

Research on High School English Reading Instruction with a Focus on Deep Learning

Mengwei Zheng

College of Foreign Languages, China Three Gorges University, Yichang 443002, Hubei, China

Abstract: *Deep learning in teaching is a meaningful learning process in which students are the center of the classroom, fully engaged and participating in learning activities, thus achieving healthy development. Focusing on deep learning in English instruction helps to break away from fragmented language teaching, guiding students to explore the deeper meanings of texts and to establish correct emotional attitudes and values towards society, themselves, and nature. This paper aims to explore, using the high school reading lesson "The Stone in the Road" as an example, how to practice the principle of fostering integrity and promoting rounded development in high school English classrooms through a focus on deep learning, and to propose corresponding recommendations.*

Keywords: Deep learning, English instruction, Fostering integrity and promoting rounded development.

1. Introduction

The current reform of the high school curriculum emphasizes educational goals and the cultivation of students' subject literacy. Within this context, how to realize the fundamental educational mission of fostering integrity and promoting rounded development in senior high school English classrooms has become a central concern in teaching research and practice. The educational value of the high school English curriculum is largely realized through contextualized language learning, in which students use language to interpret experience, negotiate meanings, and respond to themes that connect individual development with social life. The curriculum standards highlight thematic meaning as a core task of teaching and learning, asking teachers to integrate learning content and guide students' development of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. Because reading texts are the most concentrated carriers of theme, discourse organization, and cultural perspective, the depth of students' understanding of thematic context and discourse directly shapes their language learning outcomes and the quality of their moral and intellectual growth.

In many traditional English reading classrooms, teaching often remains dominated by the explanation and practice of linguistic points, while thematic exploration and discourse study receive limited attention. This pattern can lead to fragmented learning in which students recognize words and sentence structures but do not develop stable interpretive frameworks for understanding whole texts. Students may locate explicit information quickly yet struggle to infer motives, evaluate viewpoints, or connect the author's choices with the text's deeper meanings. At the same time, values education can become superficial when it is added as a brief conclusion rather than being built through sustained textual inquiry and evidence-based discussion. The result is that students' reading experiences are frequently shallow and exam-oriented, which limits their ability to construct meaning, solve problems through language, and form reflective value positions.

Deep learning provides a useful lens for addressing these problems because it focuses on meaningful understanding, integration of knowledge, and transfer to new contexts.

Research on approaches to learning suggests that deep learning is associated with an intention to understand, an effort to relate ideas, and an orientation toward meaning rather than simple recall. (Marton & Säljö, 1976) In senior high school English reading, deep learning requires instructional designs that help students move from surface comprehension toward discourse-level understanding, interpretive reasoning, and value reflection. The "Ordinary High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)" emphasizes that "the English curriculum should regard the exploration of thematic meaning as the core task of teaching and learning, integrating learning content to guide the integrated development of students' language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability." In the entire language learning process, the depth of students' understanding of thematic context and discourse will directly affect their language learning outcomes, the formation of core literacy, and the effectiveness of moral education. However, in traditional English classrooms, teachers often focus only on the imparting and training of language knowledge, neglecting the exploration of thematic meaning and discourse study. This can lead to fragmented, superficial, and labeled English teaching and learning, limiting students' ability to understand language knowledge, construct thematic meaning, and solve real-world problems. It also hinders the development of students' critical thinking and correct values (Wang Qiang, 2021). How to implement deep learning to truly develop students' core English literacy has become a pressing issue in the current curriculum reform. In recent years, many scholars have conducted research and exploration on deep learning from different perspectives, providing insights into solving the problem of fragmented language learning in traditional English teaching. Deep learning is a complex and systematic process of developing cognitive and value judgment abilities. It is difficult to achieve this through learning based on a single discourse or structure. The new curriculum standards propose that high school English teaching should focus on subject-based big concepts, structuring teaching content, leading with thematic contexts, and contextualizing course content to promote the implementation of core literacy. This requires high school English teachers to shift from fragmented language point learning to in-depth learning of discourse content and connotation, and from superficial, fragmented learning to deep, integrated, and related learning. Therefore, the author attempts to focus on deep learning theory, actively

exploring high school English teaching design and classroom practice, focusing on core English literacy, integrating language knowledge and skills, setting reasonable emotional goals, and shaping students' cultural character. This approach aims to move English teaching from fragmentation to integration, and student learning from superficial to deep, thereby improving the effectiveness of moral education.

The text "The Stone in The Road" from the People's Education Press Senior High English Compulsory Book 3, Unit 2 "Morals and Virtues," offers an appropriate case because it presents a simple yet powerful narrative about personal responsibility, civic virtue, and social observation. This fable implicitly raises profound ethical questions about action versus complaint, and individual duty towards communal welfare. This paper will explore, using this reading lesson as an example, how to practice the principle of fostering integrity and promoting rounded development in high school English classrooms through a focus on deep learning, and propose corresponding recommendations.

2. The Connotation and Characteristics of Deep Learning

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have conducted research and exploration on deep learning from various levels and perspectives. In the field of domestic education, He Ling and Li Jiahou (2005) were among the earlier researchers to define the concept of deep learning. They believed that deep learning refers to learners critically learning new ideas and knowledge on the basis of understanding, and internalizing them into their existing cognitive framework. This process connects new and old ideas, allowing learners to transfer existing knowledge to new contexts, make appropriate decisions, and solve problems. Kang Shumin (2016) described deep learning qualitatively in terms of participation level, thinking depth, and cognitive experience, using learning state as a starting point. Guo Hua (2016) defined deep learning as a meaningful learning process where students, under the guidance of teachers, engage fully and actively in challenging learning topics, experience success, and achieve development.

In educational theory, deep learning is commonly contrasted with surface learning. Surface learning often emphasizes memorization of disconnected facts and short-term performance, while deep learning emphasizes understanding, integration, and the ability to apply knowledge in new situations. In reading instruction, this contrast can be observed in whether students treat a text as a collection of sentences to translate or as a meaningful discourse to interpret and respond to. Deep learning in reading is reflected in students' ability to build coherent representations of what the text is about, to explain how the author organizes ideas, to infer meanings that are not directly stated, and to evaluate viewpoints and values implied by the discourse.

From the perspective of reading comprehension, deep learning requires students to move beyond decoding and to engage with the text at the level of thematic meaning and discourse logic. Students need opportunities to connect details across paragraphs, interpret relationships among events and characters, and recognize how language choices contribute to

tone and stance. This process is not achieved by a single question or a single skill drill; it develops through carefully sequenced tasks that require students to read with purposes, gather evidence, and justify interpretations. Deep learning also has an affective and ethical dimension in English reading classrooms because many texts contain value-laden themes. Students' emotional engagement can support deeper comprehension when it is guided toward reflective discussion and reasoned judgment rather than being treated as an afterthought.

Deep learning is also shaped by classroom assessment and learning environment. If assessment focuses narrowly on recalling information or identifying grammatical structures, students are encouraged to adopt surface strategies. Instruction becomes more likely to foster deep learning when intended outcomes, learning activities, and assessment are aligned so that students are rewarded for interpretation, reasoning, and meaningful language use rather than for mechanical completion. This alignment is especially important in reading classes that aim to support both language competence and moral education, because students need consistent signals that thematic exploration and evidence-based thinking matter.

3. Designing an English Reading and Writing Lesson Focused on Deep Learning

Designing a deep learning-oriented reading lesson requires teachers to treat the text as an integrated discourse and to organize classroom activities around meaning construction. The reading lesson "The Stone in The Road" can be taught in ways that help students understand the narrative sequence while also engaging with the implied themes of civic virtue, personal responsibility, and the social contract. A deep learning design pays attention to unit coherence, the progression of cognitive demands, and the integration of reading with speaking and writing tasks that require students to express and justify their understanding.

3.1 Summarizing Unit Knowledge Content and Setting Layered Teaching Goals

Under the new curriculum standards, teachers are required to transcend the limitations of isolated lesson planning and adopt a holistic, unit-based perspective. This macro-level approach involves the strategic integration of core knowledge points, the refinement of teaching tasks to ensure thematic coherence, and the design of an instructional sequence that promotes cumulative learning. For a unit centered on abstract concepts like "Morals and Virtues," this overarching framework is paramount. The unit's educational aim is to move students from a passive recognition of virtuous terms to an active, analytical, and personal engagement with ethical principles as they manifest in narratives, historical accounts, and contemporary life. Within this schema, the fable "The Stone in The Road" serves as a foundational and accessible narrative core. It provides a concrete, story-driven gateway into the unit's abstract themes, allowing students to explore complex ideas like personal responsibility, civic duty, social observation, and the disparity between complaint and action within a defined and relatable scenario.

When designing a deep learning-oriented teaching plan for this text, teachers must carefully consider students' cognitive readiness and developmental characteristics. The parable's apparent simplicity can be deceptive; while the language is accessible to high school learners, the underlying philosophical and ethical questions require guided scaffolding to reach deeper comprehension. Therefore, the instructional design must strategically bridge the gap between the simple plot and its profound implications, reducing cognitive load on language decoding while incrementally increasing demand on ethical reasoning and critical analysis. To achieve this, a structured framework using the dimensions of "what," "how," and "why" is employed to set layered, progressive goals that guide students from textual comprehension to personal internalization and real-world transfer.

In the "what" dimension, the focus is on building a solid foundation of narrative and linguistic understanding. The primary goal is for students to accurately comprehend and articulate the basic storyline: a king places a large stone on a public road, observes various citizens reacting with complaint or passive avoidance, and finally witnesses a young village girl who, after others have passed, exerts considerable effort to remove the stone, discovering a purse of gold coins left beneath it as a reward. At this layer, teaching tasks are designed for students to meticulously extract and sequence these key events. Furthermore, students should identify and categorize the key characters and their direct speech or actions (e.g., the merchant's anger, the soldier's blame of the king's servants, the farmers' complaint about the rich). This stage also involves clarifying core vocabulary related to the theme, such as "obstacle," "complain," "responsibility," "perseverance," and "reward." A potential activity could involve creating a detailed timeline or a character-action chart, ensuring all students share a common and accurate baseline understanding of the fable's literal content before proceeding to interpretation.

In the "how" dimension, the instructional focus shifts decisively from what happens to how the story is constructed to generate meaning—a core tenet of discourse analysis in deep learning. Here, students are guided to analyze the author's craft and the textual mechanics that shape the fable's impact. This involves a multi-faceted analysis: examining the contrastive structure that juxtaposes the inaction of the adult passersby with the decisive action of the young girl; analyzing the function of dialogue in revealing character (e.g., how complaints expose a mindset focused on blame rather than solution); and investigating the use of symbolic elements (the stone as a metaphor for communal problems, the road as society's shared path, the gold as the tangible and intangible rewards of virtue). Teachers can design tasks that require students to create a comparative grid analyzing the motivations, actions, and implied virtues/flaws of each character. More advanced analysis can deconstruct the narrative pacing and the king's role as an observer, prompting questions about point of view. The culminating task for this dimension is the co-creation of a sophisticated "Text Structure Information Diagram." This diagram would not merely summarize paragraphs but visually map the rising action (the placement of the stone, successive failures), the climax (the girl's decision and action), and the resolution (the discovery and the king's revelation), explicitly linking each narrative

stage to the character traits being highlighted and the thematic ideas being developed. This process transforms the text from a simple story into a studied artifact of deliberate composition.

In the "why" dimension, the goals ascend to the level of critical interpretation, ethical evaluation, and personal synthesis, which represent the pinnacle of deep learning engagement. This layer challenges students to interrogate the purpose and broader significance of the text. Key questions drive this exploration: Why did the king choose this specific test? What does the fable suggest about the author's critique of societal behavior? What is the underlying commentary on the relationship between individual action and collective welfare? More critically, students are encouraged to engage in evaluative reasoning: Is the king's method of testing his people ethically justified? Who is the true moral agent—the active girl or the testing king? Finally, and most importantly, deep learning necessitates transfer. Therefore, teaching tasks must explicitly bridge the textual theme to the students' lived reality. Teachers can design reflective discussions or writing prompts: "What are the modern-day 'stones in the road' in our school or community?" "Identify a situation where people tend to complain rather than act. Propose a constructive solution." A powerful project-based extension could involve students documenting a minor communal issue, designing a small-scale intervention, and reflecting on the process in light of the fable's themes. This dimension moves beyond the text to foster the development of moral reasoning, empathetic insight, and a sense of agency, thereby directly fulfilling the unit's goal of exploring "Morals and Virtues" and the overarching educational mission of fostering integrity and rounded development.

3.2 Adopting a Question-Guided Model to Promote Deep Thinking

A question-guided model is indispensable for scaffolding students' cognitive journey from grasping the literal plot of "The Stone in The Road" toward deciphering its layered allegorical significance. This pedagogical approach employs a carefully sequenced taxonomy of questions, each designed to activate a distinct level of thinking, thereby systematically cultivating the interpretive and evaluative skills central to deep learning. The process begins with foundational questions that establish a common understanding of the narrative, such as inquiring where the king placed the stone, who encountered it, and what the young girl ultimately discovered. These queries ensure all students have an accurate factual baseline, preventing higher-order discussion from being derailed by misunderstandings of the text. As this comprehension stabilizes, the questioning strategically advances to the interpretive and analytical plane. Students are prompted to delve into character motivation, authorial craft, and symbolic meaning. They might explore why the king conceived of such a test, analyze how the reactions of the various passersby such as spilling goods, damaging carts, and voicing complaints collectively reveal a societal attitude of blame and avoidance, and consider the symbolic weight of the stone as an obstacle and the gold as a reward. The question challenges students to reflect on why the author chose a young girl, often associated with innocence and lack of authority, to be the agent of resolution, contrasting her with the adult citizens. This stage trains students to read inferentially, connecting textual details

to broader patterns and implicit meanings.

The model culminates in evaluative and reflective questions that tether textual analysis to ethical reasoning and personal judgment, a hallmark of deep engagement. These questions invite students to critique the king's methodology, debating whether deception is a fair means to teach a moral lesson, and to ponder who the true hero of the narrative is—the proactive girl or the instructive king. Most significantly, they drive transfer by asking students to articulate the fable's core moral and to identify analogous "stones" in their own modern contexts, be they in school, local communities, or digital spaces. To deepen thinking further, teachers must skillfully employ follow-up prompts that demand evidential support, pressing a student who claims "the girl was selfless" to pinpoint the exact action or dialogue that demonstrates this trait. This continuous cycle of question-evidence-elaboration sharpens both linguistic precision and critical thought, ensuring that discussions remain anchored in the text while reaching toward abstract, value-laden reflection. To support deep thinking, teachers can also incorporate ongoing feedback into questioning. When students answer, teachers can ask follow-up prompts that require elaboration, clarification, or evidence. This kind of interaction helps students refine both language and thinking during the learning process rather than only at the end. Formative assessment research emphasizes that feedback is most effective when it helps learners understand the goal, recognize gaps, and take actionable steps to improve. (Black & Wiliam, 1998)

3.3 Closely Integrating Life Elements to Hone Practical Subject Skills

The new curriculum standards require middle school English teachers to focus on improving students' language application abilities, enabling them to flexibly apply the subject knowledge they have learned in practical environments. Therefore, in English reading instruction, teachers can introduce familiar life elements to students, guiding them to apply their acquired knowledge in real-life scenarios and honing their practical subject skills. When constructing practical life scenarios, teachers need to consider students' daily living environments and design scientifically reasonable language use scenarios that align with their physical and mental development characteristics. This approach will strengthen students' language use abilities and enhance their aesthetic and cognitive appreciation of the English language.

In the teaching of "The Stone in the Road" from the People's Education Press Senior High English Compulsory Book 3, Unit 2 "Morals and Virtues," teachers can design language use scenarios related to civic responsibility and personal initiative, based on students' actual social experiences and the communal environments around them. Teachers can employ activities such as role-playing and simulated dialogues to allow students to practice language in interactive settings. For instance, organizing a "Community Forum" where students role-play various stakeholders, such as residents, school representatives, and local officials, to discuss a persistent but neglected public issue, like a consistently clogged drain in a neighborhood or the misuse of shared study spaces at school. Through diverse language activities such as formal complaints, constructive suggestions, and persuasive

proposals, students' language expression and practical negotiation skills can be enhanced. Teachers can guide students to articulate problems, propose actionable solutions, and advocate for collective action, moving beyond mere complaint to constructive dialogue. Additionally, by analyzing modern short stories, news articles, or film clips that depict individuals tackling social 'obstacles,' students' understanding of narrative persuasion and ethical argument in English can be improved. Organizing students to reflect on and write about "stones" in their own lives, followed by peer discussions and the drafting of action plans, can help them express their insights and translate moral contemplation into practical language output.

By employing these methods, the theme of personal accountability versus collective complacency can be effectively integrated into actual teaching. This helps students to improve their language abilities and cognitive levels in a real-life context, transforming the abstract moral of the fable into a framework for engaged citizenship and purposeful communication

4. Conclusion

Overall, applying the deep learning model to high school English reading instruction can significantly enrich reading materials, innovate teaching methods, and improve students' reading experiences, thus achieving the desired teaching outcomes. Therefore, high school English teachers should carefully study the theoretical framework related to the deep learning model and explore English reading teaching plans based on deep learning, considering the characteristics of the English subject. In reading instruction, teachers should design tiered teaching questions based on the course tasks and reading material content to fully engage students' initiative in reading. Additionally, incorporating familiar life elements into teaching can help refine students' practical application skills. By adopting these approaches, teachers can continuously improve the effectiveness of reading instruction and enhance students' core English literacy.

References

- [1] Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.
- [2] Guo, H. (2016). The deep learning and its significance. *Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method*, 36 (11), 25-32.
- [3] He, L., & Li, J. H. (2005). Promoting students' deep learning. *Modern Teaching*, (5), 29–30.
- [4] Kang, S. M. (2016). A study on deep learning based on the cultivation of disciplinary literacy. *Educational Research*, 37(7), 111–118.
- [5] Marton, F., & Säljö, R. (1976). On qualitative differences in learning: I—Outcome and process. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46(1), 4–11.
- [6] Wang, Q., Zhou, M., & Cai, M. K. (2021). Integrated unit instructional design for senior high school English based on big ideas. *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools (Secondary Edition)*, 44(1), 1–7.