International Journal of Educational Development
ISSN Print: 3104-4263
ISSN Online: 3104-4271
CD ISSN: 3104-428X
https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9083

Current Situation and Optimization Strategies of Lead-in in Junior High School English Reading Classes: A Case Study of Grade One in Caotang Middle School

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How to cite this paper: Luo, X. (2026). Current situation and optimization strategies of lead-in in junior high school English reading classes: A case study of Grade One in Caotang Middle School. International Journal of Educational Development, 3(3), 71–79. ISSN Print: 3104-4263, ISSN Online: 3104-4271.
https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9083
Published: 2026-06-29

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Abstract

Lead-in serves as the core initial link in English reading teaching, and plays a critical role in focusing students' classroom attention, connecting prior and new knowledge, and stimulating learning motivation. To explore the application status and existing problems of lead-in in English reading classes for first-year junior high school students, this study takes 4 English teachers and 124 students from Grade One of Caotang Middle School as research subjects, and conducts an empirical investigation through classroom observation and questionnaire survey. The results show that the commonly used lead-in methods in current teaching are dialog lead-in (38.5%), review lead-in (23.1%), video lead-in (20.5%) and game lead-in (10.2%). However, widespread problems exist, including unreasonable duration control, monotonous method types, insufficient topic relevance, and low attention to students' needs. Only about 20% of students believe that lead-in can continuously enliven the classroom and stimulate learning interest. Based on cognitive development theory and advance organizer theory, this study puts forward optimization strategies from four dimensions: duration management, interest stimulation, topic anchoring, and student-centeredness, so as to provide practical reference for the design of lead-in in junior high school English reading classes.

Keywords

Lead-in; Junior High School English; Reading Teaching; Current Situation Investigation

1. Introduction

English reading teaching is a core component of the junior high school English curriculum, undertaking the important function of cultivating students' language competence, thinking quality and cultural awareness. As the first step of reading teaching, classroom lead-in acts as a bridge connecting students' pre-class state and

classroom learning, and its quality directly affects the teaching efficiency and student participation of the whole class. For first-year junior high school students who have just completed the transition from primary school, scientific lead-in design can effectively lower the threshold of reading learning, help students quickly enter the learning state, and establish internal connections between old and new knowledge.

Domestic and foreign academic circles have carried out long-term research on classroom lead-in. Foreign research started early. Turney (1975) systematically summarized four major functions of lead-in in Sydney Micro Skills: attracting attention, stimulating learning motivation, clarifying teaching objectives, and building connections between old and new knowledge, which laid the theoretical framework for lead-in research. Enkhsaruul (2009) further proposed that high-quality lead-in should have three characteristics: interestingness, relevance and meaningfulness, and knowledge connection and thinking expansion can be realized through activities, games and other forms. In domestic research, scholars have carried out rich discussions on the design principles and method types of lead-in: Wang (2016) put forward that classroom lead-in should meet three requirements of atmosphere construction, student demand and problem creation; Hao (2008) summarized various lead-in methods such as free dialog, group discussion, multimedia and cultural background, providing reference for frontline teaching.

Overall, existing studies mostly focus on theoretical summary and principle interpretation of lead-in methods, and most empirical studies take senior high school students as subjects. Special investigations on lead-in in reading classes for Grade One, a critical transition period from primary to junior high school, are relatively insufficient, and the practical problems and optimization paths of frontline teaching still lack empirical support. On this basis, this study takes Grade One of Caotang Middle School as a case, systematically sorts out the current application status and core problems of lead-in in English reading classes through classroom observation and student questionnaires, and proposes targeted optimization strategies combined with relevant teaching theories, so as to provide practical basis for improving the quality of junior high school English reading teaching.

2. Theoretical Basis of Classroom Lead-in

2.1. Cognitive Development Theory

Piaget's cognitive development theory holds that individual cognition completes meaning construction in the process of interaction with the environment, and its core mechanism includes four links: schema, assimilation, accommodation and equilibrium. Among them, schema refers to the existing cognitive structure of individuals; assimilation is the process of integrating new stimuli into the existing schema; accommodation is the process of adjusting the original schema to adapt to

new information. The two together promote the development of cognitive level to a higher stage (Guo, 2007).

The essence of classroom lead-in is that teachers introduce new knowledge based on students' existing knowledge schema, helping students complete the connection between old and new knowledge through assimilation and accommodation, and reduce the cognitive difficulty of new knowledge learning. First-year junior high school students are in the transition stage from concrete operational stage to formal operational stage, and their cognitive development has obvious stage characteristics. When designing lead-in, teachers must fit students' cognitive development level and select appropriate lead-in materials and activity forms, so as to effectively activate students' existing schema and realize natural cognitive advancement.

2.2. Advance Organizer Theory

Ausubel proposed the advance organizer theory in the 1960s, whose core viewpoint is that the premise of meaningful learning is the substantial connection between new knowledge and learners' existing cognitive structure. An advance organizer is a kind of guiding material introduced to learners before the presentation of formal teaching content. It is more abstract, general and inclusive than new knowledge, and can provide cognitive scaffolding for subsequent learning, helping learners build connections between old and new knowledge (Ausubel, 1968).

Advance organizers can be presented in various forms such as pictures, texts and videos, which have strong adaptability to reading teaching. Reading itself is a complex cognitive process involving multiple links such as attention, memory, decoding and meaning construction. The guiding materials in the lead-in link are essentially a kind of advance organizer. Teachers design lead-in content that fits the theme and has appropriate difficulty before reading, which can help students activate background knowledge in advance, reduce the difficulty of text comprehension, and improve the efficiency and depth of reading learning.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Subjects

This study selects Grade One of Caotang Middle School as the research field, and the research objects include two groups: teachers and students. For teachers, 4 first-year junior high school English teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience are selected as classroom observation objects. For students, 124 students in this grade are selected as questionnaire survey objects, covering classes of different levels to ensure the representativeness of the sample.

3.2. Research Methods

3.2.1. Classroom Observation Method

Non-participatory in-class observation was adopted to record 39 English reading

classes of the 4 teachers throughout the process. The observation dimensions include three core aspects: type of lead-in method, duration of lead-in, and students' classroom response, so as to systematically sort out the real application form of lead-in links in frontline teaching.

3.2.2. Questionnaire Survey Method

On the basis of referring to existing mature research tools, the Student Questionnaire on Lead-in in Junior High School English Classes is compiled combined with the cognitive characteristics of first-year junior high school students. The questionnaire includes two dimensions: perception of lead-in function and demand for lead-in design, with a total of 17 items. It has been reviewed by 2 experts in middle school English teaching, and its content validity meets the research requirements. A total of 124 questionnaires were distributed to first-year junior high school students, and 124 valid questionnaires were recovered, with an effective recovery rate of 100%.

3.3. Data Processing

Descriptive statistics are carried out on the data such as frequency and duration of lead-in methods obtained from classroom observation. Percentage statistics are used for quantitative analysis of questionnaire data to present the lead-in effect and demand matching from the perspective of students.

4. Research Results and Analysis

4.1. Teacher's Perspective: Current Usage of Lead-in Methods

Through the observation and statistics of 39 reading classes, the current lead-in methods in English reading classes for Grade One of Caotang Middle School cover various types such as dialog, review, video and game. The frequency distribution of core methods is as follows:

Lead-in Method	Dialog Lead-in	Review Lead-in	Video Lead-in	Game Lead-in	Other Methods
Proportion	38.5%	23.1%	20.5%	10.2%	7.7%

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Lead-in Methods in Junior High School English Reading Classes

It can be seen from the data that the current lead-in methods present the characteristic of "traditional methods as the mainstay, audio-visual methods as the supplement":Dialog lead-in accounts for the highest proportion, reaching 38.5%. This method mainly takes the form of teachers' questions and students' answers or student-student discussions, carrying out basic communication around the text theme, and helping students initially access the core vocabulary and sentence patterns of the lesson. For example, when explaining the text on the theme of travel

modes, teachers start the class with daily Q&A such as "How do you get to school?". This method conforms to students' cognitive development law, is easy to operate and control the classroom rhythm, so it becomes the most commonly used lead-in method for teachers.

Review lead-in ranks second, accounting for 23.1%. Teachers introduce new knowledge by reviewing old knowledge related to the theme of the lesson, and help students realize knowledge transfer based on the logic and relevance of English knowledge. For example, in the teaching of the animal theme unit, teachers first guide students to review known animal vocabulary and sentences expressing preferences, and then naturally transition to the new lesson content. In essence, it completes the assimilation of new knowledge by activating the existing schema.

Video lead-in accounts for 20.5%. Teachers use multimedia equipment to play video clips related to the text theme, and quickly attract students' attention in an intuitive and vivid form. For example, in the theme teaching of "Birthday Food Around the World", teachers introduce the topic through animation clips, which is a concrete application of advance organizers and can effectively reduce the strangeness of new knowledge.

Game lead-in accounts for the lowest proportion, only 10.2%. Teachers mostly adopt simple game forms such as word guessing and sentence pattern rush answer, aiming to relieve students' learning pressure and create a relaxed classroom atmosphere. On the whole, the application frequency of innovative and interactive lead-in methods is low, and teachers' lead-in design tends to be conservative.

4.2. Student's Perspective: Perceived Effect and Demand of Lead-in

4.2.1. Perception of the actual effect of lead-in function

The questionnaire investigates students' perception of lead-in effect from two core dimensions: "enlivening classroom atmosphere" and "stimulating learning interest". The results are as follows:

Table 2. Students' Perception of Classroom Lead-in Functions

Effect Dimension	Yes	Sometimes Yes	No	Don't Know
Enliven classroom atmosphere	20	35	61	8
Stimulate learning interest	18	37	62	7

The data shows that the proportion of students choosing "sometimes yes" is the highest, while the proportion of students choosing "no" is close to half, and only about 20% of students clearly recognize the effect of lead-in. This indicates that the actual effect of current classroom lead-in is not stable. In most cases, it fails to give full play to the functions of enlivening the atmosphere and stimulating interest.

Some lead-in even fails to achieve the expected effect, but may distract students' attention due to problems such as formalization and irrelevance, and have a negative impact on subsequent learning.

4.2.2. Demand matching of lead-in design

The questionnaire further investigates students' demand for lead-in design and their actual perception. The results show that 81.4% of students believe it is necessary for teachers to understand students' needs when designing lead-in links, reflecting students' high expectation for personalized lead-in design that fits themselves. However, only about 25% of students feel that teachers have considered their needs when designing lead-in, and more than half of students believe that teachers do not design lead-in activities combined with students' needs. This result reflects that the current lead-in design still has an obvious "teacher-centered" tendency: teachers mostly choose lead-in methods from the perspective of teaching convenience and operational difficulty, and pay insufficient attention to students' interest points, cognitive basis and life experience, resulting in the disconnection between lead-in and students' needs, and it is difficult to fully mobilize students' participation enthusiasm.

5. Optimization Strategies for Lead-in in Junior High School English Reading Classes

Combined with the core problems found in this survey, based on cognitive development theory and advance organizer theory, this study puts forward optimization strategies for lead-in in junior high school English reading classes from the following four dimensions.

5.1. Precise Duration Control: Balancing Efficiency and Effect

Unreasonable lead-in duration is a prominent problem in current teaching. Too short lead-in cannot activate students' cognitive schema, while too long lead-in will occupy the time for text reading and practice. According to the attention characteristics of first-year junior high school students, the lead-in duration of reading classes should be controlled at 3-5 minutes, and the maximum should not exceed 6 minutes.

Teachers need to establish the design principle of "conciseness and efficiency": for video lead-in, core clips should be edited in advance and controlled at 2-3 minutes to avoid playing long clips completely; for dialog and discussion lead-in, core questions should be designed in advance to avoid topic divergence and deviation from the theme; for review lead-in, the old knowledge most closely related to new knowledge should be accurately anchored, and meaningless comprehensive review should be avoided. The lead-in link should complete the classroom state switching and theme introduction with the least words and the shortest time, and reserve

sufficient time for subsequent in-depth reading.

5.2. Diversified Methods: Targetedly Stimulating Learning Interest

Aiming at the problems of single lead-in method and insufficient student interest, teachers need to break the fixed mode of "dialog + review", and flexibly select lead-in methods according to text types and themes to realize "one strategy for one lesson".

Specifically, for texts with cultural themes, background knowledge lead-in can be adopted to supplement relevant cultural common sense and expand students' cultural vision; for narrative texts, suspense lead-in can be adopted to arouse students' curiosity through question setting; for themes close to students' lives, situational lead-in can be adopted to design activities combined with real scenes such as campus and family. At the same time, combined with the age characteristics of first-year junior high school students, highly interactive lead-in forms such as picture guessing, short sentence solitaire and situational performance can be appropriately added to reduce the boredom of reading learning. It should be noted that method innovation cannot be separated from teaching objectives, and meaningless activities for the sake of fun should be avoided.

5.3 Strengthened Topic Relevance: Anchoring Core Teaching Objectives

This survey finds that some lead-in activities have the problem of topic deviation. Teachers design content irrelevant to the text theme to enliven the atmosphere, resulting in the disconnection between lead-in and subsequent reading, and cannot play the role of knowledge connection. In this regard, the design principle of "goal orientation" should be established, and all lead-in activities must be closely linked to the core theme and teaching objectives of the text.

When designing lead-in, teachers should first clarify the core topic, language knowledge points and ability objectives of the lesson, and then reversely deduce the content and form of lead-in, so as to ensure that the lead-in content is the foreshadowing and extension of the text theme. At the end of the lead-in link, it is necessary to naturally transition to the reading task through summary questions, clearly inform students of the learning direction of the lesson, and establish an explicit connection between lead-in and text reading, so that lead-in can truly become a cognitive scaffold for new knowledge learning rather than an independent classroom link.

5.4. Student-Centered Design: Catering to Cognitive Development Needs

The foothold of lead-in design is students' learning and development. Teachers need

to change the design idea of "determining learning by teaching" and take students' needs and cognitive characteristics as the core basis for lead-in design.

On the one hand, lead-in materials should be close to students' life experience and interest points, and select content familiar to students such as campus topics, peer stories and popular positive IP, so as to reduce cognitive distance and activate students' existing life schema. On the other hand, differentiated design should be carried out according to class style: for active classes, discussion and competition lead-in can be more adopted to cultivate students' expression and thinking ability; for introverted classes, audio-visual and picture lead-in can be more adopted to gradually guide students to participate. The difficulty of lead-in should follow the principle of "zone of proximal development", slightly higher than students' current language level, so as to avoid being too simple to mobilize enthusiasm, and also avoid being too difficult to hit learning confidence.

6. Conclusion

Through classroom observation and questionnaire survey, this study systematically sorts out the application status of lead-in in English reading classes for Grade One of Caotang Middle School. The study finds that the current commonly used lead-in methods in class are mainly traditional forms such as dialog lead-in and review lead-in, while innovative methods such as video and games are less applied. The lead-in link generally has problems such as unscientific duration control, unstable effect, insufficient topic relevance and low attention to students' needs, which fails to give full play to its due teaching value. In view of the above problems, teachers can optimize lead-in design from four dimensions: duration management, method innovation, topic anchoring and student-centeredness, so as to improve the effectiveness of lead-in in reading classes.

This study still has certain limitations: the research sample only selects Grade One of a single school, with limited sample range, and the universality of the conclusion needs further verification; the research cycle is short, and no teaching intervention experiment has been carried out to verify the actual effect of the strategies. Future research can expand the sample range to cover junior high schools in different regions and levels, and carry out longitudinal teaching intervention research to verify the teaching effect of optimization strategies through controlled experiments, so as to provide more convincing practical basis for junior high school English reading teaching.

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