

# Analysis of Thematic Context in English Reading Teaching

Yaping Zhou

China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, 637009, China

## Abstract

In recent years, thematic context has become a hot topic in foreign language teaching. The General Senior Secondary English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020) lists the thematic context as the first element of the curriculum content, and emphasizes that all language learning activities should be carried out in a certain thematic context. However, in the actual English teaching, some teachers are out of context and only focus on the one-way transmission of knowledge in the textbook, regardless of whether students really understand and use it. Teaching English reading is not just about transferring knowledge, but about putting students in situations to find and solve problems. This paper discusses and analyzes some current researches, and proposes some optimization strategies for English reading teaching based on thematic contexts. In the teaching of English reading, teachers should teach the whole unit based on a certain thematic context and guided by rich reading materials and methods, so as to cultivate students' comprehensive ability and cross-cultural awareness.

## Keywords

Thematic Context; English Reading Teaching; Cross-cultural Awareness.

## 1. Introduction

In English reading teaching, thematic context is important for the orderly conduct of thematic learning, which can create cultivate students' ability and cross-culture awareness. The Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 edition, revised in 2020) lists the thematic context as the first element of the curriculum content, and emphasizes that all language learning activities should be carried out in a certain thematic context. However, there are still some problems in English reading teaching with thematic context. Some teachers either teach out of the subject context, or only pay attention to the explanation of textbook knowledge, ignoring the development of students' cultural literacy.

This study analyzes relevant researches of context and explores how to optimize English reading teaching strategies based on thematic context. It can help teachers better relate the thematic context with the reading text from the theoretical and practical levels, and understand the importance of the thematic context. At the same time, it provides a certain reference for English teachers to integrate more thematic contexts into reading teaching. In addition, several strategies and suggestions are provided for creating thematic contextualized English classrooms and thematic meaning exploration.

## 2. Problem Identification

In this section, the author firstly introduces the two core concepts of "context" and "thematic context", and then the author list some problems in English reading teaching based on thematic context.

## 2.1. Context

Context is first noted by J. R. Firth (1957) in the study of language. Firth constructed the “contextual theory of meaning”, and classified contexts into two types: the environment based on language itself; and the social environment associated with language. He and Jiang (1997) think the classification of context mainly includes two: one is to interpret context as concrete factors abstracted from the context that influence participants in language activities; the other is the interpretation of context as background knowledge shared by participants in language activities. There are two main types of contextualized classifications that are generally accepted today: linguistic context and non-linguistic context. When we learn a foreign language, we must not only learn the correct language form, but also learn the real context that matches the correct foreign language form (Wang, 2007).

The Cambridge dictionary defines “context” from language aspect as the text or speech that comes immediately before and after a particular phrase or piece of text and helps to explain its meaning. Contextual factors in cognitive linguistics include elements in conventional context, such as time, place, people, scenes, etc., as well as their own unique terms and unique connotations, mainly including reality, experience, schema, category, concept (metaphor, metonymy) and other terms, which together constitute the contextual components of cognitive linguistics (Wei, 2016).

## 2.2. Thematic Context

The Thematic-based Instruction (TBI) first emerged in the United States, which is closely related to “thematic context” (Ma, 2022). In domestic, the concept of “thematic context” was proposed in The Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 edition, revised in 2020) which is closely related to TBI. The Standard sets three categories of thematic contexts, namely, man and self, man and society, and man and nature. Let’s take Unit 5 Into the world, from compulsory high school English textbook 1, as an example. This unit belongs to the theme of man and nature. And when teachers prepare for reading teaching, they should arrange teaching activities based on the thematic context of man and nature.

## 2.3. Problems in English Reading Teaching based on Thematic Context

There are four main problems in English reading teaching based on thematic context as following.

### 2.3.1. Inadequacy of English Teaching Texts

In English reading teaching, some teachers often organize teaching design lesson plans only according to reading materials on the textbooks, but ignore that for most high school students, they have a certain level of English learning, so textbook content cannot effectively attract students’ interest and attention. When students’ theme sentence text accumulation is insufficient, it will directly affect students’ learning effectiveness in the thematic context.

### 2.3.2. Separation of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Teaching

Many teachers are accustomed to teaching students vocabulary, grammar knowledge and sentence structure from textbooks, but ignore the comprehensiveness of the theme that has been set in teaching, resulting in the separation of the four teaching objectives of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### 2.3.3. Single Approach to Teaching Reading

At present, some English teachers often adopt a single offline group teaching with the goal of examination-oriented education. It is easy to overlook that students with individual differences have different learning status.

#### **2.3.4. Lacking of Cross-cultural Perspective**

From the actual situation, the current content of English textbooks focuses more on the response and transmission of Western culture and values, no matter high school textbooks or middle school textbooks (Chen, 2022; Lin, 2023). Many teachers often ignore cross-cultural education, especially in reading teaching, and students' understanding of English reading materials may be misunderstood, which may affect high school students' ability. And the traditional cultural content involved is still not enough and not deep enough, which is easy for students to ignore the thinking of traditional culture when learning English knowledge.

### **3. Strategies for English Reading Teaching based on Thematic Context**

As for the above problems, there are some solutions and strategies.

#### **3.1. Provide Various Thematic Reading Materials**

First, when English teachers teach reading, they should provide various reading materials. In addition to studying texts in the textbooks, teachers should also gather more reading materials for students around the same topics or different topics. They can create thematic context. There are some principles of creating contexts. The context created should be holistic, subjective, authentic, interesting, and intuitive (Wu, 2020; Guo, 2021). These materials can be taught collectively in the classroom or as a resource for self-directed learning after class, so as to improve self-directed learning of students.

#### **3.2. Integrate Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Teaching**

The thematic contexts do not exist in isolation. Teachers should adopt certain teaching strategies based on thematic contexts (Zhao, 2021). The teaching of basic knowledge of English is very important. However, in thematic context, teachers should promote the improvement of students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Only by designing reading texts around the theme and guiding students to explore the meaning of the text theme can we generate efficient classroom teaching and learning and develop students' listening and speaking skills (Li, 2020). Topic context was expected to improve comprehensibility judgments (Burmester et al, 2014). Shin (2007) considered theme-based instruction combines real life situations with instruction, incorporates all four basic language skills communicatively, inspires students to make their minds individually and apply experimental learning and project-based learning methods. Thus, when in reading classes, teachers should integrate others teaching to guide students to strengthen language ability.

#### **3.3. Combine Online and Offline Teaching**

In order to make reading classes more interesting and effective, teachers can use diversified teaching modals, such as Flipped classrooms, MOOCs.

#### **3.4. Integrate Cross-cultural Perspectives**

Language learning and cultural learning are inseparable. According to Lin (2023), language characteristics and cultural characteristics are closely related, and many language expressions are also influenced by culture. When setting up the teaching of reading in a thematic context, it is necessary for teachers to guide students to understand text materials from different cultural perspectives and promote students' cultural awareness.

For example, Spring Festival is a traditional festival in China, and compared to Americans, they celebrate Christmas. In reading teaching, teachers can guide students to read relevant text carefully, and look for the similarities and differences between "Christmas" and "Spring Festival" in terms of customs and habits in the reading process, so as to promote students' initial

perception of the cultural differences between China and the West, so as to achieve the effect of cultivating students' cross-cultural awareness.

To establish the concept of cultivating students' cultural awareness in English teaching, fully explore the cultural knowledge and connotation involved in thematic context, it is necessary to comprehensively consider students' age, knowledge, ability, experience and the development and requirements of the new era, so as to formulate appropriate strategies (Zhang, 2020). At the same time, Wang (2021) believes that different readers will interact with the author from different angles, will have different interpretations and interpretations of the author's writing intention, and have different cognitions of the value orientation of the discourse. Therefore, when analyzing the discourse, it is necessary to consider the student's personalized cognition.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay analyzes the problems in English reading teaching based on thematic context and offers some strategies to solve these problems. However, the essay hasn't mentioned the situation and the reason that reading teaching is out of thematic context. In conclusion, an effective English classroom should rely on thematic context, point to the development of students' ability, and lead students to cultivate cross-culture awareness.

#### Acknowledgments

I know that words are supposed to be my thing, but I will never be able to find the right words to thank my family members, for the sacrifices they made every day so that I could go from a graduate to a post-graduate. Moreover, I would like to express my gratitude to my tutor, who always helps me in time, both in study and in life. And no words would ever be enough.

#### References

- [1] Firth, J. R.(1957). (Ed.). Papers in linguistics. London: Oxford University Press. Juliane Burmeister, Katharina Spalek & Isabell Wartenburger.(2014).Context updating during sentence comprehension: The effect of aboutness topic. *Brain and Language*.
- [2] Shin, J. K.(2007). Developing dynamic units for EFL English teaching forum. *English Teaching Forum*, 45 (2), 2-8.
- [3] Zhao Qinhu.(2021).Application of Thematic Context-Based Deep Learning in Foreign Language Teaching.
- [4] Chen Danling.(2022). An effective strategy for infiltrating traditional culture in junior high school English reading teaching. *KAOSHI ZHOUKAN*(49),116-120.
- [5] Guo Xiang.(2021). Practical Inquiry into the Implementation of Cultural Awareness Cultivation Goals in English Reading Teaching. *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools(a middle school edition)* (02), 38-43.
- [6] He Zhaoxion, Jiang Yanmei.(1997). A dynamics study of context. *Journal of Foreign Languages* (06). 16-21.
- [7] Li Juanjua.(2020). Holistic Design of Teaching Strategies for Primary School English Classroom Contexts. *Teaching & Administration* (32),60-62.
- [8] Lin Shan.(2023). Research on Teaching Strategies for High School English Reading in the Context of Themes. *English Journal for Middle School Students* (20),103-104.
- [9] Ma Xiaoyan.(2022). Investigation and research on the implementation of high school English reading teaching activities based on thematic context.
- [10] Wang Chuming.(2007). On the context of foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (03),190-197+240.

- [11] Wu Weimin.(2021). Teaching Strategies for Junior Secondary English Units Based on Thematic Contexts. *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools(a middle school edition)* (08),7-12.
- [12] Wang Yanrong.(2021). Classroom teaching design of junior high school English reading under the exploration of thematic significance. *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools(a middle school edition)* (09),22-26.
- [13] Wei Zaijiang.(2016). Context in Cognitive Linguistics: Definition and Function. *Journal of Foreign Languages* (04),39-46.
- [14] Zhang Hui.(2020). Research and Practice of Chinese Awareness Cultivation Strategy of High School English Reading Teaching Based on Theme Context. *Journal of Jilin Provincial College of Education* (10),28-32.
- [15] People's Republic of China Ministry of Education. (2020). *General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision)*. Beijing: People's Education Press.