

An Action Research on Achieving English Core Competencies through Whole Book Reading

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This research explores whether whole book reading can realize the educational value of English through two rounds of action research. It was found that English core competencies can be achieved through careful selection of books, elaborately designed learner-centered reading tasks and teaching activities.

Keywords: whole book reading, English core competencies

Introduction

As a core foreign language and a required subject in China, English is entrusted with stimulating critical and divergent thinking, deepening intercultural understanding and improving students' comprehensive language proficiency, which constitute English core competencies. However, what kind of language materials to use and what kind of textbooks to choose directly affect the development of these core competencies. English teaching based on whole book reading is an important means worth exploring.

Whole book reading refers to treating a book as a whole and reading it holistically from the overall perspective of information acquisition, aesthetics, and meaning construction (Lu & Chen, 2021). With a high degree of comprehensiveness, contextualization and completeness, whole book reading has a unique advantage in cultivating learners' core competencies (Zhang, 2019). Teachers should give full play to its unique advantages and actively explore its nurturing path.

Raising Problems

(i) Identifying Problems

English teaching is not only the training of language skills, but should also cultivate learners' comprehensive qualities including thinking capacity, cultural awareness, and learning ability. However, the

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author has found in teaching practice that the pressure of test-taking leads to difficulties in the full implementation of core competencies education. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to explore how to effectively combine the nurturing goal of English core competencies with language skills training.

(ii) Survey Analysis

The author conducted a questionnaire survey on English core competencies, which consisted of 30 questions in four dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity and learning ability. A total of 47 adult learners participated and 41 valid questionnaires were collected. The results are as follows: the overall mean for nurturing-goal dimensions is 3.69 (language proficiency 3.50; cultural awareness 3.82; thinking capacity 3.59; learning ability 3.85). Accordingly, the overall English core competencies of the participants is at the middle-upper level ($M=3.69$), but there is a significant difference in four dimensions.

(iii) Confirming Problems

Thus, the problems of learners in the dimensions of core competencies are as follows: firstly, learners' language skills are not high, which affects learners' comprehension of the text and hinders the comprehensive development of English core competencies, and teachers need to build reading scaffolds to promote the comprehension of the whole novel. Second, learners have obstacles in higher-order thinking, and teachers need to design progressive teaching activities to realize the cultivation of lower-order thinking to higher-order thinking. Third, the depth of cultural awareness is insufficient and needs to be developed together with thinking training; fourth, learners' learning ability is not yet perfect and needs to be further consolidated and developed in the process of reading the whole book. It can be seen that learners have different degrees of room for improvement in different dimensions of English core competencies.

Developing an Action Research Program

(i) Participants

The subjects of this action research were a group of 47 adult learners in an English class. They were active and serious about their studies, but their average *Lance* value of English reading proficiency test was only 650 L. Most of the learners had not had the experience of whole book reading in English except for a few learners before the research.

(ii) Research Tools

This study utilized a combination of questionnaires, classroom observations and interviews to yield a comprehensive and in-depth account of learners' performance and development. The questionnaire, developed by the author with guidance from Guangzhou University experts, comprises 30 five-point Likert items (1 = minimum, 5 = maximum) covering four dimensions of English core competencies. All data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0. The questionnaire was piloted with 20 English adult learners and yielded a Cronbach's α of 0.90, indicating high reliability.

(iii) Research Plan

This action research lasted from mid-September 2024 to the end of December 2024, and consisted of two rounds, with the first round lasting six weeks and the second round lasting eight weeks. Each round of action

research encompassed three segments: implementation and follow-up; observation and discovery; reflection and improvement.

To explore whether the implementation of whole book reading teaching can realize the nurturing goal of English core competencies, this action research followed the principle of “whole-in, whole-out” and took the three major types of whole book lessons as the teaching guide, i.e., introductory reading lesson, discussion lesson, and application and innovation lesson (Zhang, 2018). Based on the four elements of material selection, i.e., the textual and educational value of the book, the textual and linguistic difficulty of the text and the cognitive level of the learners (Zhang, 2019), *The Secret Garden* and *Black Beauty* from Good English 10 were selected as reading materials for the first and second rounds of action research respectively.

Implementing the Action Research

Round 1: *The Secret Garden* Whole Book Reading

(1) Implementation and Follow-up

Based on the identified problems, this round of action research focused on promoting learners' understanding of the text by building a reading scaffold, with an emphasis on improving learners' language ability and thinking capacity. The specific implementation process was as follows:

An introductory reading lesson was arranged in the first week. Before the lesson, the teacher played the videos of an English manor and mockingbirds to help learners visualize the scenes of the novel and stimulate their interest in reading. During the lesson, the teacher guided the learners to predict the content of the novel based on the cover, title, table of contents, illustrations, etc. so as to form an overall perception of the content and difficulty of the text. Subsequently, learners read the first chapter of the novel in a time-limited manner and completed the corresponding reading record sheet, which contained three tasks: summarizing the chapter outline using the 5W1H method, analyzing the characters with the STEAL method, and accumulating good words and sentences. Finally, the teacher explained in detail the purpose and completion requirements of each task. In this lesson, the teacher led the learners to complete the guided reading in terms of content, methodology and language. Week 2~4 was the independent reading stage outside the classroom where learners carried out novel reading and completed the tasks according to the reading record sheet, group discussions and exchanges encouraged.

During Week 5, the teacher scheduled the first discussion lesson, focusing on the Story Mountain model for combing narrative storylines and expanding learners' logical and divergent thinking. In the class, learners began by reviewing and organizing story characters through character pairings. Learners then worked in groups to sort the chapter summaries of *The Secret Garden* that they completed prior to class. Next, learners learned the five parts of the story mountain with the aid of songs and understood the role of each part in the form of diagrams. Afterwards, under the guidance of the teacher, student groups matched the chapter summaries to the five parts of Story Mountain to visualize the plot development of the novel.

In the 6th week, the teacher arranged the second discussion class, focusing on analyzing the process of character formation (see Table 1) and change and exploring the thematic meaning of the novel, in order to enhance learners' logical thinking, critical thinking and cultural awareness. First, the teacher created a teaching scenario and introduced the class using pictures of the characters from the movie. Subsequently, student groups

presented the results of their pre-class study, i.e., the evolution of the characters of Mary and Colin, the main characters of the story, and the teacher and classmates commented and optimized the results. Then, guided by the teacher, learners discussed to determine the thematic meaning of the novel. Finally, supported by language scaffolding, learners selected their favorite fictional character and articulated why, connecting to their own lives and delivering a one-minute speech that drew inspiration from the novel.

Table 1
Character Development in The Secret Garden

Character Analysis	Mary	Colin
The Old One		
Factors		
The New One		

(2) Observation and Discovery

Through careful observation of learners' classroom performance and in-depth interviews after the first round of action research, the author found that in the first round of the whole book reading process, with the help of the well-designed reading record sheet, the multidimensional introductory lesson and the discussion lesson, the learners were from unfamiliar to familiar with the story mountain model and the STEAL character analysis method and gradually mastered these two effective reading analysis tools; through personal participation in the whole book reading activities, learners gained a complete reading experience and clarified the basic direction and method of novel reading; they increased the accumulation of vocabulary, enhanced their reading speed, improved their reading habits to a certain extent, and their logical and critical thinking were practiced, and their ability of independent learning was strengthened, and the learners learned to make progress together in group cooperation. group cooperation to make progress together.

(3) Reflection and Improvement

Under the guidance of the reading record sheet and three lessons, learners could basically complete the extraction of key information of the novel and understood the novel in terms of outlining the storyline, analyzing the characters, and exploring the thematic meaning, etc. Meanwhile, they expanded their vocabulary and felt the beauty of the novel's language and meaning in the process of accumulating good words and good sentences.

However, although the cultivation of language ability is more effective and the training of logical thinking is sufficient, the cultivation of higher-order thinking quality and cultural awareness is relatively weak. In addition, although most learners had a positive and affirmative attitude towards whole book reading, some of them mentioned in the interviews that they wished to add more discussion sessions so that they could share their reading experiences and receive feedback on the reading process in a more timely manner. Some learners also said that the first round of novel reading had not yet fully stimulated their interest in English reading, and the reading experience was average. Therefore, based on the first round of action research to promote text comprehension, the subsequent teaching should incorporate more thinking training and cultural awareness guidance to enhance learners' cultural awareness and critical and creative thinking skills, and on the other hand, increase the frequency of discussion sessions and design richer and more creative forms of teaching to further enhance the nurturing effect of whole book reading.

Round 2: *Black Beauty* Whole Book Reading

(1) Implementation and Follow-up

The second round of action research lasted for 8 weeks, aiming at creating an immersive English reading environment for learners through a more frequent and richer curriculum and putting emphasis on thinking training and cultural awareness development. *Black Beauty* is narrated from the horse’s perspective, depicting the experiences of *Black Beauty* belonging to different owners. It reflects many cultural phenomena of that society as well as the relationship between human beings and animals. The rich plot and profound connotation of the book provide good materials for learners to cultivate the quality of higher-order thinking and cultural awareness. The frequency of the curriculum was determined according to the experiences of the protagonist *Black Beauty* and the relative length of novel chapters. The specific implementation process is as follows:

The first week of the cycle was devoted to introductory reading. Given that learners were already familiar with the use of the reading task sheet, in order to activate their background knowledge and enhance their participation and interest in reading, the class began with a contest on “horses”, which guided learners to guess and identify the body parts, sensations and behaviors of horses (see Table 2 for sample questions). Then, under the guidance of the teacher, learners predicted the main content and writing perspective of the novel through the cover and table of contents. Finally, through a Q&A session, learners learned about the author of the novel, the writing background, the purpose of writing and the diversity of novel versions and formed good reading expectations. After this lesson, the stage-based discussion lessons followed the process of “independent reading outside the classroom - pre-course study - classroom output”.

Table 2
Sample Questions for Black Beauty Knowledge Competition

Items	Questions
Q4	How can a horse's age be determined by its teeth?
Q10	How does a horse's sense of vision compare to humans?
Q15	In which situation might a horse rear up on its hind legs?

A discussion lesson was conducted for chapters 1~6 in Week 2, with a thematic folding book as the form to present learners’ achievement. Before class, learners worked in groups to complete the tasks of compiling the storyline, drawing character relationship diagrams, analyzing characters, exploring themes, etc. Each task was accompanied by detailed mind maps or answer guides to realize differentiated teaching. In the classroom, after the teacher’s analysis and comments, learners revised their group results and cooperated to create their own thematic folding books under the teacher’s demonstration. In this process, learners’ participation was high and the classroom atmosphere was active while they deeply understood the theme of treating animals kindly.

Discussions around chapters 7~9 of the novel in Week 3 focused on learning script adaptation techniques for readers’ theater in preparation for subsequent adaptations. Prior to class, learners previewed the teacher-written and AI-edited (Tian, etc, 2025) script excerpts from Chapter 7, assuming that learners had difficulty in recognizing content optimized by humanized AI due to limited experience (Tian & Fussell, 2024). In the classroom, after sorting out the story outline and characterization of the three chapters, the teacher demonstrated the four major skills of plot selection, dialogue adaptation, emotion expression and action design. Learners tried

to adapt the novel excerpt from Chapter 9. With the script evaluation form, they could realize mutual evaluation in groups so as to promote the development of their comprehensive thinking capacity.

Discussions around chapters 10~14 of the novel were held around the 5th week to adapt the group's own script. Before class, learners collaborated to adapt the script of Chapter 13. In class, the teacher began by organizing the five chapters and reviewing script adaptation techniques. Afterwards, learners discussed and revised the group results and completed high-quality screenplay writing under the teacher's guidance.

During Week 6~7, learners read chapters 15~16 of the novel and rehearsed the scene in reader's theatre format. Week 8 was a presentation class, in which learners read and acted out the scripts adapted in Week 5 in groups. Teachers and student judges graded different groups in terms of script adaptation and live presentation, and selected the best script group and the best performance group for awards. Through the whole process of being scriptwriters, directors and actors in the reader's theater activities, learners' diversified thinking was expanded, their deep learning experience was richer and their interest in reading was further stimulated.

(2) Observation and Discovery

After this round of action research, the author refined the questionnaire of the confirming problem stage according to the content of the novels read and the teaching reality, and distributed it to the learners again to fill in. Questionnaire data showed mean scores of 3.72 for language ability, 3.85 for cultural awareness, 3.87 for thinking capacity, and 4.11 for learning ability. The author used SPSS 27.0 to carry out a paired samples t-test on the pre-test and post-test results of the questionnaire, and the difference was significant at $p=0.008<0.05$, indicating that whole book reading was fruitful in fostering learners' language, culture, thinking and learning ability, which helped to realize the goal of English education.

In addition, in order to further explore the effectiveness of the second round of action research, the author selected six learners to be interviewed on the basis of classroom observation and completion of the reading task sheet, focusing on instructional design and the effect of whole book reading. In terms of instructional design, all the learners interviewed unanimously said that the staged discussion lessons helped them significantly in grasping the main idea of the novel, sorting out the relationship between the characters and comprehending the thematic meaning. The thematic folding book and reader's theater activities were highly recognized, and the forms of "text reading + handcrafted activities", "independent reading + group work" were greatly accepted, which improved the degree of classroom participation and allowed learners to integrate more actively into the learning process.

In terms of the effect of whole book reading, it was highly compatible with the goal of English core competencies. In terms of language proficiency, learners not only developed good reading habits, increased reading speed and interest, but also expanded their vocabulary and strengthened their vocabulary guessing ability. At the same time, they accumulated a wealth of discourse knowledge, mastered information extraction skills and a variety of reading strategies, and effectively improved their language comprehension and application skills. In terms of thinking quality, learners' ability to analyze and summarize was significantly strengthened, and they were able to think about the relationship between characters from multiple perspectives and create a script based on the content of the novel and their own insights, showing flexibility and creativity in thinking, and promoting the development of critical and creative thinking. In terms of learning ability, learners were more adept at group cooperation, and would actively seek help from group members when they encountered difficulties. They

practiced their independent learning and collaborative learning abilities, and cultivated good learning habits and strategies. In terms of cultural awareness, learners deeply understood the importance of living in harmony with nature and animals, and learned the good qualities of being helpful, friendly, courageous, strong and hardworking, and enhanced their cultural understanding and value judgment.

(3) Reflection and Improvement

After two rounds of action research, learners made significant progress in English learning. Not only did they developed good English reading habits, English reading interest also became stronger. Their reading ability was significantly improved, their logical, critical and creative thinking was further practiced in reading and discussion activities, and their learning ability was strengthened through independent learning, group cooperation and inquiry-based learning. They also realized the rich value of life contained in the novels and gradually formed excellent values through exploring the novels' explicit or implicit thematic meanings. However, due to the large number of learning tasks designed and the limited time available for learners to read outside the classroom, the quality of some of the tasks completed varied. In addition, the cultivation of cultural awareness requires a combination of explicit and implicit teaching. In this regard, this round of action research was deficient in that the explanation of cultural knowledge in novels was not in-depth enough, and the analysis of the comparison between Chinese and foreign cultures was insufficient. These problems clarified the direction for future research and provided valuable references.

Conclusion

Whole book reading can to a certain extent improve the performance of learners in the various dimensions of the nurturing goals, so that learners have better language skills, exercise the thinking capacity in completing the tasks and develop learning ability in independent reading and group cooperation, but the cultivation of cultural awareness requires a more elaborate teaching design. The nurturing effect of whole book reading can be realized by selecting books and carefully designing student-oriented reading tasks and teaching activities, but the cultivation of core competencies itself is a long-term process. Teachers need to give learners more time to expand reading volume and reading experience and achieve significant improvement in a specific goal dimension according to the learning situation.

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