

Optimizing Question Design for English Reading Teaching

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Abstract: As an important part of English teaching, reading teaching plays an extremely important role in consolidating and expanding students' vocabulary, broadening students' knowledge horizon and improving students' reading ability and general English proficiency level. As to the quality of reading teaching, the importance of designing reading teaching questions highlights itself. From the perspective of new curriculum reform, English core literacy has been highly valued. Aiming at current problems of the design of reading teaching questions, this paper takes a reading teaching case for an example, which is a reading material about *The Freshman Challenge* in Unit 1 of compulsory 1 in senior high school of the new version, discussing how to design effective reading teaching questions in every link to prompt students to form English literacy in their independent reading, analysis and comprehension, and to gradually improve the effectiveness of English reading teaching.

Keywords: English reading; High school; Question design; Teaching effectiveness.

I. Introduction

1.1 Research background

In English teaching in senior high school, reading teaching occupies a very important position. When evaluating quality of reading teaching, the teachers' question-designing is highly valued. Classroom questioning, frequently used in English class, is a teaching method by which teachers raise questions and guide students to use their prior knowledge and experience to answer these questions, so as to obtain new knowledge. Appropriate and delicate design of questions can lead students into the "question situation" and stimulate students' desire to explore knowledge and read thoroughly and happily. It also can help cultivate students' interest and habits to express their ideas, guide students to think actively and gradually promote them to master knowledge and develop their intelligence. However, under the pressure of national college entrance examination, reading teaching pays more attention to the improvement of students' correct rate of answering different types of reading comprehension questions. In other words, it seems that the purpose of reading teaching only serves for answering reading comprehension questions, which are usually in fixed types. Over time, students lose interest in learning English, giving up the opportunity to further improve comprehensive ability. What is more, there are some common problems in the design of English reading teaching questions, such as: types of questions are monotonous; questions are not organized in a good cognitive hierarchy; and neither do these questions take the students' emotions into consideration. Therefore, under the guidance of new curriculum reform, English teachers

should organize various activities to help students regain the reading interest in English, and obtain overall development via the study of English, and at the same time improve English reading teaching quality effectively in English classes. In this study, the author analyzes existing problems in the design of reading teaching questions, and discussed some pairs of relationships to be considered in the process of question designing. More importantly, the author suggests some designing strategies which might be useful to improve the quality of the questions of the teaching questions and strengthen the effectiveness of English reading teaching.

1.2 Commonly used types of English reading teaching questions

According to Broome's classification of educational objectives, questions designed by teachers in English reading teaching can be divided into the following three types: display questions, reference questions and evaluation questions. In book of *A course in English Language Teaching* written by Professor Wang Qiang, reading questions can be divided into three pair-types, and they are closed and open questions, display and genuine questions and lower-order and higher-order questions[1]. Among them, display questions are designed to help students primarily understand the text, requiring the students to understand the basic information in the text. Reference questions aim at helping students to explore discourse connotation, cultivating students' ability of higher level of thinking, since students can only get corresponding answers on the basis of integrating information of the discourse. Evaluation questions aim at helping students internalize discourse and develop students' further thinking. This type of questions require students to have the highest level of thinking, as students need to generate and express their own views and opinions on relevant topics or phenomena based on their own experiences.

1.3 Main points

The paper is divided into seven parts. The first part makes a brief introduction of the research background and commonly used types of English reading teaching questions. In part two, current problems of reading question design will be discussed, including lacking of variety, lacking of hierarchy and lacking of affection. Part three introduces 3 pairs of relations that should be considered in question design, which are question design and teaching objectives, question design and reading materials and question design and students' subject. In part 4, the author presents a case and makes analysis. Part 5 puts forwards 3 ways of designing questions in reading teaching, including diversity of question design, hierarchy of question design and affection of question design. Part 6 is conclusion. The last part is bibliography.

II. Problems in the design of questions

2.1 Lack of variety

It is generally acknowledged that almost all teachers will ask questions in class when teaching English reading, but most of them just ask questions based on the textbook. In other words, most of questions are display questions, and students can find answers directly from articles without too much thinking. For example, teachers often ask such questions: Can you tell me the genre of the text? When and where do things happen? What is the main idea of the passage? And a small number of teachers will design reference questions, but quite a few teachers will organize evaluation questions in reading class. Through the above, we can know that most teachers ask questions just for the sake of asking questions, but they do not realize that type of these questions is monotonous valueless. In the long run, students' reading interest and desire will be reduced, which greatly influences the improvement of reading teaching effectiveness.

2.2 Lack of hierarchy

In the usual reading class, we will find that teachers' questions are arbitrary. For the design of pre-reading questions, several consecutive questions are thrown out, but students have no ideas what is the theme of the reading teaching in this class. The design of while-reading questions focusing on details, leads to a lack of depth of thinking training and the deep excavation of text information among students. For the design of post-reading questions, questions designed to promote emotional sublimation separate from the main line, resulting in the classroom "silence" and students cannot answer the teacher's questions. That is to say, these questions designed by teacher lack gradients and breadth, and fail to proceed step by step, from easy to difficult and be interlocking. In addition, most teachers tend to ignore the logical relationship and emotional context between the text content when interpreting the text, thus causing these questions to be too simple or too complicated, which cannot arouse students' learning enthusiasm and frustrates students' confidence, thus gradually leading to invalid reading teaching [2]. Take some teaching videos for an example, whose reading topic is Freshman Challenge. The teacher began the class through a discussion with students, but questions discussed are not closely related to the topic, like, *how was your holiday? How do you think of your new school?* These questions are not helpful to learn the new passage. And for while-reading activities, the teacher gave several consecutive questions to students to discuss, such as: *Can you make a paraphrase of the sentence? What can we learn from the passage?* These two questions are too difficult for students to answer at this reading stage, and it should be asked after learning the whole passage. Therefore, I design complete reading questions of different reading stages trying to solve these problems in the later part.

2.3 Lack of affection

In the daily teaching of reading, few teachers will come up with questions related to emotional education, because most of questions designed by teachers focus on learning and consolidating language knowledge. Therefore, students fail to deeply understand the connotation of the discourse. More importantly, these questions fail to guide students to integrate with the author's thoughts, and ignore students' emotional education and values education. In fact, many texts contain a lot of humanistic knowledge. Therefore, if teachers can dig deeper into the humanistic nature of the text and show positively emotional attitudes and values of the text through questions, which will enable students to form correct emotional attitudes and values, which will promote the overall development of students. Take one of my English reading classes in senior high school, for example, whose reading material is cultural relics. The teacher designed many questions to analyze the passage, such as: *What's the main idea of the passage? What does the paragraph 2 tell us?* But for post-reading activities, the teacher just asked us to retail the whole passage. In other words, the teacher just focused on the passage rather than dig out its connotative meaning, which ignores students' emotional education and values education. For this topic, the teacher can supplement something about Chinese cultural heritage so as to strengthen students' sense of pride toward Chinese culture. And not my English teacher has this problem, but others have the same problem through my observation of many English open classes. Therefore, it is critical to educate students on affection and values under the background of promoting Chinese culture to go global in a new era.

III. The pairs of relations that should be considered in question design

3.1 Question design and teaching objectives

The general goal of English teaching in senior high school is to further clarify the purpose of English learning on the basis of junior high school English learning, develop independent learning and cooperative learning capabilities, form effective English learning strategies, and cultivate comprehensive language application skills. The 2017 edition of the *English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School*

describes the goal of reading skills as follows : " To develop reading strategies; To cultivate language sense; In particular, to develop the ability to acquire or process information while reading." [3] From above, all types of reading class should be based on text, and teaching objectives should be achieved through different ways. In short, asking questions should not only be confined to words, sentences, and paragraphs in the text, but help to develop students' abilities through inquiry and exercises. It refers to cultivating students' abilities of skimming, scanning, predicting, researching, sorting and generalizing.

3.2 Question design and reading materials

Questions should not only be based on text but surpass text. It means that instructing students to do a shallow level of reading firstly [4]. For example, teachers can design questions based on some certain key points and on the general idea of the text. What is more, these questions can be guessing the meaning of new words according to the context, understanding the reference relation, logical relation, reference title, text structure, iconic information and others in the text. Secondly, teachers can guide students to carry out deep reading activities. For example, teachers can guide students to make inferences and judgments in terms of the text, understand the author's intention and evaluate the text, which can include writing style, logical expression and others. Then students can have extensive discussion activities and so on. In addition, questions design should follow the rule of "content first, then style" in text writing [4].

3.3 Question design and students' subject

Any teaching activity separated from the main body of learning—students, is bound to be inefficient or even invalid. The core idea of the new curriculum standard is "student-centered ". Consequently, the design of questions should be aimed at students and serve students. Multiple intelligence theory holds that everyone possesses nine kinds of intelligence at the same time, but these nine kinds of intelligence are applied to each person in different ways and with different degrees of combination. Teaching should aim at the characteristics that each student has both intellectual advantages and disadvantages. In other word, teaching should help students to fully display advantages and transfer the characteristics of advantages to disadvantages, so as to promote development of disadvantages as far as possible [4]. A teaching class is composed of students with different language levels and skills, different learning motivations, personalities, background knowledge and learning goals. As a result, when designing questions, teachers should first carefully consider the depth, breadth, difficulties, brightness, angle, precision and density of these questions. Secondly, teachers need to consider student-centered design of problem-solving methods. And these questions should be interesting and familiar to students, or are close to their level and ability so that they can express and make comments. What is more, teachers can encourage students to ask or generate their own questions as far as possible. Because it is only these questions that touch students' heart that can really be beneficial to them. In short, teachers need to consider the following aspects when designing reading questions. (1) Can students understand these questions and express their opinion at their present proficiency level? (2) Are these questions partial, difficult, shallow or excessive? (3) Do students have the ability to answer all these questions?

IV. Case presentation and analysis

4.1 Analysis of reading material

The reading material for this course is a narrative essay about the challenges faced by freshmen in Grade One. The essay adopts the writing format of "total score", that is, the author gives a general overview of the article firstly, and then makes detailed description of challenges faced by freshmen. This class is aimed at students in the first year of senior high school, although most students universally have read different genres

such as narrative, argument, practical writing articles, and can generally understand discourse characteristics of different genre articles, but when students entering English learning in senior high school, the number of new words and complex sentence patterns increases obviously, which will increase reading difficulty to students. Therefore, teachers should design reading teaching questions very carefully not only for understanding and acquiring the information of the text, but also more importantly forming their own ideas towards the author's intention and hidden meaning of the article. Therefore, students can easily deal with them when encountering similar genres of texts and reading materials of the same topic in the future learning.

4.2 Design ideas and teaching objectives

The overall process of classroom teaching design is: putting forward questions, analyzing and inferring, verifying through reading, and concluding and transferring [5]. Classroom teaching closely connects with the topic of "challenges faced by freshman", and the author designs specific teaching questions conforming to students' thought and law of development in each teaching link. For example:

- *What do you want to know about school life in other countries?*
- *How many paragraphs are there in the article?*
- *Can you guess what will the text talk about?*
- *What did Adam do after he was refused by the football coach?*
- *What are similarities and differences between Adam's school life and your school life?*

These questions are interrelated to each other and progressive, which can help to promote the development of students' deep thinking and guide students to build up their own understanding of similar narrative genre texts through coping with these questions. In a long run, reading teaching effectiveness can be gradually improved.

Teaching key and difficult point: Talk about some challenges that students are facing and how to solve these problems.

4.3 Design of reading questions

Step 1: Warming-up

Successful lead-in activities can not only stimulate students' interest, make students take the initiative to participate in learning, but also help students to predict the text content in advance. The topic of this class is challenges faced by freshmen. The author hopes to stimulate students' interest in reading in the process of warming-up activities. At the same time, these questions help students master some new words in the process of talking about challenges, which can help remove obstacles in later reading. Therefore, this class starts with some interview videos for freshmen, and some target words, such as: challenge and freshman, then having a free talk with students about the following questions.

Q1: What do you want to know about school life in other countries?

Q2: What would you tell a teenager from another country about school life in China?

Q3: How do you feel as a freshman?

Q4: Do you think what challenges will you face?

Design specification: in order to activate students' existing knowledge, the author is directly in virtue of topics that students are familiar with and smoothly import new words step by step. In a relaxed and chatty atmosphere, students don't feel abrupt, because such import is connected with students' actual life, which can stimulate students' awareness of existing structure and learning interest, paving for subsequent study.

Step 2: Before-reading

Look at one of the pictures in the passage and read the title of the passage, then answer the following questions:

Q1: What's the title?

Q2: What can you see in the pictures?

Q3: How many paragraphs are there in the article?

After students' answer, the author asks students to mark paragraphs in the text.

Q4: Can you guess what will the text talk about?

Design specification: The title is the essence of the whole article, and it is also the refinement and summary of the text content. The illustrations in the text can not only help students to deeply interpret the text, but also activate the existing cognition in students' minds and make them have intuitive imagination. By reading pictures and titles, students can generally predict what the author is going to say in this text. Through the standard paragraph, students can intuitively understand the paragraph distribution of the article.

Step 3: While-reading

Since the article only shows potential topic sentences in content but lacks formal topic sentences, the general idea of each paragraph should be summarized on the basis of intensive reading [6]. Moreover, many sentences in the article are suitable for repeated reading and savoring. Therefore, the author adopts the form of segmented reading to guide students to draw evidence in the article according to questions and enthusiastically answer them. The author uses layers of in-depth questions to drive students' reading and thinking, and carries out in-depth interpretation of the text, so as to cultivate students' thinking depth, flexibility, expansiveness, agility, creativity and criticism.

1). Paragraph 1

Q1: Who is Adam?

Q2: What does Adam feel during the first week?

Q3: What is the challenge for Adam?

Q4: What's the topic sentence?

Q5: Can you make another sentence to replace the topic sentence?

Q6: What challenge will the writer talk about first? Why? (Prediction)

Design specification: Questions 1, 2 and 3 are designed to allow students to extract text information about Adam's identity, feelings and challenges. Question 4 asks students to find out the topic sentence of the passage and train their ability of analysis and induction. By explaining the topic sentences, students can deepen their understanding of the topic and improve their ability to process information in English thinking. Question 6 asks students to predict the content of the text according to their previous experience and knowledge construction. Through the prediction, students will produce reading expectation. As a result, reading process will become a positive and active communication one to improve reading efficiency.

2). Paragraph 2

Q1: What courses did Adam choose?

Q2: Which one do you think would be his favorite? Why?

Q3: What's the main idea of paragraph 2?

Q4: Which challenge will the writer talk about in next paragraph? (Prediction)

Design specification: Questions 1 and 2 require students to extract surface information with lower reading ability. According to existing experience and cognition, students can quickly locate the relevant position of the article through some key words, such as "course" and "favorite", so as to cultivate students' mental agility. Then, students extract surface information of the text to illustrate Adam's chosen course. In question 3, students summarize the common elements based on various information obtained, and integrate the main idea of the second paragraph, so as to deepen students' understanding of the article and gradually cultivate the profundity of students' thinking. On the basis of a thorough understanding of the second paragraph, students can make a prediction about content of the third paragraph. Question 11 aims to develop students' logical thinking ability and predictability.

3). Paragraph 3

Q1: Which challenge does the writer talk about?

Q2: Why did Adam fail in joining in the school football team?

Q3: What did Adam do after he was refused by the football coach?

Q4: Analysis of the sentence: I'll find a way to improve my own so that I can make the team next year. What does "make the team" refer to?

Q5: Please list some words to describe his work in the club. (No more than 9 words)

Q6: Which part of France will the writer talk about? Why? (Prediction)

Design specification: Question 1 can help students understand the main idea of the Paragraph 3 and guide students to see whether prediction of Question 4 in the Paragraph 2 is correct. After-reading testing can enhance students' interest and deepen their understanding of the material. Questions 2 and 3 ask students to extract the text information describing Adam's participation in the school community. Questions 4 test students' ability to predict the reference of underlined words according to the context. Question 5 investigates students' ability to summarize and generalize. These questions interrelated and progressive can gradually guide students to carry on their own thinking. In the second paragraph, the author introduces the first challenge—choosing courses. In the third paragraph, the author describes the second challenge---taking part in after-class activities. Therefore, students can take a bold guess that the writer may introduce the third challenge or how Adam would handle these challenges in the fourth paragraph. Question 6 again trains students to use prediction strategies in reading.

4). Paragraph 4

Q1: What is Adam worried about?

Q2: Is Adam confident that he will get used to senior high school life? How do you know?

Design specification: Question 1 aims to train students' ability to summarize the general idea of the passage. At the same time, there is no fixed answer to question 1 and all answers are reasonable as long as they make sense. Question 2 checks students' understanding of Adam's attitude towards these difficulties. The attitude of the author or the characters in the article is often not directly written, students can feel attitudes only through careful reading and from the choice of words and rhetorical device.

Step 4: Post-reading

Ask students to have a group discussion on the following questions for 8 minutes and choose a

representative to express their ideas.

Q1: What kind of person do you think Adam is? Why?

Q2: What challenges do Adam face as a freshman?

Q3: Do you face the same challenges as Adam?

Q4: What other challenges are you facing?

Q5: How do you deal with them?

Q6: What are similarities and differences between Adam's school life and your school life?

Design specification: After students read the passage carefully, the author puts forward questions: What challenges do Adam face as a freshman, which leads students back to the title. Through this question, students can intuitively feel the story that the passage will display, which can exercise students' ability of judging the general idea of the article based on observing the title of it. Questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 are designed to develop creativity and criticality of students' thinking, which means that students can talk freely, have their own thoughts on these questions, and these questions help improve students' oral communication skills.

Step 5: Summary

Q1: Where can you find this article? A. In a diary. B. In News Week. C. In a storybook. D. In a social science magazine.

Q2: Complete the outline and retell the article based on the outline.

Paragraph	Challenge	How Adam feels	Solution
1		Confused	
2	Choosing___ courses		
3			He will find a way to___
4			

Design specification: Question 1 examines students' understanding of the source of the passage. Students are required to deduce the source of the passage based on their existing cognitive structure and deep understanding of the passage. Question 2 aims to help students consolidate newly learnt words, sentence patterns and structure in the class, which lays a foundation for homework.

Step 6: Assignment

You are going to enter a university. What challenges will you face as a freshman? Think about it and write an outline.

Design specification: The assignment asks students to write an outline about the difficulties that freshmen just entering a university will face. The purpose is to ask students to apply writing ideas and structure learned in this class to their own writing ideas. Therefore, students learn to transfer knowledge, and develop expansiveness of their thinking.

V. Strategies for designing questions in reading teaching

5.1 Diversity of question design

Bloom (1956), a famous educator and psychologist, proposed that the cognitive field can be divided into six target levels from low to high, namely, memorization, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis

and evaluation. [7] This is corresponding to the class questions proposed by Long & Sato (1983), which are display questions, reference questions and evaluation questions, and they have been explicitly introduced in the beginning. In senior high school English reading teaching, teachers should hold the proportion of display-oriented, reference-oriented and evaluation-oriented questions well when designing questions, so as to rationalize questions design. It is worth noting that it is not necessary for teachers to design questions strictly in accordance with the six levels in the reading class, but teachers need to know these questions should be diversified and the proportion of each type of questions should be reasonably distributed. [2] According to Bloom six target levels and types of classroom questions, the author takes The Freshman Challenge in unit 1 of compulsory 1 in senior high school of the new version as an example to construct a hierarchy table that is suitable for cognitive field of questions design in senior high school English reading teaching (see Table 1).

Table 1: The hierarchy table of cognitive domain of English reading teaching question design

Cognitive domain level	Question design
Memorization	What courses did Adam choose? What does Adam feel during the first week?
Comprehension	Is Adam confident that he will get used to senior high school life? How do you know?
Application	Can you tell how will you deal with these challenges?
Analysis	Can you guess what does “make the team” refer to?
Synthesis	What’s the main idea of the whole passage?
Evaluation	What kind of person do you think Adam is? Why?

5.2 Hierarchy of question design

In senior high school English reading teaching, teachers usually need to design a set of progressive questions. First of all, students are guided to acquire relevant information, then process text information and perceive text language. In the final, the author digs out information hidden behind the text through the analysis of the text, author's views and writing intention [8]. When polishing this reading teaching class, the author takes questions design as the starting point and starts the class with a video and four questions, and they are:

- (1) *What do you want to know about school life in other countries?*
- (2) *What would you tell a teenager from another country about school life in China?*
- (3) *How do you feel as a freshman?*
- (4) *Do you think what challenges will you face?*

Out of the excitement of just entering senior high school, students could show great interest to the text. Next, guiding students to go through the text and puts forward questions: For example, Can you guess what will the text talk about? How is Adam feeling during the first week? What courses did Adam choose? Which one do you think would be his favorite? Why? And so on. After understanding the main meaning of the passage, the author designs questions around the topic of “freshman challenge”:

- (1) *Do you face the same challenges as Adam?*
- (2) *What other challenges are you facing?*
- (3) *How do you deal with them?*

Finally, students express their thoughts through group discussion. It can be said that such progressive

question design can help stimulate students' interest in reading, promote students' active exploration and multi-dimensional thinking, and gradually improve the effectiveness of reading teaching.

5.3 Affection of question design

Positively emotional attitude is an important component of sound personality, while effective learning strategy is an essential condition to achieve lifelong learning. The reading material is not only the object that the teacher teaches and the student learns, but also the result of the author's subjective cognition. Different people will produce different understanding in terms of the same passage. Therefore, teachers should not only pay more attention to the development of explicit resources in the text according to their own presets, but also properly connect with students' reality to develop invisible educational resources outside the text, so as to guide students' spirit and penetrate their emotions [8]. In this class, the last question left to students was what other challenges are you facing now and how do you deal with them? Students can gain a lot by learning this article. Such as: we shouldn't quit when we are facing challenges and we should thank others who give us recommendations. This type of questions design echoes from the beginning to the end. That is to say, when students understand the teacher's design intention, the sublimation of emotion is natural.

VI. Conclusion

The promulgation of English Curriculum Standards for Ordinary Senior High Schools (2017 Edition) leads and guides the current English teaching reform in China. This paper focuses on "the optimization of English reading teaching question design to improve reading teaching effectiveness ". Aiming at current situation of English reading teaching, this study concludes three major problems existing in the English reading teaching classrooms through the literature research and case study of reading teaching, and these problems are: questions design lacks of diversity, hierarchy and does not pay attention to students' emotion. Next, the author puts forward three pairs of relationships which should be considered when teachers design reading teaching questions. Then the author makes further reflection on teachers how to solve these problems, how to promote teachers' reading teaching design ability and how to optimize the design of English reading teaching questions, through which to guide and promote the teaching of English reading and to finally achieve effective reading classroom teaching and improve the quality of English teaching. First of all, the questions should be diversified, and the proportion of display questions, reference questions and evaluation questions should be reasonable. Moreover, teaching questions should have a sense of hierarchy, from lead-in to detailed reading, and these questions are all linked with one another. Finally, when designing reading teaching questions, teachers should not only pay attention to the mastery of language knowledge, but also attach importance to students' emotion, attitude and values development. In short, teachers should keep a watchful eye on the progress and development of students.

Due to the author's limited level, the angle and analysis depth and breadth of this paper are not enough. Therefore, how to fundamentally change teachers' reading education concept, further improve teachers' reading teaching design ability, and really realize classroom transformation and learning transformation are all issues that worth further thinking and discussion. It is gratifying that with the further development of curriculum reform and classroom reform, reading teaching has made some progress under the joint efforts of all parties. The author firmly believes that under the guidance of core literacy, China in the 21st century information age will cultivate more talents with necessary moral characters and key abilities to meet the needs of lifelong development and social development, which are conducive to improve China's international core competitiveness.

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