in Life

Dewey defined “life” as encompassing children’s every life, advocating that schools should provide authentic, interactive life contexts mirroring those experienced by children through family interactions, community engagements, and physical activities. He believed that all true education emerges from individual experience and develops as that experience grows. His “experiential curriculum paradigm” emphasized that “the true center of the interconnectedness of school subjects is not science, not literature, not history, not geography, but the social activities of the children themselves.” At the same time, Dewey regarded “life” and “experience” as the same level of concepts and believed that both terms “life” and “experience” covered the whole range of individual and collective experiences. He pointed out that experience encompasses not only what people do and what happens to them, but also emotions and attitudes such as pursuit, love, faith, patience, and how people act, react, feel and think. In short, experience encompasses all the activities and feelings that people have in the course of their lives. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the expansion, accumulation and deepening of children’s individual experiences, and gradually develop children’s existing experiences into a richer, more diversified and structured form, gradually approaching the form of the teaching materials encountered by adults.

2. The Feasibility of Combining Dewey’s “Education as Life” with Senior High School English Reading Teaching

The purpose of this section is to illustrate the feasibility of applying Dewey’s concept of “Education as Life” to senior high school English reading teaching in the contemporary context, which includes two parts, namely, the significant improvement of teaching technical conditions and the compilation of English teaching materials close to life.

2.1 The Significant Improvement in Technical Conditions for Teaching

With the rapid development of information technology, advanced educational methods and tools are also increasingly widely used in English teaching, which to a certain extent improves teaching efficiency, and students can obtain more diversified and more authentic learning resources. First of all, with the continuous progress of multimedia technology, the teaching mode can be changed from a single, boring and lack of vitality to an interactive form that integrates visual and auditory senses. Secondly, the application of infor-

mation technology makes teaching resources more multimodal, beyond the previous time and space limitations, so that the language information is closer to real life, more intuitive vivid, and easy to understand. At the same time, the application of information technology makes the teaching environment more lifelike, information technology combines the teaching language with images, video, sound and text so that students can understand, learn and use the language in real-life contexts. Therefore, the significant improvement of teaching technology provides technical support and guarantees for senior high school English teaching, which not only strengthens the close connection between school education and students' real life but also creates favorable conditions for the more effective integration of Dewey's "Education as Life" into the senior high school English reading classroom.

2.2 The Close Alignment of English Textbook Compilation with Real Life

At present, the teaching contents, selection and organization of language materials in English textbooks are closer to students' lives. The textbooks are designed to develop students' listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing skills through rich language activities and tasks. For example, each unit provides listening materials, speaking activities, reading materials and writing tasks which are very close to daily life. This development of comprehensive language skills helps students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in real life. The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition, 2020 Revised) divides thematic contexts into three categories: human and self, human and nature, and human and society. Table 1 presents a thematic analysis of reading passages in the 2019 New Edition Senior High School English Textbook (Compulsory Book 1) published by People's Education Press (PEP). The results demonstrate comprehensive coverage of thematic contexts across all units. Notably, the thematic clusters of Life & Learning, Nature & Ecology, and Physical Education exhibit strong alignment with students' daily experiences, enhancing the relevance of learning content to their lived realities. This creates a possibility for the application of Dewey's "Education as Life" in teaching.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Readings by Unit in the 2019 PEP Senior High English (Compulsory Book 1)

Unit	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5
Titles of Reading Passages	The Freshman Challenge	Travel Peru	Living Legends	The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep	The Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present
Thematic Context	Human & Self	Human & Nature	Human & Society	Human & Nature	Human & Society
Thematic Cluster	Life & Learning	Nature & Ecology	Literature, Arts & Sports	Disaster Prevention	History, Society & Culture

3. The Specific Strategies for the Application of Dewey's "Education as Life" in Senior High School English Reading Teaching

This chapter employs the reading text *The Freshman Challenge* from Unit 1 of the 2019 New Edition Senior High School English Textbook (Compulsory Book 1) published by People's Education Press (PEP) as a case study to demonstrate specific strategies for implementing Dewey's "Education as Life" in senior high school English reading teaching.

3.1 Course Objectives to Reflect Students' Life Needs

Teaching objectives are the core and guide of teaching design, and clear teaching objectives can prompt teachers to accurately grasp the purpose and requirements of the curriculum, and then reasonably plan the teaching content and adopt appropriate teaching strategies and teaching methods, making the teaching work more targeted. The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition, 2020 Revised) emphasizes the activity-based English learning, which advocates the integration of language, culture and thinking into practical activities led by thematic meanings, and encourages students to communicate and express themselves effectively in English in real-life situations, thus promoting the in-depth integration of language learning and real-life practice. Therefore, teachers should closely correlate the teaching objectives with the actual needs of students, so that students can apply their language knowledge in real-life scenarios, and urge them to continuously improve their English literacy and ability to cope with life in practice.

Using the reading text *The Freshman Challenge* from Unit 1 of the 2019 New Edition Senior High School English Textbook (Compulsory Book 1) published by People's Education Press (PEP) as a case study, this text describes, from a first-person perspective, the many challenges that Adam, an American student, faces as he enters high school. This text is close to the real life that first-year high school students are facing, and it can resonate with students. The teaching objectives can be described in three aspects. Firstly, students can acquire English expressions related to teenagers' lives, such as freshman, challenge, responsibility, and so on, and use these expressions to communicate and exchange ideas in their lives. Secondly, students can analyze the main ideas of each part to determine the structure of the text, find out Adam's character traits and learn his good qualities. Thirdly, students will be inspired to compare and analyze the similarities and differences between high school life in China and abroad, as well as to help them deal with the challenge of "how to adapt to high school life quickly".

3.2 Course Content to Incorporate Students' Life Experiences

The content of the course should be incorporated into students' life experiences, which requires that teachers create life situations and supplement life-oriented teaching resources. English teachers in senior high school should carefully select teaching resources that are closely related to students' daily lives, including students' family life, campus life, community life, and attention to and participation in social life. Therefore, when arranging the course content, teachers need to take into account its acceptability and students'

life experiences and habits of mind and select appropriate teaching materials. Specifically, teachers should make effective use of the resources of students' campus life to build up teaching situations that are close to their lives, to make the teaching activities more vivid and real, and to stimulate students' interest and participation in learning. For example, when learning The Freshman Challenge, teachers can ask students to talk about their feelings about entering high school and the problems or challenges they encountered, and then let students think about how to overcome these problems through group cooperation. Teachers can incorporate students' daily life topics and problems they are interested in into English teaching, which is easier to attract students' attention and assist them in transferring what they have learned to real life.

3.3 Course Implementation to Connect with Students' Real Life

Dewey was deeply aware of the close connection between education and social life, and he believed that society survives in communication, that social life and communication are essentially the same thing, and that all communication has educational value. [i]And he criticized the previous phenomenon that traditional education was out of touch with social life. Therefore, teachers should be closely connected with students' lives in the process of English teaching in the four aspects of pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading and evaluation.

In the pre-reading stage, the teacher should create a real-life situation to stimulate students' interest in inquiry. To fit the theme of this unit, the teacher informs the students that our school magazine is going to publish a column called "The Freshman Challenge", and then asks the students, "How is your high school life? Have you encountered any problems or challenges?" The teacher guides the students to work in small groups to discuss the above questions and then introduces the topic of the day.

During the while-reading stage, teachers can use question chains to prompt students to explore the reading material in depth. Teachers ask a series of questions, "What challenges has Adam encountered or is encountering? How does Adam feel? What is Adam's response? What kind of person do you think Adam is?" Due to the differences in life experience and knowledge reserves among students and their understanding of things or problems, they perceive things in different ways and thus get different experiences. Therefore, teachers should create a relaxed and free teaching atmosphere, guide students to explore, listen carefully to students' speeches, and respect students' unique experiences and feelings.

At the post-reading stage, teachers should design transferable and innovative tasks to address students' real-life problems. Teachers guide students to think about the three questions they asked when reading the text, "What challenges have I encountered or am I encountering? How do I feel about it? What is my response?" Next, teachers can guide students to think about the question, "How can I adapt to high school life as soon as possible?" Finally, the teacher assigns a practical after-class assignment, asking students to write an article about The Freshman Challenge and submit it to the column of the school magazine.

When assessing, teachers need to diversify the subjects and methods of assessment. In addition to the teacher, the subject of evaluation should also include students' self-assessment and peer assessment. Self-assessment enables students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses more clearly and helps them to reflect on themselves. Peer assessment can show a more comprehensive picture of the performance of the evaluated and avoid the one-sidedness of a single perspective. Evaluation should not be limited to paper and pencil tests, but teachers should also pay attention to the daily performance of students and use information such as portfolio, which can provide teachers with more reference value of assessment information for teaching.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper analyzes the background and core viewpoints of Dewey's concept of "Education as Life", which makes us realize that education should not be detached from students' real life, and we should select teaching resources close to students' real life in the classroom, and pay attention to improving students' ability to apply what they have learned to solve real problems in their life. At present, the teaching technology conditions have improved significantly, and the English teaching materials are written close to the students' real life, which provides favorable conditions for Dewey's concept to be applied in the senior high school English reading classroom. At the same time, English teachers in the classroom should make the course objectives reflect the students' life needs, the course content into the students' life experience, and the implementation of the course in contact with the students' life, which can not only better stimulate students' learning interest, but also help to cultivate students' practical application ability. Therefore, the application of Dewey's concept of "Education as Life" in senior high school English reading teaching can not only make the reading materials more life-oriented and practical but also contribute to the cultivation of students' competence in problem-solving.

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