

# Exploring Effective Three-Step Education Approaches in Senior High School English Whole-Book Reading from the Perspective of Subject-Based Education: Taking “The Old Man and the Sea” as an Example

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**Abstract:** Centered on the three-level progressive structure of “text-literature-culture”, this paper explores a systematic approach to achieving educational goals in whole-book reading teaching. The text level serves as the foundation, focusing on the accurate grasp of the work’s language, structure, and details; the literature level is the key, guiding students from the text to the artistic world, helping them understand character portrayal and narrative strategies, and developing their literary appreciation abilities; the culture level is the sublimation, promoting students to place the work in a broader historical context and cultural tradition, and understand the spiritual values and social significance carried by literature. These three approaches are interrelated and gradually deepened, jointly forming a comprehensive educational framework that takes the whole book as the carrier and integrates language training, thinking development, and humanistic edification.

**Keywords:** Educational approaches; Whole-book reading; Close reading; Literary interpretation; Cultural understanding

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research background

Reports from the 18th and 19th National Congresses of the Communist Party of China have clearly pointed out that the fundamental task of education is to foster virtue through education. Under the educational background of the new era, teaching emphasizes promoting students’ all-round development through “subject-based education” to ultimately achieve “fostering virtue through education”. As an important bridge connecting Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges, English, coupled with the deepening of globalization, requires students not only

to master linguistic knowledge but also to possess the ability to understand diverse cultures and conduct international communications <sup>[1]</sup>. This makes the educational mission of the English subject increasingly prominent.

The “General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised in 2020)” (hereinafter referred to as the “Curriculum Standards”) states that the core competencies of the English subject include four aspects: linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. It also stipulates that senior high school students should complete no less than 45,000 words of extracurricular reading during the compulsory course stage and no less than 100,000 words during the selective compulsory course stage <sup>[2]</sup>. However, affected by factors such as educational evaluation orientation and students’ academic burden, the total amount of students’ extracurricular reading fails to meet the standard. Traditional reading teaching mostly stays at short texts in textbooks, making it difficult to expand students’ horizons and dig deep into the connotation of texts <sup>[3]</sup>. Teachers also often neglect the explanation of language points and the educational value carried by texts in the teaching process <sup>[4]</sup>.

Whole-book reading, as a comprehensive learning activity, is regarded as an important path to solve the above dilemmas and realize “subject-based education”. However, there are still many difficulties in carrying out whole-book reading in practice: teachers lack systematic teaching guidance for whole-book reading <sup>[5]</sup>; students generally have a sense of difficulty towards whole books <sup>[6]</sup>.

## **1.2. Research purpose and significance**

This study aims to explore effective approaches to senior high school English whole-book reading from the perspective of subject-based education. Through classroom observation, questionnaires, and other forms, it investigates the practical difficulties in current teaching and strives to construct an effective three-step education approach of “text-literature-culture”, providing operable English reading teaching methods for English teachers. It enables English teachers to carry out English moral education in reading teaching, promote English curriculum education, and thus enhance the integrity of teaching.

## **2. Definition of relevant concepts**

### **2.1. Subject-based education**

Subject-based education is a way to implement fostering virtue through education by educating students comprehensively, in all aspects, and throughout the whole process <sup>[7]</sup>. Through the learning of subject knowledge, students cognize the laws of nature and society, construct the relationships of “object-self”, “you-self”, and “self-ego”, enrich their social nature, integrate into society and culture, and become social subjects with cultural essence, thereby realizing human development <sup>[8]</sup>.

### **2.2. Text**

In a general sense, a text is the actual application form of language, an overall sentence or sentence system composed in accordance with certain language cohesion and semantic coherence rules. It is a visible and perceptible surface structure of language, which may be a single sentence, a paragraph, or a text.

### **2.3. Literature**

Literature has a broad and narrow sense. In the broad sense, “literature” refers to all works written in words. In

the narrow sense, “literature” emphasizes conveying ideas and concepts, and more emphasizes the uniqueness of the way of expression, pursuing the beauty of rhetoric, or it can be said to be an excellent way of expression. This meaning is basically close to the concept of “literature” we commonly use today.

## **2.4. Culture**

There are many understandings of culture, and different disciplines have different understandings of culture. The traditional view holds that culture is a social phenomenon. It is a product created and formed by humans over a long period of time, and at the same time, it is a historical phenomenon, a deposition of human society and history. From a philosophical perspective, culture refers to all spiritual activities and their products of humans relative to economy and politics. In a general sense, culture is the sum of symbol and sound systems created and acquired by humans that are generally recognized and used by people in the process of constantly understanding themselves, transforming themselves, understanding nature, and transforming nature. Expressed in more concise words: culture is the sum of language and characters <sup>[9]</sup>.

## **3. Construction of the three-step education approach: Taking “The Old Man and the Sea” as an Example**

This study will take the classic novella “The Old Man and the Sea” <sup>[10]</sup> by American writer Ernest Hemingway as an example to specifically elaborate on the construction and implementation of the three-step education approach of “text-literature-culture”. The novel tells the story of Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman, who goes to sea alone after 84 days of no catch, and engages in a life-and-death struggle with a huge marlin and the subsequent swarming sharks <sup>[10]</sup>.

“The Old Man and the Sea” is a classic and has profound educational value <sup>[11]</sup>. This study will show how to guide students to complete the whole educational process from language acquisition to value internalization step by step through a complete teaching cycle. The entire teaching cycle will include four weeks, totalling 5 class hours (40–45 minutes per class hour), of which 2 class hours are needed for the text level, 2 class hours for the literature level, and about 1 class hour for the culture level.

### **3.1. Text level: Based on language, laying the foundation for education**

#### **3.1.1. Teaching objectives**

##### **(1) Language Construction and Application**

After guiding students to conduct in-depth text analysis, help students identify and accumulate key vocabulary and typical sentence patterns describing the sea, sharks, the old man’s appearance and psychological activities in the novel, and enable them to use these linguistic materials for plot retelling and preliminary description of character characteristics, laying a perceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis of Hemingway’s “Iceberg Theory”.

##### **(2) Thinking Development and Improvement**

Guide students to accurately sort out and summarize this basic story framework by reading the whole book, drawing plot context diagrams or time clue tables, etc., and exercise students’ ability to extract and integrate information in reading.

### 3.1.2. Assignment of reading tasks

Before entering in-depth learning at this level, teachers require students to read the whole book within two weeks and complete the following tasks:

- (1) Draw your “nautical chart”: Draw a “plot route map” or “time log” of the story development, clearly marking several important events of the old man from the hopeful “going to sea”, to the thrilling “fishing” struggle, and finally the quiet “return”.
- (2) Prepare a reading notebook and take notes of impressive sentences in the book at any time. Please pay special attention to: (a) Words and sentences describing the different appearances of the sea. (b) Paragraphs depicting the ferocious postures and intense actions of sharks when they attack. (c) Monologues revealing the old man Santiago’s inner thoughts and feelings during the struggle.
- (3) Find evidence mentioned in **Table 1** from the book and try to complete a preliminary “character sketch” for the two main characters:

**Table 1.** Exploration table of character traits of Santiago and Manolin

Character	Traits
Santiago	What words, actions, and psychological activities make you feel that he is a tough and unyielding “tough guy”?
Manolin	From his interaction with the old man, what details can you find to prove his loyalty, kindness, and admiration for the old man?

### 3.1.3. Design of teaching activities

- (1) Plot Route Co-creation Workshop——Construction of “Story Deck”

In class, teachers group students. Within the group, each student takes turns to share the most critical plots and design ideas in their “nautical chart” for 1-2 minutes. Then, each group collaborates to draw a clear and complete “plot route map” poster, which is posted around the classroom to form a “gallery”. One “commentator” from each group stays in front of their own poster, and other group members act as “nautical consultants” to visit other groups’ works in turn, leaving likes or questions. Students return to their own groups to read feedback and exchange improvements. Subsequently, teachers guide the whole class to conduct a brief review: Which group’s map impressed you the most? Why? What was the biggest disagreement encountered during group discussion? How was it solved? Finally, combining the commonalities and highlights of each group, teachers summarize the plot structure and internal logic of the novel together with the whole class.

- (2) Language Treasure Hunt Guide——Interactive Appreciation Meeting of Beautiful Essay Excerpts:

Before class, teachers use AI word cloud generators to generate a visualized “The Old Man and the Sea” Language Cloud Map based on the excerpts submitted by students. In class, students will discuss in groups around the high-frequency words in the cloud map how these words jointly construct the tone of the novel. Furthermore, teachers read an excellent description selected from students’ notebooks (with the source hidden) and carry out a “listening to language to identify the context” game. Students rush to answer and judge whether the description is about the sea, sharks, or the old man’s psychology and explain the reasons.

## 3.2. Literature level: In-depth appreciation, enhancing the level of education

### 3.2.1. Teaching objectives: Aesthetic appreciation and creation

This level aims to guide students from “understanding the story” to “appreciating art”, focusing on letting



students know how the author “tells” the story. In this process, students will learn and master two core knowledge points: first, Hemingway’s famous “Iceberg Theory”, students will recognize that the words and images of a work are only “one-eighth above the water surface”, while the emotions, ideas, and themes of the work need to be actively explored by readers through close reading <sup>[12]</sup>; second, the literary device of “symbolism”, students will understand the definition and function of “symbolism”, and recognize that a specific person, object, or scene in a literary work can represent an abstract concept or emotion <sup>[13]</sup>.

### 3.2.2. Assignment of reading tasks

Before entering in-depth learning at this level, teachers need to guide students to re-read the following key passages with the purpose of appreciation:

- (1) The epic struggle between humans and nature: Santiago’s several-day confrontation and contest with the big marlin.
- (2) The impermanence and cruelty of fate: The swarming of sharks and the plundering of the old man’s achievements.
- (3) The sustenance and symbol of spirit: The scenes where the old man dreams of or mentions African lions many times.

In the process of re-reading, students need to actively think and record the following contents:

- (1) What style of language does the author use? How does this language style make you feel? Is it complicated or minimalist? Is it straightforward or implicit?
- (2) What deeper meanings can you perceive beyond the literal meanings of the core images such as “sea”, “marlin”, “sharks”, and “lions” that repeatedly appear in the book?

### 3.2.3. Design of teaching activities

- (1) Decoding the “Iceberg” Code——Subtext Reasoning

First, teachers take the classic dialogue between the old man and Manolin in “Table 2” as an example to guide students to analyze the values hidden under the concise lines, which in this example is the different definitions of “failure”. Subsequently, students are grouped to extract other passages containing subtext from the book (such as the old man’s dialogue with the fish, sea monologues, etc.), and cooperate to infer the “seven-eighths” of the deep meaning under Hemingway’s words.

**Table 2.** Key dialogue in “The Old Man and the Sea”

Dialogue
“They beat me, Manolin,” he said. “They truly beat me.”
“He didn’t beat you. Not the fish.”
“No. Truly. It was afterwards.”

- (2) “Symbolism Exploration Station”——Cooperative Inquiry into Thematic Images

Teachers set up four exploration stations: [Sea], [Marlin], [Sharks], and [Lions] in the four corners of the classroom. Each station is equipped with relevant original text cards and guiding questions. Students go to different stations according to their interests to conduct research and discussion, thinking about the symbolic meanings carried by these core images in the text. Finally, the whole class jointly analyzes the

different meanings contained in different images, forming a systematic understanding of symbolism.

### **3.3. Culture level: Connecting with reality, realizing the sublimation of education**

#### **3.3.1. Teaching objectives: Cultural inheritance and understanding**

This level aims to guide students from “appreciating art” to “exploring culture”, examining “The Old Man and the Sea” in a broader cultural context. In this process, students will focus on learning and understanding two core cultural concepts: first, the individual struggle spirit in the “American Dream” spirit reflected behind the work <sup>[14]</sup>; second, connecting the vigorous spirit of “As heaven maintains vigor through movements, a gentle man should constantly strive for self-perfection” in traditional Chinese culture <sup>[15]</sup>. Through cross-cultural comparison, students will understand that this kind of perseverance is a precious virtue universally advocated by humans. Ultimately, this level aims to guide students to transform the abstract character strength in the book into spiritual resources for personal growth, realizing the internalization and sublimation of values.

#### **3.3.2. Assignment of reading tasks**

Before entering in-depth learning at this level, teachers need to guide students to think about the following questions based on their own experience on the basis of completing the understanding of the whole text and literary appreciation:

- (1) What kind of personal spirit does Santiago’s story embody? In which cultural context is it highly respected?
- (2) Is this “tough guy spirit” or the quality of “self-improvement” equally important in our traditional culture and current social life? What enlightenment does it have for you to face challenges in life or study?

#### **3.3.3. Design of teaching activities**

- (1) “The Tough Guy Spirit at All Times and in All Countries”——Cultural Connection and Value Debate

Teachers will organize a small-scale debate. In the first session, after group discussion, teachers will guide students to compare Santiago’s perseverance with the “self-improvement” emphasized in Chinese culture and the “individual struggle” emphasized in American culture, exploring their similarities and differences. In the second session, students need to conduct a short debate around the topic “Is Santiago a failed hero or a successful strong man?”.

- (2) “Where is My ‘Big Fish’?”——Self-Projection and Value Internalization

After completing the cultural discussion, ask students to write a short essay titled “Where is My ‘Big Fish’?” or “How Do I Face the ‘Sharks’ in Life?”. In this essay, students need to write about the “big fish” they are currently pursuing or the “sharks” they are encountering in their study or life, and specifically explain how to use the indomitable spirit learned from Santiago to achieve or overcome these difficulties and setbacks blocking the ideal goals.

## **4. Summary, reflection and outlook**

### **4.1. Research summary**

Based on the needs of senior high school English subject-based education, guided by the “General High School English Curriculum Standards,” and aiming at the current problems in whole-book reading teaching, this paper initially constructs an effective three-step education approach of “text-literature-culture,” taking “The Old Man

and the Sea” as an example. The text level focuses on language knowledge and plot sorting, cultivates students’ information extraction ability and logical thinking, and lays the foundation for education; the literature level focuses on the appreciation of writing techniques, improves students’ aesthetic ability and critical thinking, and deepens the connotation of education; the culture level focuses on cross-cultural comparison and practical connection, cultivates students’ cultural reflection ability, shapes positive values, and realizes the sublimation of education. The study provides a specific and operable educational plan for senior high school English whole-book reading teaching, which helps promote the in-depth integration of language teaching and value guidance from the perspective of subject-based education.

## **4.2. Reflection**

Although this study has initially constructed a three-step education approach for whole-book reading, it still has the following limitations:

- (1) The research case is relatively simple. Only taking “The Old Man and the Sea” as a research case, it does not involve a whole-book reading of other genres such as dramas, poems, and popular science books. There must be differences in the appreciation of the content of different types of literary works, and the applicability of this approach to different genres of texts needs to be further tested.
- (2) Insufficient consideration of student differences. It does not fully consider the differences in learning interests, learning needs, and learning acceptance levels of students with different English proficiency, and more hierarchical teaching tasks need to be designed.

## **4.3. Future outlook**

In terms of the promotion of teaching practice, the “three-step education approach” can be promoted and optimized in the future, and applied to whole-book reading teaching of more genres. Different genres of literary works can have different reading focuses, and teaching adaptation strategies for different genres of texts can be explored.

In terms of the deepening of academic research, it can be systematically promoted from two aspects. First, carry out long-term follow-up research on teaching cases, select students of different grades and English proficiency, and test the implementation effect of the three-step education approach through classroom observation, score analysis, questionnaires, etc.; second, actively use the Internet and information technology, and use visual tools such as mind maps and short videos to enrich the forms and contents of cultural comparison.

At the cross-disciplinary collaboration level, teachers of Chinese and other literature, history, and philosophy disciplines can be united to build a cooperative research and teaching practice group in the future, and design teaching plans around the cultural education goals of English whole-book reading.

Overall, based on the trend of the new curriculum reform and the new college entrance examination, improving students’ reading volume, cultivating their reading interest, and exercising their reading ability are inherent requirements. Therefore, this study has great enlightenment significance for senior high school English teaching. In the future, we will continue to conduct in-depth research, strive to explore a better model of whole-book reading teaching, and further improve students’ core competencies.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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