

Activity-Based Approach in Junior High School English Reading: A Practical Case Study

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Abstract

The Activity-Based Approach serves as a pivotal strategy for fostering core competencies, transforming learning methods, and achieving subject-oriented education in English language teaching. Under the guidance of thematic contexts, students engage in a series of English learning activities encompassing learning and understanding, application and practice, as well as transfer and innovation, thereby advancing their linguistic knowledge, refining language skills, and enhancing learning strategies. Reading, as an interactive process between language and thinking, plays a critical role in cultivating students' core competencies in English. Nevertheless, the effective integration of the Activity-Based Approach into junior high school English reading teaching remains a challenging yet worthwhile issue to explore. This study unfolds through a novice junior high school English teacher's collaborative lesson planning and two rounds of trial teaching with the teaching and research group, focusing on reflective practice to align the Activity-Based Approach with reading instruction. The findings illuminate the comprehensive, interconnected, and hierarchical nature of the Activity-Based Approach, offering novel perspectives for English education postgraduates and frontline junior high school English teachers to understand and implement this pedagogical framework, while providing practical insights for English teaching innovation.

Keywords

Junior High School English Teaching; English Reading Teaching; Activity-Based Approach; Teaching Design; Core Competencies

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2018 Edition) explicitly advocates the implementation of an Activity-Based Approach characterized by “integrated learning and thinking, innovation and application as the core” in its curriculum philosophy. This pedagogical framework centers on thematic meaning construction, guiding students through progressive activities of learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation to cultivate

higher-order thinking skills. The curriculum standards delineate six interrelated components of English course content: thematic contexts, text types, linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies, with the Activity-Based Approach functioning as an organic integration of these elements. Conceptually, the Activity-Based Approach refers to students engaging in comprehensive, interconnected, and practical English learning activities under thematic guidance, drawing on prior knowledge and diverse texts to analyze and solve problems. This process facilitates the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, development of language skills, comprehension of cultural connotations, cultivation of multi-dimensional thinking, formation of value judgments, and refinement of learning strategies, embodying the dual development of linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness alongside enhanced thinking quality and learning capacity.

This study is based on an open class conducted by Teacher H, a novice ninth-grade English teacher at L Middle School in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, with collaborative discussions among the ninth-grade English teaching and research group. L Middle School is a public nine-year comprehensive school directly administered by the district, boasting high-quality student intake and educational resources. The English teaching and research group comprises ten teachers, with five dedicated to ninth-grade instruction, and the faculty is predominantly young and professionally dynamic. Teacher H, a 2024 graduate from a key normal university with notable achievements in teaching skill competitions, teaches English to two ninth-grade classes with mixed proficiency levels. With extensive competition experience and strong professional capabilities, Teacher H regularly consults senior colleagues to optimize instructional design. Grounded in the theoretical connotations of the Activity-Based Approach, this study analyzes the current status and challenges of junior high school English reading teaching, explores instructional design aligned with the Activity-Based Approach, and provides practical guidance for English education postgraduates and frontline teachers to understand and implement the framework in reading classrooms, fostering active student engagement and core competency development.

2. Theoretical Framework and Text Analysis

2.1. Connotations of the Activity-Based Approach

The Activity-Based Approach, as defined in the English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2018 Edition), emphasizes that English learning activities should be comprehensive, interconnected, and hierarchical, guiding students to construct knowledge and develop abilities through progressive engagement. Learning and understanding activities focus on knowledge acquisition and initial comprehension, laying the foundation for further learning. Application and practice activities aim to consolidate and internalize knowledge through contextualized practice, bridging the gap between input and output. Transfer and innovation

activities encourage students to apply acquired knowledge and skills to new contexts, fostering creative thinking and critical evaluation abilities. Collectively, these three tiers of activities form a closed-loop learning process that aligns with students' cognitive development patterns, promoting the integration of language, thinking, and culture.

The Activity-Based Approach also embodies the organic integration of the six core components of English curriculum content. Thematic contexts provide the overarching framework for learning, while diverse text types offer authentic linguistic and cultural materials. Linguistic and cultural knowledge constitute the content basis of learning, and language skills serve as the medium for knowledge acquisition and expression. Learning strategies enable students to engage in effective self-directed learning. Under the guidance of the Activity-Based Approach, these six components are no longer isolated but interact synergistically to facilitate holistic student development.

2.2. Text Analysis of Beauty in Common Things

The open class focuses on the reading text *Beauty in Common Things* from Section B of Unit 5 in the ninth-grade English textbook published by People's Education Press, which centers on traditional Chinese art forms and belongs to the thematic context of "Human and Society." The text introduces three representative traditional Chinese art forms: sky lanterns, paper cutting, and clay art, aiming to help students understand the cultural customs and backgrounds of traditional Chinese art. In terms of core competency development, the lesson cultivates students' linguistic competence by enabling them to master English expressions related to traditional Chinese art forms and their symbolic meanings, and to use textual structures and expressions to introduce other art forms. It fosters cultural awareness by guiding students to understand, analyze, and appreciate the aesthetic, technical, and spiritual beauty of traditional Chinese art, enhancing cultural identity and confidence. It develops learning ability through collaborative exploration tasks involving the creation and introduction of traditional artworks, promoting cross-cultural communication skills. It nurtures thinking quality through sequential questioning around the core theme of "beauty," expanding the breadth and depth of students' thinking, and strengthening their abilities to summarize textual structures and extract information.

The text is an expository essay with a clear general-to-specific structure. The opening paragraph provides a general introduction to traditional Chinese art forms, highlighting their rich cultural connotations. The subsequent three paragraphs elaborate on sky lanterns, paper cutting, and clay art respectively, covering their historical origins, production processes, materials, symbolic meanings, and practical uses. The text employs simple present and past tenses as well as passive voice, with clear logic and vivid content that stimulates students' interest in traditional Chinese

art.

3. First Trial Teaching and Reflection

3.1. Implementation of the First Trial Teaching

Following collaborative discussions within the teaching and research group, Teacher H designed a reading lesson centered on the Activity-Based Approach and developed corresponding teaching materials. The first trial teaching prioritized practical implementation to identify and address instructional challenges.

In the lead-in stage, Teacher H played a video introducing paper cutting, sky lanterns, and clay art, immersing students in traditional Chinese art culture and stimulating initial interest. She also demonstrated her own paper-cutting work, engaging students in interactive questioning to introduce the lesson theme. The dialogue between the teacher and students effectively linked the visual content to the lesson title *Beauty in Common Things*, guiding students to recognize that ordinary materials can be transformed into beautiful artworks.

Subsequently, Teacher H initiated a brainstorming activity, asking students to share their favorite traditional Chinese art forms and explain their preferences. However, the activity failed to achieve the intended outcomes due to two key issues. First, the absence of linguistic scaffolding hindered students' oral expression, limiting meaningful interaction. Second, the activity prematurely focused on output without sufficient vocabulary and sentence pattern practice, resulting in disorganized descriptions of traditional art forms. When students mentioned Sichuan opera face-changing but lacked English expressions, Teacher H provided the term and supplementary background information, alleviating the communication barrier but extending the lead-in duration.

The lead-in stage included extensive interaction and expansion activities, consuming excessive time and compressing the subsequent while-reading and post-reading stages. During while-reading, Teacher H spent considerable time guiding students through textual analysis, leaving insufficient time for transfer and innovation activities that required students to solve problems creatively in new contexts. The lesson concluded abruptly with a brief summary, marking the end of the first trial teaching.

3.2. Reflection and Revision Suggestions

Following the first trial teaching, the teaching and research group conducted a comprehensive reflection and review. Teacher H acknowledged that the overly lengthy lead-in disrupted the lesson flow, reducing student engagement in later stages and necessitating instructional adjustments. Senior teachers concurred, emphasizing the need for a concise, focused lead-in that introduces the topic and establishes the lesson tone efficiently. The extended video and demonstration activities, while engaging, diverted time from core instructional objectives.

Furthermore, the excessive number of activities in the application and transfer stages was deemed impractical for a single class period. While collaborative discussions and role-plays are valuable, they are time-consuming and often fail to achieve their intended goals when rushed. Teachers suggested streamlining redundant activities to ensure each task serves a clear purpose. Teacher H also reflected on her tendency to design overly interactive group activities with rigid answer expectations and limited evaluation criteria, which restricted student creativity. She resolved to design authentic, open-ended discussion activities that encourage diverse perspectives.

The key challenges and corresponding revision suggestions from the first trial teaching are summarized as follows: the lengthy lead-in disrupted lesson progression, requiring activity reduction and time control; the poorly designed lead-in activity hindered student expression, necessitating delayed output and scaffolding provision; and the overabundance of while-reading and post-reading activities.

4. Second Trial Teaching and Reflection

4.1. Implementation of the Second Trial Teaching

Based on feedback from the first trial teaching, Teacher H revised the instructional design, optimizing activities, teaching materials, and lesson structure to control activity duration and enhance lesson flow. The second trial teaching demonstrated improved coherence and balanced time allocation.

In the lead-in stage, Teacher H created a context closely related to students' daily lives: the Nanchong Museum's recruitment of young narrators to introduce paper-cutting artworks. This authentic scenario effectively activated students' prior knowledge and experience while concisely introducing the lesson theme. The interactive dialogue guided students to reflect on the key aspects of traditional art introduction, such as production processes and historical backgrounds, naturally transitioning to the reading task.

During the application and practice stage, Teacher H guided students to read each paragraph and answer targeted comprehension questions. The sequential questioning about sky lanterns, paper cutting, and clay art not only assessed factual understanding but also encouraged students to evaluate the craftsmanship and creativity of traditional artisans, fostering deeper thematic comprehension. The detailed analysis of production processes and the passive voice structure reinforced linguistic knowledge acquisition and application.

The second trial teaching successfully completed all instructional stages, with minor areas for improvement identified by the teaching and research group, prompting final revisions before the formal open class.

4.2. Reflection and Optimization Suggestions

Teacher H reflected that the second trial teaching was more effective, with a concise, contextually relevant lead-in, smooth lesson progression, balanced time allocation, and theme-aligned blackboard design. However, senior teachers noted that students primarily followed teacher instructions to complete tasks without engaging in meaningful independent exploration. The design lacked interconnectedness between activities, as the museum narrator scenario introduced in the lead-in was not revisited in subsequent stages, weakening lesson coherence. Teachers emphasized the need to strengthen the hierarchical and interconnected nature of activities across the learning, application, and transfer stages.

The key challenges and corresponding optimization suggestions from the second trial teaching are summarized as follows: the lead-in scenario lacked connection to subsequent activities, requiring a revisited output task in the transfer stage; the absence of assessment mechanisms limited student feedback, necessitating integrated evaluation checklists; the simplistic comprehension questions hindered deep analysis, requiring mind map integration; and the lesson conclusion lacked thematic elevation, requiring cultural pride cultivation and ideological integration. Following collaborative discussions, the teaching and research group finalized the instructional activities for the formal open class, structuring the lesson into pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages with six interconnected activities aligned with the three tiers of the Activity-Based Approach.

5. Formal Teaching Implementation and Analysis

5.1. Pre-Reading Stage: Learning and Understanding

Activity 1: Brainstorm and Share (Perception and Comprehension)

Teacher H introduced an authentic scenario centered on traditional Chinese culture: the Nanchong Museum's recruitment of young narrators to introduce paper-cutting artworks. She presented a recruitment poster and explained that students met the narrator requirements, prompting reflection on the key aspects of paper-cutting introduction. This activity stimulated learning interest, activated prior knowledge, and naturally introduced the lesson theme of traditional Chinese art. Students actively shared insights about production processes, historical backgrounds, and cultural significance, laying the foundation for subsequent reading.

Activity 2: Predict and Skim (Information Acquisition and Organization)

After contextual introduction, Teacher H guided students to analyze the lesson title *Beauty in Common Things* and accompanying images to predict the main content and structure of the text. Students identified three images corresponding to sky lanterns, paper cutting, and clay art, and inferred the text's general-to-specific structure. Skimming activities helped students summarize paragraph main ideas and textual structure, developing prediction and logical thinking skills while enhancing overall textual comprehension.

5.2. While-Reading Stage: Application and Practice

Activity 3: Read and Complete (Summary and Integration)

Teacher H guided students to read the text in detail and complete structured tasks, including comprehension questions and mind map construction, through collaborative group work. For the introductory paragraph, students identified common materials (bamboo, paper, clay) and core themes (love, beauty, family). For subsequent paragraphs, groups selected either sky lanterns or paper cutting to construct mind maps outlining historical origins, materials, production processes, symbolic meanings, and usage. For clay art, students completed a sequencing task for the production process and analyzed the use of passive voice. This activity fostered information organization, synthesis, and collaborative learning skills, consolidating linguistic knowledge and textual understanding.

Activity 4: Read and Explore (Analysis and Internalization)

Teacher H employed a sequential question chain centered on the lesson title “beauty in common things” to guide in-depth thematic exploration. Questions such as “What is common? What is beauty?” prompted students to analyze the relationship between ordinary materials and artistic beauty, uncovering the underlying theme that Chinese people transform ordinary objects into beautiful artworks through creativity and emotional expression. Students reflected on the cultural connotations of traditional art, including love, good wishes, and craftsmanship, developing cultural identity and higher-order thinking skills. This activity deepened thematic comprehension, expanded thinking breadth and depth, and fostered critical thinking abilities.

5.3. Post-Reading Stage: Transfer and Innovation

Activity 5: Retell and Share (Creation and Evaluation)

Teacher H revisited the Nanchong Museum narrator recruitment scenario, challenging students to introduce Sichuan opera face-changing as narrators. She provided linguistic scaffolding, including mind maps, vocabulary lists, and sentence patterns, to support oral expression. Students watched a short video about face-changing, prepared short introductions in groups, and presented their work. A self-assessment checklist was provided for students to evaluate their performance based on content completeness, language accuracy, nonverbal communication, and attitude expression. This activity promoted authentic language output, consolidated acquired knowledge, enhanced public speaking confidence, and fostered cultural inheritance awareness.

Activity 6: Think and Judge (Critical Thinking and Evaluation)

Teacher H presented images of endangered traditional Chinese art forms, including shadow puppetry, Sichuan opera face-changing, and New Year paintings, highlighting the risk of cultural loss. She guided students to discuss the importance of protecting and inheriting traditional culture and brainstorm actionable measures

for teenagers. Students expressed appreciation for traditional art beauty, praised Chinese people's creativity, and proposed initiatives such as learning traditional art, promoting cultural heritage, and raising public awareness. This activity cultivated critical thinking skills, fostered cultural protection and inheritance awareness, and promoted the formation of positive values and social responsibility.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the implementation of the Activity-Based Approach in junior high school English reading teaching through a collaborative lesson planning and iterative trial teaching process. The findings demonstrated that the Activity-Based Approach, characterized by comprehensiveness, interconnectedness, and hierarchy, provides an effective framework for designing reading activities that foster core competencies. The iterative revision process revealed key principles for effective implementation: authentic context creation, scaffolded support for output activities, balanced time allocation, interconnected activity design, and integrated formative assessment.

The formal open class implementation validated the effectiveness of the optimized instructional design, with students demonstrating enhanced engagement, linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and higher-order thinking skills. The study highlighted the importance of student-centered learning, progressive activity design, and thematic depth in reading instruction, aligning with the goals of core competency development and moral education.

Nevertheless, the study also identified persistent challenges in implementing the Activity-Based Approach, including balancing activity diversity with time constraints, designing authentic and interconnected activities, and fostering student autonomy and creativity. Future research should explore long-term implementation strategies, evaluate the sustained impact of the Activity-Based Approach on student learning outcomes, and investigate the integration of emerging technologies to enhance activity design and student engagement.

In conclusion, the Activity-Based Approach offers a transformative framework for junior high school English reading teaching, enabling educators to move beyond traditional teacher-centered instruction to student-centered, competency-focused learning. Through continuous practice, reflection, and innovation, English teachers can effectively implement the Activity-Based Approach to provide meaningful, engaging, and culturally rich learning experiences, fostering students' holistic development and equipping them with the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive skills necessary for global citizenship. As educators, it is our responsibility to embrace innovative pedagogical approaches, refine our teaching practices, and contribute to the development of English education in China, nurturing students who are confident, creative, and culturally competent.

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