

# A Teaching Design for Developing Junior High Students' Thinking Quality Based on Thematic Meaning Exploration

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**Abstract:** Reading in English is an important way to develop students' thinking quality. Teachers should analyze the text in depth, take the theme as a clue, select appropriate teaching strategies according to the teaching objectives and students' cognitive level, and create engaging classroom activities. This article takes "Why don't you talk to your parents" as an example and explains how to develop students' thinking quality in the teaching of reading based on thematic meaning exploration, And how to develop students' thinking quality step by step with the help of "problem chains".

**Keywords:** Thematic meaning, Thinking quality, English reading teaching.

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## 1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022) (abbreviated as ECSCE) includes the students' thinking quality among the connotations of core literacy for the first time. Students advance language learning in the development of thinking and develop thinking in language learning. The development of logical, dialectical, and innovative thinking, as well as making their thinking reflect a certain degree of agility, flexibility, creativity, criticality, and profundity, are all requirements for students to embody the core literacy mindfulness characteristics. Students should also observe and understand the world and see things from various perspectives while learning languages.

ECSCE clearly points out that the content of the English curriculum is composed of themes, discourse, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies, with themes at the top of the list. Students' exploration of the thematic meaning of a discourse is the most important part of their language learning, which has a direct impact on their comprehension of the discourse and degree of thinking development.

At present, although the majority of English teachers have already provided a range of reading teaching activities, the teaching content does not currently form an organic whole and does not adequately comprehend the discourse's thematic meaning. Some teachers tend to focus only on the basic knowledge of language and the understanding of surface meaning in reading teaching, but not on the excavation of the deeper connotation of the text, ignoring the development of students' thinking, which is detrimental to the cultivation of students' thinking quality and innovation ability [1]. The core job of teaching and learning in the English curriculum should be the exploration of the thematic meaning. The development of students' thinking should therefore be the teacher's guide as they design learning activities that fit the meaning of the topic, broaden students' thinking space, activate students' background knowledge related to the topic, and seize the key points of students' thinking development[2]. Additionally, teachers should also integrate learning content to lead the development of students' language skills, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability.

For this reason, it is especially critical for teachers to design questions that foster students' thinking based on the thematic meaning and with a focus on thinking training.

## 2. Interpretation of Thematic Meaning

A classroom based on thematic meaning exploration is one in which the goals, content, and activities of classroom teaching are designed around a certain theme [3]. According to the ECSCE, the themes include three major categories: human and self, human and society, and human and nature. "Human and self" takes "I" as the perspective and sets "Life and Learning" and "Being and Doing". In "human and society", from the viewpoint of "society", "Social Service and Interpersonal Communication" and "Literature, Art and Nature" are set. The theme groups of "Man and Society" are based on the perspective of "society" and include "Social Service and Interpersonal Communication", "Literature, Art and Sports", "History, Society and Culture", and "Science and Technology". "Man and Nature" takes "nature" as the perspective and sets up "natural ecology", "environmental protection" and "disaster prevention". "Disaster Prevention" and "Cosmic Exploration" are thematic clusters. There are several sub-themes under each theme group[4].

Middle school English teaching based on thematic meaning exploration needs to adhere to the ECSCE and core literacy. Teachers should create contexts that are closely related to the thematic meaning and fully explore the cultural information carried by the particular topic and the key points for developing students' thinking quality. At the same time, teachers should also consider the thematic meaning exploration as the core task of teaching and learning, and integrate learning content and lead the development of the integration of students' language skills, thinking quality, cultural awareness and learning ability [3]. For learners, exploring thematic meaning is the main point of interest and motivation for learning. This not only helps to increase learners' motivation and classroom participation, but also reduces to a certain extent the sense of boredom that comes with long-term language learning[5]. At the same time, students can also have a more accurate and deeper grasp of the content of the discourse and a more accurate understanding of the language used in the discourse, rather

than just getting a superficial understanding of the language.

### 3. Interpretation of Thinking Quality

According to ECSCE, the thinking quality refers to the personality characteristics of human thinking, and responds to the level of students' understanding, analysis, comparison, inference, criticism, evaluation and creativity, which are mainly reflected in observation and discrimination, induction and inference, criticism and innovation[4]. The development of students' thinking quality should also follow the process from lower-order thinking to middle-order thinking and to higher-order thinking. Low-order thinking involves memory and comprehension activities; middle-order thinking involves analysis, comparison and judgment activities; and higher-order thinking involves evaluation and creativity activities. The improvement of students' thinking quality helps them learn to find out problems, analyze them and solve them, and make correct value judgments about things. This requires teachers to design learning activities that meet the developmental characteristics of students' thinking quality in the light of their learning situations.

### 4. Reading Instruction of Developing Students' Thinking Quality Based on Thematic Meaning Exploration

The design of reading instruction based on thematic meaning can be divided into three steps: firstly, to explore the meaning of the themes by carefully reading the texts. Secondly, to identify the teaching objectives by analyzing the course content. Finally, to develop teaching activities based on the teaching objectives. The design of English reading teaching activities based on thematic meaning is explained in this article taking an example from a middle school English reading lesson.

#### 4.1. Exploring the thematic meaning

Teachers should first read the discourse to clarify the content of the discourse and consider the thematic meaning revealed by the content of the discourse before designing the teaching. In this essay, we concentrate on the thematic meaning and the development of students' thinking skills as the goal of teaching design by taking Unit 4 "Why don't you talk to your parents" of Grade 8 English in PEP as an example. The theme of this unit is "Social Services and Interpersonal Communication" under the category of "Human and Society", and the sub-theme is "Harmonious Family and Community Life". The text includes two letters on the topic of "How to deal with family conflicts". Sad and Thirteen's letter describes the family problems he encountered, such as his parents' frequent quarrels and his elder brother's problems. Robert Hunt reassures him and suggests ways to improve communication and exchange among family members in his letter.

Students in the Eighth grade are in the critical period of transition from adolescence to mature youth, and as a result, their psychological development is marked by a shift between semi-maturity and semi-naivety, and disputes and contradictions with their families are more prevalent. Students' psychology will be impacted by the stress of life and study, and one issue they must address is how to effectively solve problems and express their emotions correctly. The meaning of this theme is to guide students to face various conflicts in the family positively, to investigate the causes of

problems, to deal with problems in growing up correctly, to establish positive values, and to construct a new understanding of "growing up troubles".

#### 4.2. Determining Teaching Objectives

The teacher needs to adjust the difficulty learning activities, set appropriate teaching objectives, and tailor the discourse's substance to each student's unique requirements. Based on the study of the discourse, teachers determine the following teaching objectives:

Language knowledge: Students can master the key words and phrases: argue, communication, nervous, whatever, get on with, lead, elder; students can talk about their family conflicts and use the phrase "Why don't you....?" to make reasonable suggestions to others;

Language skills: Students will be able to improve their ability to read and access information; they will be able to express themselves more clearly in English;

Cultural awareness: Students will be able to understand the differences that exist between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of how people resolve family conflicts;

Thinking quality: Students can understand that having disagreements with family members and others is natural and common when growing up. They can also realize the importance of proactive communication and exchange in problem-solving and conflict-resolving.

#### 4.3. Designing teaching activities

##### 4.3.1. Create a thematic context to activate thinking

The teacher can begin the introductory part with the song "Trouble is a friend" and prompt students to think "Whether trouble is a friend or not?" Then, the teacher will ask the following questions to stimulate students' thinking about the topic of the lesson:

Q1: What problem do you usually have?

Q2: If you had a problem, who would you like to ask for help?

[Design idea] Firstly, the song "Trouble is a friend" gives students a general idea of the theme of the lesson. Secondly, students are encouraged to reflect on the issue and recall how they solved the conflicts with family members before. In Q1, students were asked to brainstorm about the conflicts they had in their daily life. In Q2, the teacher shows students who they always ask for help, in the process, the teacher guides them to contact the "school counselor" if they needed assistance.

##### 4.3.2. Obtain key information to develop middle order thinking

Led by the thematic meaning, teachers should design questions that imply the main line of the text based on the content of the discourse, and then help students comprehend the text's structure in light of their comprehension of the topic. The teacher mainly starts from interpreting the relevant information or the given pictures, helping students to think differently about the genre and meaning of the text, and practicing their ability of middle order thinking such as observation, inference and generalization. The following questions were designed by the teacher for the pre-reading:

Q1: What's the relationship between the two people in the picture?

Q2: What are they doing?

Q3: Who wrote the letter?

Q4: Who do you think have a problem?

Q5: Who is giving advice?

Q6: Where do you usually find these letters?

[Design idea] Beginning with straightforward questions, Q1 and Q2 encourage students to make a reasonable analysis of the pictures given in the text. By analyzing the pictures, students can make clear that the article is mainly about “problems”. Q3-Q6: Combined with the information in the text, students can make predictions: the article mainly describes Sad and Thirteen seeking help from Robert Hunt, while judge the subject matter of the article-letters. During this process, teachers should also continue to stimulate students’ curiosity and desire for knowledge.

#### 4.3.3. Analyze the content of texts to promote deep thinking

To develop students’ thinking quality in English reading teaching, teachers should lead students to interpret text details in thematic contexts and sort out text information. At the same time, teachers should also encourage students to actively voice their views, investigate the values ingrained in the discourse, and develop empathy while simultaneously encouraging them to query and critique the text’s content. After students have basically understood the structure of the text, the teacher asks the following questions:

Q1: What is Sad and Thirteen’s main problem?

Q2: How does he feel at home?

Q3: What is Robert Hunt’s advice?

Q4: Do you agree or disagree with Robert Hunt’s advice? And why?

Q5: Suppose you are Sad and Thirteen’s friend, can you give him some advice?

[Design idea]The teacher uses the above questions to help students obtain detailed information about the text, comprehend the main idea of the text, and grasp the main line of the text. Q1 promotes students’ further understanding of Sad and Thirteen’s problem, extracts key information, and helps students get effective information infusion to create a framework for their responses to the following questions. In order to summarize Sad and Thirteen’s psychological activities, students should complete Q2, which help students have a better grasp of the text by having them analyze the relationships between family members and the causes of the conflict. Q3-Q5 promote students to extract multiple pieces of information from the text for integration and deeper thinking guided by the meaning of the theme. Students are encouraged to critique and challenge the suggestions made by Robert Hunt, as well as actively express their own opinions. In this process, teachers should respect students’ different thinking and ideas and encourage them to continue thinking from different perspectives, so as to lay the foundation for developing higher-order thinking in the next stage.

#### 4.3.4. Sublimate the theme of the text to cultivate higher order thinking

The cultivation of students’ higher order thinking is a crucial component of English teaching. The thematic meaning exploration-based in junior high school English reading instruction focuses on themes and guides students to explore the thematic meaning of discourse in depth through multi-level activities in order to develop higher-order thinking[6]. In order to accomplish this, teachers need to move past the boundaries of “knowledge understanding” in their instruction of reading and instead progressively shift toward “knowledge transfer” and then “knowledge innovation.”

After presenting the complete text information through a series of layered questions, teachers gradually build a bridge for students’ language output and encourage students to analyze the material from superficial to in-depth. In the post-reading stage of the lesson, the teacher asks the following questions:

Q1: Did you have problems with your family before? What did you do?

Q2: If you have problems with your family later, what will you do?

[Design idea] The teacher leads students in small groups to discuss what conflicts they have had with their parents and tell how they have resolved these conflicts in the past. Invite students to share their stories, and other students to offer ways and suggestions for the student to resolve the conflicts. Additionally, the student is questioned on “If you were to have another conflict with your family, what would you do?” This calls for students to engage in creative output based on deeper interpretation and internalization of textual themes until they are able to critically think and articulate themselves. These activities not only prompts students to open their minds, but also trains them to express their own opinions that go beyond the text while remaining true to its themes. As they integrate their individual emotional attitudes and interpretations of the subject “Harmonious Family” into their answers, students’ higher order thinking abilities are exposed during the process of producing language.

## 5. Conclusion

Reading is a multidimensional way of thinking [7]. Teaching reading based on thematic meaning exploration requires teachers to design questions with hierarchy and guide students to develop thinking quality and improve core literacy in the process of analyzing and solving problems.

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