

# Deep Learning Strategies for Senior High English Reading based on the Activity-Based Approach to English Learning

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## ABSTRACT

English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, revised in 2025) emphasize the concept of "deep learning" more explicitly and systematically. However, issues such as formalized, mechanized, and fragmented teaching activities remain prominent, failing to achieve the effect of deep teaching. Taking "After Twenty Years" selected from *Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) Compulsory 1* as an example, this study explores how to effectively promote deep teaching in reading classes through progressive activities that move from being based on the text, to delving into the text, and finally to going beyond the text, thereby stimulating higher-order thinking.

## KEYWORDS

Deep Teaching; Activity-Based Approach; Senior High School; English Reading Activities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The *General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards* (2017 Edition, 2025 Revision) (hereinafter referred to as the *English Curriculum Standards*) articulates and emphasizes the concept of "deep learning" more explicitly and systematically (Ministry of Education, 2025). Although the term "deep teaching" does not appear frequently in the document, the core principles of deep teaching permeate various aspects, such as curriculum objectives, curriculum content, teaching suggestions, and academic quality evaluation. For instance, in curriculum philosophy, an activity-based approach is expected to be implemented in English learning oriented toward the development of core competencies. Activities should be designed to be comprehensive, interconnected, and practical, guiding students to achieve deep learning through a process of learning and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and innovating. Regarding implementation suggestions, the design of English learning activities should raise well-sequenced questions that progress from comprehension to application and from analysis to evaluation, thereby facilitating students' thinking to develop steadily from lower-order to higher-order levels. Thus, the introduction of the activity-based approach to English learning provides a robust guarantee for deep learning.

Reading instruction constitutes a vital component of senior high school English teaching, and the instructional texts used in reading serve as carriers of linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, methodological knowledge, and value-based knowledge. Currently, senior high school English reading instruction still exhibits test-oriented practices that lack depth, such as the direct translation of texts, locating answers to corresponding reading comprehension questions, and mechanically copying and reciting grammatical sentence patterns. Although the *English Curriculum Standards* explicitly advocate organizing and conducting teaching based on the activity-based approach to English learning, some teachers encounter problems of "formalization," "fragmentation," and "mechanization" when applying this approach to concrete reading instruction, making it difficult to

achieve the desired effect of deep teaching. Therefore, this study will explore how the activity-based approach to English learning can be effectively implemented in English reading teaching activities to realize deep teaching.

## **2. DEEP LEARNING**

Zheng advocates that deep learning requires a form of meaningful learning in which students, under teachers' guidance, actively engage in challenging learning themes, experience success, and achieve development, ultimately aimed at the holistic development of individuals as concrete, social beings (Zheng, 2019). During this process, students' engagement and motivation are two significant targets of deep learning (Anggraini, 2025). Accordingly, deep learning emphasizes a learner-centered approach, focusing on students' interests and needs, and stimulating their initiative. Only when students actively participate in learning activities can they maintain a positive emotional attitude and interest toward what they are learning. Other scholars contend that deep learning refers to the process in which students employ various higher-order thinking skills to solve challenging learning tasks, have meaningful learning experiences, and thereby master the core knowledge of a subject and its modes of thinking, construct knowledge structures with transferability, and develop critical and creative learning dispositions (Guo, 2016). In other words, deep learning stresses the importance of creating authentic contexts, enabling students to identify problems within these contexts and use higher-order thinking skills, such as comparing, interpreting, analyzing, applying, conceptualizing, hypothetical reasoning, and reflecting, to establish connections among learning content. Ultimately, after acquiring new knowledge and building connections, students should be able to apply what they have learned in practice and transfer the newly acquired knowledge to novel situations to solve real-world problems.

In short, deep learning is a learning activity centered on high-level cognition, high-quality thinking, and autonomous knowledge construction, emphasizing learner-oriented and the engagement of higher-order thinking skills (Long Yang & Huang Yu, 2026). Based on the definitions above, to achieve deep learning, teachers should design reading instruction activities that embody the characteristics of knowledge integration, higher-order thinking, and transferability of outcomes. These activities collectively point toward the core competencies: language competence is enhanced through use, cultural awareness is developed through comparison, thinking quality is cultivated through questioning, and learning ability is consolidated through experience.

## **3. ACTIVITY-BASED APPROACH**

*English Curriculum Standards* clearly pointed out: "The Activity-based approach to English learning refers to a series of English learning activities that are comprehensive, interconnected, and practical in nature. Guided by thematic meaning, these activities, encompassing learning and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and innovating, enable students, drawing on their existing knowledge and relying on different types of texts, to promote their acquisition of linguistic knowledge, development of language skills, understanding of cultural connotations, development of multi-dimensional thinking, judgment of value orientations, and application of learning strategies in the process of analyzing and solving problems".

### **3.1. The Implementation Pathway of the Activity-Based Approach**

The activity-based approach emphasizes developing students' language competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability through three categories of first-level activities: learning and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and innovating. Each of these three first-level activity categories further encompasses three second-level activity forms. Specifically, learning and understanding activities mainly consist of three text-based activities:

perception and attention, acquisition and sorting, and generalization and integration. These activities are designed to help students understand linguistic knowledge, obtain information, organize text content, and develop initial language cognition. As the foundational stage of language learning, they focus on the input and preliminary processing of language materials. Applying and practicing activities mainly involve in-depth text exploration activities, including description and interpretation, analysis and judgment, and internalization and application. These activities emphasize applying acquired knowledge to practical situations, thereby enabling students to internalize linguistic knowledge and enhance their language use ability through description, analysis, and judgment. Transferring and innovating activities refer to beyond-text activities, such as reasoning and argumentation, criticism and evaluation, and imagination and creation. These activities focus on cultivating students' critical and creative thinking, encouraging them to transfer acquired knowledge to new contexts for reasoning, evaluation, and creation. In terms of activity structure, the three categories of first-level activities do not follow a linear sequence; rather, they constitute three levels that interact and spiral upward. Progressing from text-based activities to in-depth text exploration activities, and then to beyond-text activities, the activities advance layer by layer in an upward spiral. These English learning activities provide a concrete implementation pathway for more effectively putting the activity-based approach to English learning into practice.

### **3.2. Characteristics of English Learning Activities**

As can be seen from the definition of the activity-based approach in the *English Curriculum Standards*, English learning activities designed under its guidance are characterized by three features: comprehensiveness, relevance, and practicality.

The comprehensiveness of English learning activities is primarily manifested in three aspects: core competencies, curriculum content, and language skills. First, the subject core competencies represent a concentrated embodiment of the educational value of the English subject and constitute the fundamental task of English teaching. The four dimensions—language competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability—are mutually integrated and mutually reinforcing. The subject core competencies serve as the goal of the activities, while the implementation of English learning activities also provides a pathway for cultivating these competencies. Second, the activities are designed for teaching the curriculum content. Centered around thematic contexts and grounded in texts, English learning activities enable students to acquire linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, and to develop language skills and learning strategies in the process of solving problems. Finally, the five language skills, listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing, serve as both the prerequisite for and one of the purposes of implementing the activities. Therefore, English learning activities should facilitate the integration of the six elements of the curriculum content, the holistic development of language skills, and the comprehensive cultivation of the subject core competencies (Zhang, 2019).

Relevance is also a key characteristic of English learning activities. English learning activities are divided into three progressive levels: learning and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and innovating. These activities follow a logical sequence of text-based, in-depth text exploration, and beyond-text activities; thus, they are interconnected, centered around thematic contexts, and possess inherent logic. Moreover, not only are the activities interconnected with one another, but they are also connected to students' life experiences and cognitive backgrounds. The activity-based approach to English learning adheres to a student-centered philosophy; therefore, the design of activities takes students' learning situations as the starting point and fully connects with their actual life experiences.

The practicality of English learning activities is primarily reflected in two aspects: the subject and the content. Students are the subjects of learning; they can fully exercise their agency during the learning process, actively participate in learning activities, identify and solve problems within these activities, and complete corresponding tasks. Moreover, the learning content itself originates from real-life

practice, which makes it inherently practical. The content that students learn in class relates to real-life practice, and outside the classroom, students can also apply what they have learned to guide their practice.

### **3.3. Practical Problems in the Application of the Activity-based Approach in English Reading Teaching**

Since the activity-based approach was introduced, many frontline teachers have gradually begun to apply it to guide their reading instruction activities. However, due to misunderstandings of or insufficient familiarity with the relevant theories, some teachers' application of this approach to reading instruction has failed to achieve the effect of deep teaching, resulting in three conspicuous negative phenomena (Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Li, 2023). The specific manifestations are as follows.

**Formalization of learning activities:** Some teachers mistakenly believe that simply labeling a teaching task as an "activity" is equivalent to implementing the activity-based approach to English learning. Other teachers design activities "for the sake of having activities," with the activities they devise bearing little connection to the reading text or being detached from students' real-life experiences, lacking depth, and remaining at a formalistic level without genuine meaning.

**Superficialization of activity content:** Although the activity-based approach to English learning clearly stipulates that learning activities comprise three levels, learning and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and innovating, some teachers, in their teaching practice, interpret these simplistically as three discrete steps, namely: grasping the gist of the text, completing corresponding reading comprehension exercises, and discussing a related topic. Moreover, some teachers still regard the reading text merely as material for learning linguistic knowledge and understanding its surface-level cultural content, overlooking the logical reasoning, critical thinking, and creative awareness embedded in the discourse. This approach is not conducive to cultivating higher-order thinking skills such as extracting, interpreting, generalizing, and integrating, and thus fails to achieve the effect of deep teaching.

**Passivization of the learning subject:** Because learning activities remain superficial and the activity content is shallow and unengaging, students show little enthusiasm for participating in reading activities, thereby developing negative attitudes toward them.

## **4. THE DESIGN OF ENGLISH READING TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

This section takes "After Twenty Years" as an example to explore the design of senior high school English teaching activities oriented toward deep learning. "After Twenty Years" is selected from the *Developing Ideas* section of Unit 4 in the FLTRP senior high school English textbook (Compulsory Book 1). The thematic context of this unit is "Man and Society," specifically concerning positive interpersonal relationships and social interaction. In designing the teaching activities, this study adheres to the principle of being oriented toward deep learning and adopts the activity-based approach to English learning as the instructional method, with a total of six activities designed. These six teaching activities progress step by step from text-based activities to in-depth text exploration activities, and then to beyond-text activities, guiding students from the superficial to the profound to analyze the plot and character traits, grasp the features of the O. Henry-style ending, and further understand the relationship between "affection and law."

[Text Analysis]:

[What]The text type of this lesson is an excerpt from a short story. The story is about two close friends who agreed to meet again after twenty years. The excerpt presents the scene in which the protagonists, Bob and Jimmy, wait to reunite at the appointed time and place. The two were once inseparable

friends; when they parted, one remained in New York to build his life while the other went west to seek his fortune. However, the changes wrought by two decades have altered their identities, morals, and destinies. Bob, in his pursuit of wealth, has gone astray, whereas Jimmy has upheld the law and become a police officer. By the time they reunite, they stand in opposition as "pursuer" and "fugitive."

[How] This text employs first-person narration and dialogue to drive the plot forward, with Bob's monologue providing the background and gradually revealing the conflict. The O. Henry-style ending is both unexpected and plausible.

[Why] This lesson aims to guide students to explore the relationship between friendship and law, enabling them to correctly understand this relationship and realize that true friendship is a precious treasure, but by no means a shield for illegal acts.

[Students Analysis]:

- 1) Students can sort out the basic plot (using the 5W1H framework), but inferring implicit information, such as character analysis, requires teachers' guidance.
- 2) Students have preliminary views on concepts such as "friendship," "justice," and "success," but may hold black-and-white judgments. The moral conflict in the story can provoke reflection: students may simply judge Jimmy as having "betrayed his friend" and find it difficult to understand his dilemma between "duty and friendship," as well as O. Henry's presentation of the complexity of human nature.
- 3) Students lack background knowledge of early 20th-century American westward expansion, urban development and change, and social order, which may affect their understanding of the characters' choices (e.g., going west to seek adventure, becoming a police officer).
- 4) Students have been exposed to some of O. Henry's short stories, but they may lack a systematic understanding of the O. Henry-style ending, and their ability to appreciate "foreshadowing" and "surprise endings" needs to be further developed.

[Teaching Objectives]

- 1) Infer the characters' personalities based on the descriptions in the story.
- 2) Predict the ending of the story with prompts and compare it with the original ending, thus deepening their understanding of the characteristics of the O. Henry-style ending.
- 3) Relate the story to their own life experiences, further explore the meaning and essence of friendship, think dialectically about the relationship between friendship and law, and develop a correct view of friendship.

#### **4.1. Learning and Understanding Activities: Based on Texts**

"Learning and Understanding" is the first stage of English learning activities. Teaching design based on learning and understanding activities involves acquiring textual information, including themes and text content, through activities such as perception and attention, acquisition and sorting, and generalization and integration; establishing connections between the textual information and learners; and forming new knowledge structures or experiences (Cao et al., 2024).

Activity1: Guess

Guide Ss to guess the subject of a simple resume through some key information.

[Students behavior]Ss read the resume to guess the subject----O. Henry.

[Design Purpose]Arise students' interest and introduce the author of this story.

Activity 2: Ask and Answer

-What aspects of a person may change and which may remain relatively stable after twenty years? (T guide students to think about appearance, job, status.....)

[Students' behavior]Ss talk about their opinions with their partner.

[Design Purpose]Activate Ss' existing knowledge and emotional experiences related to time, growth, and change, and create a positive classroom atmosphere; guide Ss to think from specific dimensions such as appearance, occupation, and social status, which correspond directly to the dramatic changes undergone by the two protagonists, Bob and Jimmy, in the text.

#### Activity 3: Scan and Obtain

1)T uses mind map to help Ss figure out the main elements (characters, setting, and plot) of the story.

2)T guides Ss to find out the main time of the story told by the man.

[Students' behaviors]

1)Ss fill in the mind map to gain the key information of this story.

2)Ss comb the timeline of the story and get the order of the story.

[Design Purpose]Guide Ss to identify the core elements of the short story and establish initial connections between the story elements and the theme, and help them sort out the timeline of the story to lay the groundwork for subsequent text analysis following the chronological thread.

## 4.2. Applying and Practicing Activities: In-depth Text Exploration

Building on learning and understanding activities, teachers need to implement in-depth text exploration activities for applying and practicing to help students, drawing on the knowledge structures they have acquired, engage in activities such as description and interpretation, analysis and judgment, and internalization and application, so as to achieve the description, analysis, and internalization of what they have learned.

#### Activity 4: Analyze and Reason

1) Guide Ss to analyze the character's change of feelings (Bob) through the actions and words of characters in time order.

2) Analyze the personalities of Jimmy and Bob with supporting evidence.

[Students' behaviors]Ss work in groups to find details about the plot and characters to infer the feelings and personalities of characters.

[Design Purpose]Guide students to infer the characters' emotions and personalities by analyzing the plot of the story, thereby cultivating their logical reasoning abilities through such analytical and inferential activities.

#### Activity 5: Create and Compare

1)Think of a possible ending to this story.

Q1: Did Jimmy come to meet his friend?

Q2: What might be their jobs after twenty years?

2)Guide Ss to read the note from the original ending and find out what actually happened.

Q1:Did Jimmy come to meet his friend?

Q2:What did Bob experience over the past twenty years?

Q3: Did Jimmy arrest Bob in person?

3) Guide Ss to compare their ending and the original ending and ask “Do you like the original ending and why?” and then introduce O. Henry’s style endings to Ss.

[Students’ behaviors]

- 1) Ss have a discussion based on the guidance of questions and give a surprising ending.
- 2) Ss read the note and obtain some information about the original ending.
- 3) Ss compare their ending with the original one and analyze the features of O. Henry’s style endings.

[Design Purpose] Guide Ss to create their own ending for the story based on textual clues, and then provide Ss with the original text information and guide them to infer the actual ending of the story. Finally, guide students to compare the two endings and deduce the merits or functions of the O. Henry-style ending.

### **4.3. Transferring and Innovating Activities: Beyond-text Exploration**

Transferring and innovating activities involve activities such as reasoning and argumentation, criticism and evaluation, and imagination and creation, through which beyond-text learning is carried out. Through these activities, students can engage in critical reflection on the author's attitude, intentions, and value orientations behind the text, thereby deepening their understanding of the thematic meaning. They can also attempt to apply what they have learned to express their own views in new contexts, thereby engaging in deep learning.

Activity 6: Discuss and Share

Ask Ss to discuss “Do you think that Jimmy did the right thing? Why or why not?”

[Students’ behaviors] Ss discuss whether Jimmy made the right choice and then share in the class.

[Design Purpose] Guide Ss to go beyond the plot of the story and engage in deep critical reflection on the moral dilemma of "friendship versus law" presented in the text.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Deep learning serves as a crucial lever for translating core competencies into classroom practice, providing directional guidance for the design of English teaching activities. To achieve deep learning, this paper adheres to three major principles in designing English reading teaching activities. First, adopt a student-centered approach and proceed from students' learning situations to enable students to engage in rich and meaningful learning activities fully. Second, adhere to the activity-based approach and design English learning activities following the sequence of text-based, in-depth text exploration, and beyond-text activities. Third, be guided by the core competencies, emphasize the logical coherence between preceding and subsequent activities, and stress the engagement of higher-order thinking. In exploring the design of English reading instructional activities oriented toward deep learning, this study has shifted away from the problems of formalization of learning activities, superficialization of content, and passivization of the learning subject, emphasized the central role of learners, and mobilized the full engagement of higher-order thinking in English reading. To a certain extent, it offers insights for frontline teachers in designing English reading teaching activities.

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