

# Issues and Optimization Strategies in Designing Question Chains for Primary School English Reading Instruction

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The question chain is a structured and hierarchical series of instructional questions formulated by teachers based on students' learning contexts and aimed at addressing difficulties encountered during the learning process to achieve teaching objectives. It serves as an effective approach to enhancing reading outcomes and fostering students' core competencies. In primary school English reading classes, teachers' questions often suffer from issues such as deviating from the core text, misaligning with students' actual learning conditions, lacking a logical progression, and failing to facilitate authentic transfer. To address these shortcomings, it is essential to design question chains centered on cultivating students' four key dimensions of disciplinary core competencies, thereby promoting their development as well-rounded individuals.

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Reading is one of the primary means through which learners acquire knowledge. By engaging with texts, learners gain information, broaden their understanding of the world, develop their thinking abilities, and derive intellectual satisfaction as well as aesthetic experiences (Gong & Yin, 2019). The 2022 edition of the new curriculum standards also emphasizes that primary school students should cultivate reading literacy, including the ability to "read simple illustrated stories, dialogues, and other basic discourse materials" and to "apply appropriate reading strategies to organize key information from texts and comprehend their general meaning". In practical English reading instruction, the design of question chains significantly influences reading outcomes and the development of students' core competencies. When constructing question chains, teachers must refine, select, and integrate individual questions to ensure that each one aligns with the core instructional objectives. This approach encourages students to actively question, analyze, and solve problems, while focusing on the cultivation of their core competencies, thereby fostering their development as well-rounded individuals.

## Problems in the Design of Question Chains in Primary School English Reading Instruction

### Questions Deviate From the Text's Core Theme

From a historical perspective tracing the long origins and evolution of textbooks, there exists an inherent intrinsic connection between teachers and teaching materials (Du & Shu, 2023). This intrinsic link ensures the systematic and logical structure of knowledge, thus determining that a primary school English reading lesson should be centered around a specific core theme or textual meaning. However, in actual classroom practice,

teachers' questions often deviate too arbitrarily from the main theme of the text. They tend to focus only on fragmented language and grammatical points, neglecting to explore the deeper layers of meaning within the text. This approach diminishes the cultural value conveyed by the text, severs the connection between content and cognitive development, and weakens students' capacity for holistic comprehension and critical thinking.

### **Questions Misaligned With Students' Learning Realities**

As the main participants in classroom instruction, students' cognitive development levels and prior knowledge should serve as the core foundation for teachers when designing question chains. However, in practice, teachers often fail to adequately grasp the authentic learning profiles of primary school students. The reading questions designed by teachers frequently exceed students' metacognitive abilities, demanding overly abstract reasoning and judgment. Furthermore, at the primary school stage, students' learning motivation stems primarily from direct interest and immediate feedback. Yet, existing question chain designs often overlook their emotional needs and interest orientations, resulting in insufficient student engagement with the text and the lesson. This makes it difficult to stimulate students' subjective initiative in learning.

### **Questions Lack a Logical Thread**

The integrity and systematization of reading instruction rely on the design of a coherent instructional thread. By constructing question chains that align with the text's inherent logical structure, students can be effectively guided to grasp the overall framework and deeper meaning of the passage, thereby fostering the development of systematic thinking skills. However, in current primary school English reading instruction, teachers' interpretation of texts and the design of questions tend to be fragmented, with insufficient logical connections between questions. This lack of a guiding thread disrupts students' holistic understanding of the text, hindering their ability to construct a coherent knowledge chain and cultural chain. Consequently, it restricts the development of their reading literacy.

### **Questions Lack Authentic Transferability**

The 2022 edition of the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* explicitly advocates guiding students to apply structured new knowledge to solve authentic problems in real-life contexts. However, a critical examination of current primary school English reading instruction reveals that the process through which students systematically internalize knowledge is often overlooked. In practice, the design of question chains tends to remain at the level of superficial comprehension of the text, failing to cultivate students' capacity for knowledge transfer and innovation. As a result, when confronted with real-world problems, students frequently demonstrate insufficient adaptability and a lack of creative application skills.

## **Optimization Strategies for Question Chain Design in Primary School English Reading Instruction**

### **Linguistic Competence: Designing Display Questions Around the Text Content**

In the instructional context, the interpretation of a text by teachers and students is also a process of "recontextualization", involving a deeper deconstruction of typical linguistic or social phenomena. When designing question chains for primary school English reading lessons, it is essential to focus on the main content of the text and develop a series of questions that stimulate students' language comprehension and expression abilities. Display questions tailored to students' learning levels and interests must be incorporated to ensure their engagement and active participation in the lesson.

Taking the lesson “His Dog Can Help Him” from Module 7, Unit 1 of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) New Standard 5A textbook as an example, the teacher guides students to quickly read and grasp the theme of the lesson—Special Dogs. Based on this theme, the teacher designs a chain of display questions to activate the classroom atmosphere, enhance student engagement, and foster their desire to express themselves.

- Q1: What’s the TV show about?
- Q2: What’s your favorite animal?
- Q3: Where do they live?
- Q4: What can it do?

#### **Cultural Awareness: Designing Comparative Questions Focused on Cultural Core**

Cultural awareness refers to students’ ability to understand both Chinese and foreign cultural systems, as well as to appreciate and evaluate excellent cultures. It contributes to fostering a sense of community with a shared future for humanity, cultivating character, and enhancing cultural literacy and social responsibility. In primary school English reading instruction, cultivating students’ cultural awareness is primarily achieved through the study of texts that highlight the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Teachers need to develop culturally comparative questions based on the teaching materials—by delving deeply into them and extending beyond them—enabling students to grasp the profound cultural connotations behind the texts.

Taking the lesson “I Love Sports. Speed Up” from Unit 1 of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) New Standard 4A textbook as an example, students have gained initial insights into Terry Fox’s personal story and the Terry Fox Run through earlier reading activities. To deepen their understanding of the significance of the Terry Fox Run, the teacher focuses on the cultural core message of “Love sports, love life.” and designs a chain of comparative questions. This approach highlights cultural contrasts and stimulates students’ critical thinking.

- Q1: Can he keep running?
- Q2: Who can run? Why does he do that?
- Q3: What’s the best title for the story? Why?

#### **Thinking Disposition: Designing Inquiry-based Questions to Foster Cognitive Development**

Thinking disposition refers to the individualized characteristics of a person’s cognitive processes, primarily reflecting students’ literacy in understanding, analyzing, comparing, inferring, criticizing, evaluating, and creating knowledge. Accordingly, teachers should emphasize enhancing students’ abilities in inference, critical thinking, evaluation, and problem awareness during the reading process by incorporating more open-ended questions into the question chains. Simultaneously, attention should be paid to the overall logical coherence of the question chain, utilizing progressively structured inquiry-based questions to stimulate students’ thinking.

Taking the lesson “Wonderful Seasons. Speed up.” from Unit 4 of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) New Standard 4A textbook as an example, the overarching theme of the unit is to help students appreciate the characteristics of the four seasons, align with nature, and enjoy life. The design of questions for each lesson within this unit should revolve around this central theme to ensure coherence and depth in fostering cognitive engagement.

- Big question: Why do we say seasons are wonderful?
- Q1: What does the apple tree look like in each season?

Q2: What happens to the apple tree in winter?

Q3: Why doesn't Lihan like winter?

Q4: What special meaning does the apple tree have to him?

### **Learning Competence: Designing Transfer-oriented Questions to Strengthen Application and Innovation**

For students, the most important form of learning is learning how to learn (Lin, 2000). The ability to learn is not only a core competency goal pursued worldwide but also one of the key competencies that the English curriculum in China aims to foster in students. By incorporating transfer-oriented question chains into the reading process, students are encouraged to actively employ and adapt relevant English strategies to grasp key knowledge points. Furthermore, they are guided to connect the acquired knowledge with their real-life contexts and authentic problems, thereby facilitating a transition from comprehension to application and innovation.

Taking the lesson “Let’s Buy It” from Module 2, Period 3 of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) New Standard 4B textbook as an example, the instructional content of this module focuses on enabling students to scientifically analyze and compare products based on practical considerations, develop awareness of rational consumption, and establish sound values toward spending. The teacher designs transfer-oriented questions that encourage students to relate the knowledge to their real-life situations—such as solving the problem of creating an ideal classroom environment with limited funds—thereby fostering the application of learning in practical scenarios.

Q1: Is Sam a smart buyer? Why?

Q2: Which way do you like (online shopping or offline shopping)? Why?

Q3: How to make “The Beautiful Classroom”?

Question chains demonstrate significant application value in primary school English reading instruction, as they effectively enhance the internal continuity and logical coherence among text introduction, content elaboration, and meaning extension. By designing layered and progressive question chains, teachers can guide students to progressively delve deeper into the text. This approach not only optimizes the effectiveness of reading instruction but also facilitates a cognitive leap from surface-level information retrieval to the construction of deeper meaning.

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