

# Analysis of *Advance with English* Coursebook (Yilin Oxford Edition)

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**Abstract:** Teaching materials are the concrete embodiment of the course targets and contents. It is also the main medium for teachers and students to carry out teaching activities. Good language teaching materials should be used by learners at different levels in different ways. They also provide an opportunity for teachers to form or create their unique teaching styles. Therefore, the analysis of English teaching materials is particularly important. First, this article introduces the writing purposes which match the requirements of the General English Curriculum Standards and then analyzes the contents of *Advance with English* in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The third part discusses the limitations of *Advance with English* in respect to its practical use.

**Keywords:** Textbooks; Advance with English; Coursebook analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching materials are important in the implementation of English teaching. The selection and use of appropriate teaching materials are important prerequisites to achieve the teaching objectives. With the implementation of the new curriculum reform, various English teaching materials have emerged. According to McGrath, "If we take a broad view, materials for learning and teaching languages could include 'realia' (real objects such as a chair or a shoe or a piece of fruit) and representations (a drawing or photograph of a person, house or scene) <sup>[1]</sup>." In 2003, the Ministry of Education promulgated the General English Curriculum Standards which put forth the goals in teaching foreign language education. It is on this basis that choosing proper English textbooks for the teaching of language in high schools is very important. The arrangement of the texts, activities, homework, and so on in textbooks have important effects on ensuring the quality of teaching as well as arousing learners' interest and motivation. Therefore, scientific and systematic evaluations of all kinds of teaching materials are particularly important. They are not only conducive to the correct selection of teaching materials required by the educational administration and schools but also to the appropriate choice and adjustment of the teaching materials by teachers.

*Advance with English* (Yilin Oxford edition) is revised based on these standards and is widely used in many areas. It includes eleven books where Module One to Module 5 are compulsory books whereas Module Six to Module Eleven are selective; hence, students are given the option to select according to their own interests.

## 2. Writing purposes of *Advance with English*

This section introduces the writing purposes of *Advance with English*.

### **2.1. To cultivate communication competence**

English is a language and a communication tool. The purpose of English teaching is to cultivate and improve students' communication competence. The cultivation of this ability requires language practice. Only with the use of the English language can students improve their practical skills. *Advance with English* is a teaching material that permeates the practice of language into all aspects of the teaching process.

It has helped students to lay a good foundation in creating conditions for their future studies, employments, lifelong learning, and also enabled them to have basic English literacy that is necessary as citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the deepening of the reform and opening-up, China is playing an important role in international affairs.

### **2.2. To raise cultural awareness**

Teachers should pay attention to the teaching of language knowledge and culture in the process of English language teaching. An English learner can understand and correctly use the language only if he or she truly understands the culture of an English-speaking country. This requires teachers to create activities as well as a language environment in daily teaching to enable learners to gradually overcome the cultural differences in the process of learning and form a sense of identity to the culture of English-speaking countries. Cultural consciousness permeates in various ways and not just in the classroom. The ways and methods of cultural consciousness penetration are worth studying.

In short, infiltrating cultural consciousness in the English language teaching of senior high schools does not only requires teachers themselves to have keen cultural consciousness but it also attaches great importance to students in understanding the differences between the Chinese and foreign cultures. It is also necessary to adopt a variety of effective strategies in specific teaching so that students can actively practice language where teachers stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning in allowing each student to experience and feel the charm of culture which can improve the comprehensive ability of the language use. As a set of comprehensive teaching materials, *Advance with English* pays attention to the penetration of cultural consciousness so that students can understand the differences between the Chinese and Western culture. It is true that such differences require the intentional attention of teachers; otherwise, they would only be additional learning obstacles for students.

### **2.3. To form habits of using learning strategies**

The way of using learning strategies is flexible and diverse which vary from person to person. Hence, teachers should consciously help students to form their own learning strategies in the process of learning English and constantly adjust their teaching strategies to achieve the best teaching results. Teachers should help students to understand the specific requirements of listening, speaking, reading, and writing at different stages of high school in the process of teaching so that students can constantly adjust their cognitive strategies.

At the same time, teachers should cultivate students' self-management ability. If a student can supervise his or her own learning process as well as constantly adjust learning strategies to achieve the best learning results, then the student is an excellent learner. Through self-assessment, *Advance with English* allows students to assess difficult situations as well as to make improvements in achieving the best learning results.

## 2.4. To advocate task-based teaching method

According to Reid, educational research in the past decade have identified a number of factors that account for some of the differences in how students learn <sup>[2]</sup>. Teaching method is one of the factors. The traditional teaching method mainly draws a picture where teachers emphasize on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary while students passively accept these knowledge. However, it does not show the practical characteristics of the language, neglect the development of students' emotions and personalities, as well as lacking humanistic care. This method which makes students passively study, creates introverted personalities and causes students to lack self-confidence which are not conducive in exerting their creativity. On the other hand, the new curriculum standard requires teachers to create a lively and relaxed learning environment for students through several teaching activities in order for students to understand the relevant topics in addition to the key for learning English is for students not to be afraid of making mistakes.

Rodgers wanted to enable teachers to be better informed about the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of methods and approaches so that they can make their own judgements and decisions <sup>[3]</sup>. Wang Qiang mentioned that in many cases, the way language learners learn the language is too far-off from how language is used in real life <sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, teachers need to know specific information about task-based teaching method in order to help students master effective learning strategies through imitation and cultivate their innovative competence.

Through this kind of teaching method, it is easy to communicate and cooperate between teachers and students, as well as to cultivate students in actively participating in class. Under the guidance of teachers to promote students active learning, *Advance with English* enables students to improve their language proficiency and train their communication skills in various classroom tasks.

## 3. Analysis on the contents of *Advance with English*

This section analyzes the contents of *Advance with English* in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

### 3.1. Listening

The texts in *Advance with English* are recorded by foreigners so students have the opportunity to experience the true, authentic, and beautiful English sounds which lead to proper pronunciation and mastery of the vocabulary. The listening materials of *Advance with English* are closely related to reality. It also has many exercises at the end of the articles including multiple choice questions, filling in the blanks, order of arrangement, and so on. Facts have proved that the richer the knowledge of the students, the easier and deeper their understanding are toward textbooks. By setting up certain communicative situations to make students' learning livelier and to help them to understand and express better, as well as designing some indirect questions to enlighten the students in deconstructing sentences based on their existing vocabulary and grammar knowledge, they train their listening skills. In addition, each unit in the textbook is designed for listening exercises which can be used not only to guide students' listening skills but also other skills.

### 3.2. Speaking

With the development of globalization, language has gradually become an important tool for people to communicate with each other. The main purpose of English language teaching is to encourage students to develop international vision, consciousness, and to be freely involved in external communication. A person who has learned English for more than ten years but cannot speak fluent English is a great pity. Improving students' oral expression ability is an important part of the teaching progress. The new curriculum standard requires middle school students to be able to express general inquiries and requests in their daily

communication.

The materials that are used for students' oral English practice need to be familiar and interesting topics. Only if the topics are familiar to students, then they would have something to say. The materials in *Advance with English* are closely related to students' life in which they easily arouse students' interest. The selected questions are those that students can understand and express their ideas according to their existing knowledge. The contents and forms are diverse which include surveys, distribution of posters, invitations, interviews, advertising, and so on. Students are free from the constraints of language form, and they can pay attention to the language contents in the completion of these tasks. However, the project of each unit comprises of a very difficult oral practice material as students have to learn them through the cooperative way. They need to exchange views while exercising their language expression ability. The drawback of textbooks is that they are designed too well to take into account students whose language base is weak with poor expression ability; hence, teachers are required to make up for it in the teaching process.

### 3.3. Reading

China has always placed reading comprehension in an important position of the English education and examination. The subject of reading comprehension has become more and more extensive. Reading comprehension takes up a large score in all kinds of English examination and the requirements for students' ability in this subject has become higher.

Reading comprehension plays an important role in the process of compiling *Advance with English* because it does not only enable students to acquire information, understand connotation, and learn language knowledge, but it also enables students to master reading skills to develop their reading ability. Reading strategy is to explain reading methods and skills of various types of articles. Reading and project in *Advance with English* are closely related to the actual life of students, however there are many lengthy new words. The reading part is not just a simple reading training, but it is a whole learning process. Reading strategy teaches students reading skills such as skimming and scanning which is one of the highlights in this set of textbooks. Another feature is that in order for students to have a better understanding of articles, *Advance with English* places all the exercises directly behind the article. Such a design allows students to apply the method of English reading they have learned to practice. Developing reading skills is an important task for students in English learning. The reading materials in *Advance with English* vary and they are flexible to meet the needs of students at all levels.

### 3.4. Writing

Writing is an extremely important way of expression which reflects the students' ability to use language comprehensively. In daily lives, people use mail as an embodiment of writing. In all kinds of examinations at all levels, narrative, argumentative, practical, and other articles are the focus of the examination. Therefore, teachers should teach students different writing skills according to different types of articles in the normal teaching process so that they can master the characteristics and writing essentials of different types of articles which is conducive for future work and in life. The new curriculum standard puts forward higher requirements for English writing in senior high schools; namely, the ability to provide information in words and charts, writing a simple description or practical essays on common topics such as letters and general notices, describe tasks or events, make simple comments, filling out forms such as application forms, as well as adapting short plays in small groups.

The writing part in *Advance with English* has different templates for students to use as reference so that students would learn to write through learning, copying, thinking and so on. They can also be used to cultivate students' creativity in forming their own unique styles of writing. The stories and situations in the

teaching materials allow students to feel, think, understand, and write in addition to enhancing the timeliness and pertinence of their writing. Moreover, it provides several model articles to pave the way for students to write as well as some questions for students to discuss independently, thus forming the context of the article, the central idea, and logical structure. However, it is known that such writing is very difficult. Teachers need to pay attention to the cultivation of students' writing ability in addition to the training of other individual abilities in daily teaching which would be of great benefit to the cultivation of students' comprehensive ability.

#### **4. Limitations of *Advance with English***

This section discusses several limitations of *Advance with English* in its practical use.

##### **4.1. Difficulty in mastering abundant vocabulary**

The vocabulary in textbooks is about 200 to 400 words per module and some new words do appear in the workbook in which altogether, it is higher than the target requirement of 2400 to 2500 words in the new curriculum. There are more than 2000 words in the compulsory modules (Module 1 to Module 5) in addition to the low repetition rate of many new words which makes the students unable to master the new words and their expressions effectively. There is no good solution to the vocabulary expansion, so it is difficult for students and teachers to reach the requirements of the new curriculum standard. The writing model makes it difficult for students to understand the contents in some sections especially the grammar and word power sections. This undermines the self-confidence of students with poor foundation, making them unable to keep up with the teaching rhythm, as well as lose their motivation and confidence to learn English. The new words in word power are not found in the new word table; hence, students need to go through the notes after classes which increases the difficulty in learning where some students cannot smoothly finish this learning section. There are some words that have not been listed in the previous vocabulary list and they are also not included in the new words in the current module which affect students' reading efficiency and hinder their enthusiasm for previewing and reviewing.

The intensification of vocabulary difficulty affects the achievement of the target goal. The main reason of the problem lies in the failure to form a good connection between middle and high school textbooks. Therefore, there is a need to consider the continuity and cohesion of middle and high school textbooks in order to facilitate students' learning progress. In terms of the vocabulary section, there is a need to deepen some similar inductive cognitive strategies such as semantic net and lexical net to help students enrich their vocabulary storage.

##### **4.2. Difficulty in mastering all kinds of skills**

The new curriculum standard requires students to be able to use the functional items that they have learned to express emotions, intentions, and attitudes more effectively, that is, to improve the comprehensive ability of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A lot of training has been designed in the task which can improve students' language communication ability. However, there are some difficulties in the specific operation in which the main reasons are first, the lack of teachers' own quality where their language proficiency and related knowledge cannot meet the requirements of teaching, so does the large number of students' oral proficiency and knowledge. Second, the students' learning ability and their knowledge levels are uneven so it is difficult to carry out classroom activities that everyone can participate in. Third, the period for each high school lesson is 45 minutes and such classroom activities take up a lot of time. Hence, many of these activities are mere formality which cannot be carried out in depth and meticulously where not every student can participate in them. Fourth, some objective factors also affect the development of

classroom teaching activities such as teachers' teaching ability, teaching equipment, teaching environment etc. In regard to the situation of the current college entrance examination as a baton of physical fitness, the vast majority of learning is concerned about students' test results while rarely paying attention to the ability of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

### **4.3. Difficulty in conducting self-assessment**

According to the requirements of the new curriculum standard, the compilation of a set of teaching materials should include both the formative assessment and the summative assessment. The assessment contents belong to a learning goal. There is a lack of various assessment systems in textbooks. Only in the final self-assessment of each unit, summative assessments appear but they only focus on learning self-confidence while neglecting students' interest in learning, ability development, and other factors. Hence, these are the areas that are needed to be added and expanded. In fact, this is the part which allows students to carry out self-thinking on each part of the unit in order to fill the vacancies, adjust their learning strategies, determine their development directions, as well as improve their inadequacies.

One of the highlights of *Advance with English* is its innovation in adding formative assessment. However, most English teachers and students do not attach much importance to self-assessment, making its innovative function ineffective. There are two main reasons for this in which first, teachers think that the content of the assessment is relatively vague, and they do not know how to guide their students to complete the evaluation. Even if students have completed the evaluation, they do not know its function. Some students can finish the assessment of knowledge and skills in this part because it is somewhat abstract involving learning attitudes or moods. Secondly, teachers believe that this part neither provides effective subject content for them nor it provides students an effective guidance, thus resulting in both the students and teachers neglecting or even completely omitting it. Therefore, the way to realize the function and value of "self-assessment" is to guide its scientific and feasible implementation. With the new curriculum standard, it enables one to clearly understand its target standard and better guide the teaching of English in high schools.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Advance with English* fully reflects the author's profound understanding of the essence of language. The Yilin Oxford edition uses the topics as the core aspects and pays attention to cultivate students' competence in using proper language strategies in the teaching materials. Its aim is to encourage students to develop their language ability through the use of the language and have a positive attitude toward cultural differences. Teachers use activities such as cooperation, participation, and inquiry to accomplish tasks, achieve goals, and help students to form effective learning strategies as well as to improve their cross-cultural awareness. Texts are very important in textbooks where they have several functions including morality, aesthetics, humanities, history, vocabulary, grammar, and other language knowledge.

However, there is no perfect textbook. Inevitably, *Advance with English* also has some shortcomings such as the difficulty of some contents, the lack of cohesion in the vocabulary teaching of middle and high schools, as well as the poor arrangement of some tasks. Textbook writers should select materials that are closely related to real life, scientifically compile the contents in the textbooks, properly integrate elements of the Chinese and Western culture, as well as consider the differences of students in order to perfect the teaching materials.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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