

# Analysis of English Reading Teaching Strategies based on the Thematic Meaning in Senior High Schools

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## Abstract

Thematic meaning inquiry provides a new way of thinking and direction for English reading teaching. The degree of exploring the meaning of the theme influences the depth of students' discourse comprehension, the height of students' thinking development and the effect of students' language learning. Combined with senior high school English teaching cases, this paper discusses how to explore the thematic meaning through in-depth interpretation of texts. Under the guidance of the activity-based approach to English learning, this paper expounds an effective approach to reading teaching design based on thematic meaning exploration, aiming to lead students to read texts in depth, explore the thematic meaning and connotation of texts, and highlight the educational value of English subjects.

## Keywords

Thematic Meaning; Reading Teaching Strategy; Activity-based Approach to English Learning; Senior High School English.

## 1. Introduction

General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017) proposes six new curriculum elements, the are, thematic contexts, text types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies(1). Based on English learning concepts and constructivism learning theories, thematic meaning inquiry teaching combines thematic meaning with activity design to convey discourse ideas, emotional attitudes, values and cultural connotations and promote the development of students' core competencies.

Besides, General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017) also advocates that "The English curriculum should regard the exploration of thematic meaning as the core task of teaching and learning, and integrate the learning contents in order to guide the integrated development of students' language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability(1)." Since the promulgation of the new curriculum standards, many teachers have tried to explore the meaning of themes in the classroom, but most of them are superficial and the depth of teaching practice is not enough. The obvious problems in the exploration of thematic meaning in current senior high school English teaching are as follows. First, teachers' interpretation of the text is superficial, and their theme awareness is weak, which leads to the lack of deep thinking of the text, the formation of multiple thinking, and it is difficult to generate personalized reading experience. Second, teachers design teaching objectives in a generalized way, and the objectives lack theme leadership. The goals are isolated from each other and lack of correlation, resulting in the teaching focus is not prominent. Third, the creation of situation is divorced from reality, ignoring students' sense of theme experience. Fourth, the design of teaching activities is disorderly, low level, and the essence of activities ignores the theme value. Some teachers do not follow the cognitive rules of students and do not effectively design activities according to the three levels of English learning activities.

However, the biggest change after the revision of the new curriculum standards is that it has significant requirements for the cultivation of students' multi-dimensional thinking quality. It is of great significance for effective teaching to discuss how to make students effectively master knowledge and skills, develop intelligence, and stimulate learning interest from the perspective of thematic meaning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Relevant Concepts

#### 2.1.1. Theme

Hornby (2004) interprets the meaning of theme as follows, it refers to the subject or main idea in a talk, piece of writing or work of art(2). Yi Rongmei and Chen Shuyuan (2021) also believe that English texts are generally non-literary works, and the main idea is usually the theme(3). Mei Deming and Wang Qiang(2018) believe that theme refers to a category of topics around a certain range related to people's life, study and work, that is, the theme in the new curriculum standards is closer to the topic we usually say, and is the upper concept of the topic(4). According to Wang Chunhui (2019), theme is the central issue surrounding the semantic expression of a discourse, providing scope or context for language applications such as speech and discussion(5).

According to Modern Chinese Dictionary (2016), there are three interpretations of the theme. First, the theme refers to the central idea expressed in literary and artistic works, which is the core of the ideological content of the works. Second, it generally refers to the main content of talks, documents, meetings, etc. Third, it is the main title(6). Based on these interpretations, Cheng Xiaotang and Zhou Yuxuan (2023) sum up that the theme can refer to the main content discussed in different scenarios, and can also refer to the core ideas contained in the text, reflecting the author's emotions, attitudes and values. This can be obtained either through the title, subtitle, and summary of the article, or it may require the reader to read the article(7).

In General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017), which points out that the theme provides a thematic scope or a thematic context for language learning(1). Students' exploration of thematic meaning should be the most important part of their language learning, which directly affects the degree of text comprehension, the level of thinking development, and the effectiveness of language learning. The thematic contexts cover three aspects, they are man and self, man and society, and man and nature, including 10 thematic groups and 32 sub-themes, in which the thoughts and cultural connotations, emotions, attitudes and values conveyed by a specific thematic context are the thematic meanings contained in the context.

#### 2.1.2. Thematic Meaning

Yi Rongmei and Chen Shuyuan (2021) believe that the thematic meaning is the positive emotion, attitude and correct values contained in the theme, which is the core embodiment of the teaching value of textbooks(3). The content of the thematic meaning includes two parts, they are political quality and moral quality. And the specific content of it is very rich, but it should at least include cultivating Chinese feelings and strengthening cultural self-confidence, expanding international vision and enhancing international understanding, so as to help students form a correct outlook on life and values. From the perspective of thinking about the thematic meaning of discourse, according to Cheng Xiaotang and Zhou Yuxuan (2023), the thematic meaning of a discourse can be the true feelings revealed from the perspective of the creator, the readers' understanding of the discourse based on their own outlook on life, hobbies or life experiences, or the reflection of the objective world(7). Besides, we can analyze the thematic meaning of discourse with reference to the four elements of literary activity proposed by Abrams (1989), they are works, writers, readers and the world(8).

Cheng Xiaotang (2018) believes that classroom teaching based on thematic meaning inquiry takes specific themes as the center and designs teaching objectives, teaching content and teaching activities(9). Wang Qiang (2019) proposes that the exploration of thematic meaning starts from what students already know, integrates new and old learning content, forms a new cognitive structure, and internalizes what they have learned(10). The exploration of thematic meaning focuses on migration and innovation, implements core literacy, and embodies the unity of knowledge and action. Li Baorong (2021) summarized the strategies for designing reading teaching based on thematic meaning inquiry(11). First, through the analysis of curriculum standards and learning situation, we can correctly interpret the thematic meaning of reading texts. Second, the focus of thematic meaning inquiry is clarified through teaching objectives. Third, design learning activities that highlight integrity and relevance based on thematic meaning.

### **2.1.3. Activity-based Approach to English Learning**

According to General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017), the activity-based approach to English learning advocates 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(1). When doing these activities, students use their existing knowledge, explore the meaning of texts of different types, 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. This process is not only an integrated development process of learning language knowledge and language skills, but also a continuous process of enhancing cultural awareness, improving thinking capacity, and improving learning ability.

Learning activities are hierarchical. When designing English learning activities, teachers should follow the principle of hierarchical learning activities. First, determine the theme context of this lesson and determine the development goals of students at different levels. Secondly, subject learning activities are carried out step by step from easy to difficult under the guidance of the subject context(12) (Ying Kejie, 2019). Therefore, the activities of learning and understanding mainly include text-based activities such as perceiving and noticing, retrieving and summarizing, and generalizing and synthesizing. 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. And 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.

## **2.2. Theoretical Basis**

### **2.2.1. Constructivism Theory**

Constructivism, first proposed by the famous Swiss psychologist Piaget in the 1960s, aims to study human perception of the world. According to Wang Qiang (2006), this idea believes that learning is a process in which the learners construct meaning based on their own experiences and what they already knows(13). Besides, teaching should be built based on what learners already knew and engage learners in learning activities. Teachers need to design environments and interact with learners to foster inventive, creative, critical learners. In a word, constructivism believes that students are the center of classroom instruction. English teaching emphasizes student-centered teaching, emphasizes the combination of old and new knowledge in real situations, and encourages collective cooperation. On this basis, the initiative and creativity of students can be exerted to build meaningful learning.

Wu Shanshan (2016) points out that constructivism emphasizes the situational and cooperative nature of classroom activities(14). Therefore, General Senior High School English

Curriculum Standards (2017) advocates that, during the process of designing thematic inquiry activities, teachers should fully mobilize students' interest, stimulate students' existing experience, help students build knowledge structure, and strengthen their understanding of the meaning of the theme(1). It is believed that students need to acquire new knowledge on the basis of existing knowledge and construct new knowledge structure.

How to develop senior high school English reading teaching strategies based on thematic meaning analysis is essentially a process in which teachers design a series of thematic meaning exploration activities, develop students' higher-order thinking ability, and guide students to actively acquire information, process information and construct meaning.

### **2.2.2. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives**

Bloom (1956) proposes a taxonomy, which divided the level of cognitive development into six levels according to hierarchical order, they are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, and each level has its own specific behavioral characteristics(15). Analysis, synthesis and evaluation belong to higher-order thinking. Knowledge, comprehension and application belong to lower-order thinking. Specifically, knowledge refers to recalling facts, terms, and basic concepts. Comprehension refers to understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, describing, and stating the main ideas. Application refers to applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques and rules in a different context. Analysis refers to identifying relationships, causes or motives, and finding evidence to support main ideas. Synthesis refers to combining elements in a different way and proposing alternative solutions, creative thinking.

Anderson et al. (2001) further revised and improved the cognitive field of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, and modified the six-level classification of cognitive goals as follows, they are remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create(16). Among them, analysis, evaluation and creation belong to the higher-order thinking ability, which corresponds to the logical, critical and innovative thinking of students.

Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives defines the different thinking levels of learners in the learning process, and has become an important theoretical basis for determining teaching objectives, choosing teaching methods, designing teaching tasks, and evaluating teaching effectiveness.

## **3. Reading Teaching Strategies based on Thematic Meaning Inquiry**

This paper takes the reading text "The Well That Changed the World" in Unit 2 of the student's book 3, the 2019 Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press of senior high school English book as an example of classroom teaching, so as to expounds the ways of exploring the thematic meaning in reading teaching.

### **3.1. Explore the Discourse and Interpret the Theme**

General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017) suggests that teachers interpret the discourse from three aspects: What, How and Why. "What" refers to the theme and content of a discourse. "How" refers to the stylistic features, content structure and language characteristics of a discourse. "Why" refers to the deep meaning of the text, that is, what is the author's writing intention, emotional attitude or value orientation(1). In this lesson, the teacher interprets and thinks about the text as follows.

As a news feature story, this text depicts an ordinary 6-year-old boy who completed a public welfare project. The story is about a Canadian boy named Ryan who has been helping children in Africa with water shortage since his childhood to solve the problem of drinking water shortage. Through learning the story, young students can develop an awareness of taking social

responsibilities, engaging in public welfare projects, participating in charity work, and actively helping others.

The discourse is organized in time order and develops from the first paragraph “the rising of the problem”, the second to the fifth paragraph “the solution of the problem” to the sixth paragraph “the significance of solving the problem”. In particular, the second paragraph to the fifth paragraph has twists and turns, which well reflects the three stages of Ryan’s career in public welfare namely from working hard alone to reach his first target of \$70 asking for help from his classmates and neighbours to raise \$2000 with the help of his mother’s friend to setting up a foundation to encourage more people to offer help, which reflects Ryan’s firm commitment to volunteer activities and persistent efforts to realize his dream. How to make them have the sympathy for people in need of clean water who live far away in Africa is the first challenge. Being sympathetic and caring is the first step to get involved in charity work. The next challenge is to guide the students to answer the question “How can I help?” Students can learn from Ryan’s story that getting more people involved and expanding influence are crucial to make a difference. Besides, Ryan’s good qualities such as being sympathetic, courageous, determined and persistent also play a vital role in the process.

The teaching of this lesson focuses on the story of the protagonist Ryan helping to solve the water problem in Africa and its impact, and analyzes Ryan’s qualities and good deeds, so as to guide students to help others with practical actions and understand the theme that small actions can achieve big dreams.

### **3.2. Analyze the Meaning of the Theme and Design the Teaching Objectives**

After clarifying the thematic meaning of this lesson, the teaching objectives are set as follows: 1) summarize Ryan’s motivation and contribution in helping Africans to build wells; 2) explore the meaning of the title and analyze Ryan’s qualities, evaluate his behavior; 3) raise students’ awareness of actively participating in charity work in a more creative, effective, and influential way.

The first objective is to enable students to acquire superficial factual information and initially perceive the meaning of the theme. The second objective is to explore the meaning of the theme through learning, understanding and applying practical activities, analyzing and evaluating characters, and highlighting the meaning of the theme. The third objective is the migration and innovation activities guided by the theme meaning, so that students can establish a relationship with the life situation, establish a correct outlook on life and values, and sublimate the theme meaning.

### **3.3. Design Teaching Activities around the Theme and Emphasize Integrated Learning**

#### **3.3.1. Create Thematic Context and Perceive the Theme**

The real situation is conducive to stimulating students’ learning enthusiasm and interest, and enhancing students’ experience and identification with the meaning of the theme. Before reading, teachers create real situations that help activate students’ existing schemas such as background knowledge, life experience and relevant vocabulary about the topic, and encourage students to access and apply existing knowledge to achieve deep connection with the theme(17) (Guo Ying and Xu Guohui, 2019).

The situation of this lesson is created as follows. In the steep of lead-in, teacher will show pictures of drinking water and videos of drinking water problems in Africa. Students are asked two questions: 1)What problems does water shortage in Africa lead to? 2) As senior high school students, can we help them? Why or why not? The purpose of this steep is to activate students’ prior knowledge about the world, the topic, the text types and so on, and to introduce the water shortage in Africa and guide students to think whether they can help.

### 3.3.2. Carry out Activities of Learning and Understanding

Through the new curriculum standards (2017), we know that activities of learning and understanding mainly include text-based activities such as perceiving and noticing, retrieving and summarizing, and generalizing and synthesizing. Therefore, the following activity design will be elaborated from the above three aspects. In fact, the classroom introduction above also plays a role of perceiving and noticing.

The teaching of senior high school English discourse can explore thematic meaning from four perspectives---unit, title, question, and word (Chen Xinzong, 2019), in which the title of a discourse usually reveals the main line of the theme and plot development of the discourse(18). This article is a narrative text, and its title has the function of providing clues to the whole text, indicating the writing object, relating the main plot, and revealing the emotional theme. Therefore, the teaching theme can be preliminatively determined by interpreting the title.

The first activity in pre-reading stage is to present a map of the problem of freshwater shortage in Africa and guide students to read the map and answer the questions: 1)What is the map about? 2)What do different colors stand for? On the one hand, it can cultivate students' ability of reading maps, on the other hand, it can deepen students' understanding of the water shortage problem in Africa. In a word, this activity plays the role of perceiving and noticing.



**Figure 1.** A map of freshwater problems in Africa by 2025

The second activity in pre-reading stage is to brainstorm and guide students to think about ways to solve the water shortage problem in Africa. It can not only train students' divergent thinking ability, but also cultivate their ability to organize information with mind mapping, so that the acquired information can be modular. This activity also plays the role of perceiving and noticing.

The third activity in pre-reading stage is to ask students to make a prediction according to the title and pictures, and think about the questions: What can you see in the picture on the right? Can you see the words? Why is it called Ryan's well? What can you see in the picture on the left? What's their relationship? How do you know? Can you guess how they become friends? And what is the article about? In this activity, teachers guide students to pay attention to the surface information of the text, help students perceive the text as a whole and obtain basic information, and lay a good foundation for exploring the meaning of the theme of the text and creating the transfer after reading. This activity also plays the role of perceiving and noticing.



Figure 2. The picture in the passage and the title of the passage

The above three activities belong to pre-reading activities. Teachers provide multi-modal texts (pictures, videos and texts) to stimulate students' interest in learning and cultivate students' ability of reading pictures and reasoning and judgment. At the same time, question chains are used in the process to constantly activate students' existing background knowledge, help students establish connections between old and new knowledge, and promote students' internalization of new knowledge.

The first activity in while reading stage is to ask students to read the passage and draw the mind map, and then invite a student to present his/her mind map in front of the class and the teacher gives feedback. The purpose of this activity is to help students grasp the main idea and understand the development of the story. By guiding students to read the text quickly, obtain the specific information of the text, and on this basis, summarize and integrate the text information, complete the mind map about the organization structure of the article. So this activity mainly plays the role of retrieving and summarizing. In the process, teachers need to lead students to retrieve and summarize the details of the text, clarify the internal logic, and refine the organizational structure of the text. This provides the conditions for establishing correlation between information, clarifying the main line of discourse, forming structured knowledge, deeply exploring the meaning of the theme, and realizing migration and innovation.

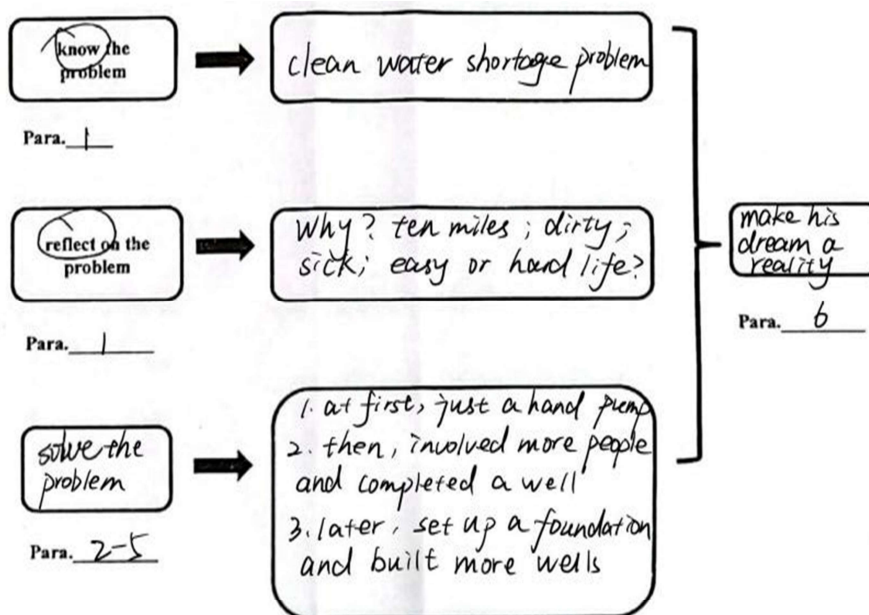


Figure 3. A student's work

### 3.3.3. Carry out Activities of Applying and Practicing

According to the Ministry of Education in 2022, on the basis of learning and understanding activities, teachers lead students to carry out in-depth text learning activities such as

description and interpretation, analysis and judgment, internalization and utilization, so as to help students internalize language knowledge and cultural knowledge, deepen their understanding of cultural connotations, and promote the transformation of knowledge into ability(19).

The second activity in while reading stage is to ask students to read the story again and have a discussion in pair: What qualities do you think Ryan has? please use some adjectives to describe him. The purpose is to make students analyze Ryan's qualities and learn from him. Besides, students can also understand the thematic meaning of the text again by sorting out the important information of the text. On this basis, through peer discussion, let the students evaluate the character's personality quality and behavior, so as to cultivate the students' ability of analysis and evaluation. Therefore, this activity aims to realize the function of cultivating students' ability of description and interpretation, analysis and judgment.

#### **3.3.4. Carry Out Activities of Transferring and Creating**

According to the Ministry of Education in 2018, 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. The meaning of the theme needs to be finally reflected in the activities of transferring and creating, which is the high-level response of students to the theme of the text. Activities of transferring and creating can solve students' authentic problems and promote the sublimation of theme value. This kind of activity enables the thematic meaning to be constructed in real life situations(20) (Li Weifeng, Bao Minfang, 2021).

The first activity in post reading stage is to ask students to read para.6 again and answer the following questions: How do you understand Ryan's change from asking "Why don't I help?" to "How can I help today?" and then ask students to analyze their understanding of the title. The purpose of it is to develop students thinking quality and language ability. In the process of exploring the meaning of the theme, the teacher should not only guide the students to clarify the author's writing intention, but also ponder how the author achieves the expression effect. So when students thinking about Ryan's changes from thoughts to behaviors, they are not only internalize and utilize the structures and adjectives to utter out their answers, but also use the thinking quality of reasoning and arguing, criticizing and evaluating to understand the change and the thematic meaning of the title.

The second activity in post reading stage is to ask students to have a discussion in groups: As a senior high school student, how can you help people in need? And the same time, the teacher presents some pictures in which different people get into trouble. This activity is designed for promoting students to relate what they have learned in class with their real-life experience. And encourage them to think and make a change to help others in need. Besides, it is important to aware the role of teachers, which is to help students think about the relationship between the thematic meaning of the article and their own life, encourage students to rationally express their personal views in connection with the reality of life, so that to realize the educational value based on the thematic meaning inquiry. In conclusion, such post-reading output activity not only originates from the text, but also goes beyond the text, so that students can exert their imagination and creativity to express their emotions, not only improve the language ability, achieve the important and difficult objectives of teaching, but also have a deeper understanding of the social meaning of the theme.

Through the creation of contexts, students can use the acquired language skills, try to use the language and cultural knowledge in the new context to analyze and solve problems, evaluate whether the solution is feasible, so as to realize the application of practice, transfer and innovation, and achieve the purpose of deep learning.



**Figure 4.** Some contextualized pictures

## 4. Conclusion

In senior high school English reading teaching based on thematic meaning inquiry, interpreting text is the starting point, exploring meaning is the landing point, and designing learning activity is the key point. Teachers need to set teaching objectives around the meaning of the discourse theme, design teaching activities at different levels, guide students to grasp the thematic meaning through interactive activities in the real context, cultivate cultural awareness and strengthen thinking ability, and implement the core competency of English subject.

Centering on the theme of helping others, this lesson creates real situations, sets multi-level, relevant and targeted questions, guides students to sort out the text structure, excavate the connotation and value of the discourse, integrates language knowledge learning, language ability improvement, thinking quality development and cultural awareness cultivation into teaching activities, and effectively realizes the goal of discipline education.

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