

The Learning Activity Design of Aesthetic Education in Junior High School English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: To promote the all-round development of Chinese students in virtue, intelligence, physics, aesthetics, and labor has been one of the significant goals of contemporary education. Aesthetic education, as a core of the "Five Integrated Education" system, plays a crucial role in educational development. However, aesthetic education resources involved in English reading teaching in junior high school have not come to the great notice of English teachers. And the existed teaching cases involving aesthetic education only present a superficial interpretation of art. Based on the situation, this paper will take an example of a reading text in Unit1 Section B in the English textbook of PEP version in grade 8, book 1, with the title "Where did you go on vacation", to explain the steps of designing aesthetic education learning activities in junior high school English reading teaching. And the learning activity design tries to help junior high students realize three levels in Activity-based Language Teaching on aesthetic knowledge involved in the reading text, which consists of perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, transferring and creating. The paper aims at providing new teaching ideas for junior high school English reading teaching to improve students' ability to know, feel, and create beauty.

1. Introduction

In 2020, *the Opinions on Comprehensive Strengthening and Improvement of School Aesthetic Education in the New Era* issued by the General Office of the State Council mentioned that: "Education should fully explore and utilize the rich aesthetic resources contained in various disciplines that reflect the spirit of Chinese aesthetic education and national aesthetic characteristics, organically integrate aesthetic education contents into the relevant disciplines, and vigorously carry out interdisciplinary education and teaching activities in the topic of aesthetic education." China's emphasis on aesthetic education is one of the manifestations of the national education curriculum reform in the new era. However, taking the English subject as an example, the integration of aesthetic education into curriculum teaching is relatively shallow. As one of the humanities, English subject plays a major role in cultivating students' aesthetic literacy and personal qualities, yet has not been fully explored in English teaching. The application of aesthetic educational resources in English teaching has left to be further developed. Therefore, under the background of China's new curriculum standards reform, this paper will take an example of a reading text in Unit1 Section B in the English textbook of PEP version in grade 8, book 1, to discuss how to design English reading

learning activities in the sight of aesthetic education, to develop students' healthy aesthetic taste and rich humanistic literacy, and help English education achieve the goal of cultivating learners' sense of beauty in the instruction process.

2. The Significance of Aesthetic Education and Related Learning Activities

Aesthetic education is not only a major means to penetrate aesthetics into the instruction process, but also a precondition to promote the all-round development of students, which aims to improve learners' ability to know, feel, and create beauty, so that learners can cultivate their sentiments and form correct and unique aesthetic values in the learning process. Many scholars in China have conducted deep research on aesthetic education. Yuanpei Cai, a well-known educator in China, once incorporated aesthetic education into the education policy in the spirit of "absorbing the essence from east to west", and formed an aesthetic education ideological system in line of a strong humanistic spirit, a solid academic foundation and rich educational experience.^[1] The scholar Li Jie believes that artistic education, which aims to promote people's freedom and all-round development, is of high value in present-day society. It is one of the useful ways to help youngsters establish a correct outlook on the world, life, and values, and improve their moral sentiments and aesthetic literacy.^[2] Yiyi Zuo believes that aesthetic education is the education of individual characters. Its goal is not just to learn artistic knowledge or improve aesthetic literacy, but also to achieve the improvement of individual characters and the all-round development in knowledge, emotion, and willingness.^[3] In 2023, the Ministry of Education pointed out in the *Notice on the Comprehensive Implementation of the Immersion Action in School's Aesthetic Education* that: "Education should engage students in aesthetic learning, and comprehensively improve students' key literacy including cultural understanding, aesthetic perception, artistic expression, and creative practice, to enrich students' spiritual and cultural life, and shape students a more pleasant emotion, a more vigorous mind, and a more perfect character." An obvious conclusion can be drawn that aesthetic education is one of the important means to cultivate students' key literacy, which makes significant contributions to cultivating students' cultural awareness and thinking quality. The English subject, as a language discipline, involves a wide range of topics in reading, including social life, natural life, life value, cultural consciousness, etc. Therefore, there are surely more or less aesthetic contents in English subject, such as language rhetoric, emotional expression, individual quality, artistic appreciation, and so on. Based on it, the integration of aesthetic education into junior high school English teaching has become a prerequisite for cultivating students' key literacy in English subject. However, current studies on integrating aesthetic education into junior high school English reading teaching are mainly based on the past teaching model of basic language knowledge and skills, which offer little help in achieving the goal of promoting the development of students' key literacy through the way of aesthetic education. Therefore, junior high English teachers should turn to a new teaching model to encourage the application of aesthetic education in junior high school English teaching.

Activity-based Language Teaching is a new student-centered teaching model, which through teachers' creating different kinds of real contexts and designing a variety of meaningful activities based on the topic of texts, cultivates students' language competence, thinking ability, and creative ability, so that students can finish the understanding and construction of new language knowledge in activities, apply knowledge in real life, and try to achieve meaningful innovation by using language. The emergence of Activity-based Language Teaching not only provides favorable conditions for the smooth process of English reading teaching under the background of the initiative of key literacy, but also offers new ideas to the teaching method with aesthetic education as a means and cultivating students' key literacy as the ultimate goal in junior high English lessons. However, nowadays, although the teaching design of reading lessons under the guidance of Activity-based Language

Teaching has deeply explored the meaning behind the reading topic, it only achieves vertical teaching related to the topic, and rarely extends the topic horizontally to truly realize the organic development of the Five Integrated Education, thus aesthetic education is often left ignored. Such a current condition has resulted in many problems, such as teachers' paying little attention to aesthetic education, the incomplete development of aesthetic resources in teaching materials, and students' lower aesthetic ability and interest in English reading. All these problems are not conducive to the all-round development of students. Therefore, in line with the trend of putting emphasis on cultivating students' key literacy, it is of great and practical significance for English teachers to design learning activities with aesthetic education as the approach and Activity-based Language Teaching as the framework in junior high school English reading teaching.

3. The Learning Activity Design Strategies of Aesthetic Education

3.1 Multi-modal teaching helps students know beauty and achieve the level of perceiving and understanding

Multi-modal refers to the existence of two or more modes in communication and meaning construction. These modes often indicate ways of information communication, including text, vision, hearing, space, gestures, etc.^[4] To apply it into teaching, teachers can establish the connection between the external environment and students' multiple senses by integrating images, sounds, videos, and other modal information into teaching processes, so that students can perceive knowledge under multiple experiences as well as improve their interest and participation in learning, which is helpful for them to better understand and master knowledge. The appearance of multi-modal teaching has undoubtedly facilitated the design of aesthetic education activities in English teaching. Teachers can prepare aesthetic audio or videos related to the reading topic before class to help students closely observe beauty. Multi-modal teaching often brings stronger and more direct stimulation than text to students' senses. Therefore, with the help of multi-modal tools, teachers can create real contexts for students, and implement various learning activities centered on students, so that the association between students and the content and structure of the text will be built into learning activities. In this way, it will be easier for students to construct a preliminary cognition and understanding of the reading text. In addition, multi-modal teaching also provides students with an opportunity to feel a more authentic text and feel the beauty of language by being engaged in the created context, which helps further develop students' aesthetic ability in language. At the same time, multi-modal teaching meets the learning habits of students with different learning styles. Both visual-preferred and auditory-preferred students will be immersed in multi-modal lessons, which hugely improves students' participation in learning activities and the final learning effect, and facilitates further implementation of the follow-up learning activities. In the process of multi-modal activities, teachers can also focus on the language expression of students' emotional attitudes. Multi-modal teaching will definitely trigger changes in students' emotions on the basis of displaying different forms of information. Therefore, teachers can take this opportunity to invite students to express their changing feelings during the process of learning activities, and guide students to search for more chunks that express one's emotional attitudes with the help of dictionaries or other kinds of tools, so as to develop students' perception and expression of different emotions. Under the vivid images of audio and video, chunks will not just be a simple combination of letters, but will be added with more sentimental colors. It will benefit students in deepening their memory of strange chunks, and further understanding the beauty of language.

Taking Jane's first diary in this article as an example, teachers can record audio in Jane's stand to simulate a probable dialogue between Jane and students as a clue to create a context. At the beginning of the lesson, teachers play the pre-recorded audio to students: "Hi, I'm Jane. I went to a

wonderful place on my summer vacation. Can you guess where did I go according to the hints for you?" After that, a video about the delicious Malaysian food and beautiful scenery will be presented for students to guess Jane's travel destination while enjoying the characteristics and customs of Malaysia. After guessing, teachers play the next audio from Jane: "How smart you are! Here I prepared my diary and four pictures for you to show my colorful vacation. Let's enjoy together. By the way, can you guess my different feelings during my stay in Malaysia? Let's have a try!" Then students will achieve an understanding of reading text under such an interactive context of making dialogues with Jane. In such a process of learning activity, not only students' attention will be attracted and curiosity be stimulated by topic-related pictures, audio, videos, etc., but also the vocabulary of emotional expression in the reading text be expanded while making the vocabulary more specific and vivid. In this way, students can construct knowledge in a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere.

3.2 Cooperative learning helps students feel beauty and achieve the level of applying and practicing

Cooperative learning is a new teaching method that differentiates the traditional big-class teaching method in its form of implementation. In cooperative learning, students are divided into different groups with a common goal. While each student plays different roles and is responsible for different tasks in the group, each group member must work together to learn and achieve the given goal. Cooperative learning provides students with the opportunity to show and express themselves, so that students can freely express their aesthetic views on the basis of the learning topic in their group. It not only helps students enhance language expression competence and deeply perceives the language beauty, but also exposes students to different views and ideas to feel different kinds of beauty, based on which, students will enrich their aesthetic literacy and have a deeper understanding of aesthetics. At the same time, cooperative learning provides a platform for a collision of ideas from students, which is a stimulus for students' creative thinking to apply the gained knowledge from textbooks into practice through collective brainstorming. Apart from that, students' awareness and ability to feel beauty in practice will be strengthened, which will allow students to realize the combination of learning and application under the nurture of aesthetics.

Taking this article as an example, teachers can organize a group activity titled "Where did I go on vacation?" In this activity, four students in a group share their summer vacation experiences, and select one most interesting story as the main learning content in the group. Then students try to draw the selected story on a piece of paper in the form of stick figure, and write the corresponding contents beside the pictures with the text structure as a frame. Finally, students should show their cooperative learning results in an oral presentation with their stick figures as hints. In detail, each group member takes different roles (leader, painter, connector, and presenter) under the guidance of teachers, and is required to complete the corresponding tasks: first, the leader needs to organize the group to select a story as the main discussing content, and ensures that the whole discussion process is conducted orderly and efficiently. Besides, the painter is required to draw stick figures based on the chosen topic, including the visited scenic spots, delicious cuisine, encountered interesting things, and so on. Third, the connector is responsible for connecting the discussed contents with the gained knowledge in this lesson to apply what they have learned into practice. At the same time, teachers should encourage students to recall the prior knowledge and integrate the previous knowledge with the new one. At last, the presenter should display the discussion results completely with concise language and clear logic in public. In addition, teachers should emphasize that in the process of cooperative learning, all the group members should work together and make joint efforts to solve the problem, instead of only focusing on their own tasks and jumping to conclusions. It is advisable

for teachers to walk around during the group discussion and offer help if necessary. Finally, after the group presentation, various forms of evaluation such as self-evaluation and peer-evaluation can be provided for students to exchange different aesthetic views among groups. In the end, the whole class tries to select one winner group, and the teacher makes a summary. The homework, serving as an extension of the in-class activity, requires students to write a diary attached with stick figures based on their own summer vacation, and some students will be invited to show their homework next time. In this way, activities on aesthetic education are able to run through the whole English learning process for students both in and after class, and the English reading teaching can also have an effect in refining the mind and cultivating the sentiment.

3.3 Situational role-play activity helps students create beauty and achieve the level of transferring and creating

Studies have shown that junior high school students are quick and active thinkers, therefore, teachers should use different teaching methods and design various teaching activities to fully stimulate students' creative thinking, so that students can realize the level of transferring and creating under a vivid and lively atmosphere.^[5] Situational role-play activity refers to a learning activity in which teachers create a situation relevant to the reading topic, and take students as main characters in the situation, the acting activities as the basis, to provide a platform for students to express and communicate freely with the gained language knowledge, and perform different characters by designing their physical gestures as an assist. In the activity, students will be put in the characters' positions to experience their feelings and life in person. In the process of preparing and performing the play, students can not only feel the beauty of language, action, and culture, but also create beauty in their free design of dialogues and actions, to realize the effective transferring of knowledge, perform an effective output of language knowledge, and create new momentum for innovation.

Taking this article as an example, teachers can introduce Jane's first diary with the mentioned Weld Quay as a key element to elicit Zheng He's great voyages to the West in the Ming Dynasty (The Weld Quay is a street in Penang, Malaysia. It was said that Zheng He stayed there on his way to the West in 1405. After that, the residents of the southeast coast of China migrated to Southeast Asia for better development. Therefore, many Chinese-style buildings over a century ago were left there by Chinese merchants.). First, teachers can play a video about Zheng He's voyages to the west, and guide students to summarize Zheng He's good individual qualities, such as dedication, loyalty, courage, and perseverance. Then, an activity of a situational role-play called "I am the ____ Zheng He" will be arranged for students. Students work in groups to fill in line with any words about Zheng He's qualities, and take the finished title as the topic to wander their imaginations on what difficulties Zheng He would have met and how to overcome them in his voyages to the West to present the corresponding qualities. And teachers need to remind students to make good use of the grammar simple past tense learned in this unit in the process of preparation and performance. By playing the role of Zheng He in short English dramas, students can better understand Zheng He's good qualities. The short drama itself is exactly a collection of beauty created in the cooperation of student groups, which is the embodiment of students' aesthetic views and literacy. In the activity, students flexibly integrate the simple past tense and Zheng He's spirits discussed in class, by which the knowledge is not simply limited to textbooks and classrooms, but transferred and created autonomously by students. Apart from that, students also have the chance to know the great figures and historical events in China, thus enhancing students' sense of national pride and cultural confidence, enriching students' spiritual culture literacy, and further improving students' perception and understanding of the beauty of China's excellent culture.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores and presents the learning activity design of aesthetic education through three types of activities, including multi-modal teaching, cooperative learning, and situational role-play activity in junior high school English reading teaching with a reading text of PEP version in grade 8, book 1, as an example. It is hoped that the importance of aesthetic education will be emphasized in junior high school English teaching. The paper tries to provide some methodological references in reading teaching for future junior high school English teachers, so that junior high school students can enrich their sentimental experience in English learning processes under the influence of aesthetic education to achieve the goal of cultivating students' awareness and ability to know, feel, and create beauty, and finally promote the key literacy in students' comprehensive development.

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