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# A Tentative Study on THIEVES Reading Method in Comprehensive English Reading Course from the Perspective of OBE - Taking Text A Virtue Called Devotion as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

The outcome-based education or OBE educational philosophy aims to achieve results and puts students first. It is an educational philosophy that adopts a reverse thinking approach to the curriculum system. The THIEVES reading method breaks the traditional thinking of English reading, and students shift from passive knowledge acquisition to active knowledge acquisition. By “stealing” relevant knowledge from the text in advance, students build a solid groundwork in preparations for formal text reading. Through literature review and teaching practice, this study takes Reading I text titled A Virtue Called Devotion in Unit 6 of the comprehensive English course as an example, and explores the feasibility of the THIEVES reading method in comprehensive English reading classes from the perspective of OBE.

**Keywords:** OBE; THIEVES reading method; Comprehensive English

## 1 Introduction

Reading is an important way for human beings to acquire knowledge, enhance intelligence, and cultivate morality. It can inspire people’s thoughts, establish lofty ideals, and cultivate magnanimity. Reading is not only an important way to acquire knowledge, improve literacy, and cultivate character, but also plays a positive and important role in inheriting national spirit and spreading national

culture. In the process of learning the English language, English reading is a compulsory subject and an indispensable part of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. Reading texts can help reproduce and consolidate acquired vocabulary and grammar knowledge, enhance English reading comprehension ability, and expand cross-cultural knowledge reserves; reading English can help to acquire knowledge, absorb excellent achievements of Chinese and foreign civilizations, and cultivate

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the ability of cross-cultural comparison and critical dialectical thinking between regions and countries; reading can help establish correct socialist values, enrich and improve one's personality, and become a well-rounded person that society needs. Unfortunately, in practical teaching, many students' motivation for learning English is not "pure". Some are to cope with examinations, and some are to "talk" with foreigners. Scholars (Shi Yongzhen, 2000, Wang Yong, 2012, and Yuan Jing, 2017) have found in a survey of English learning motivation among non-English major college students that their learning of English tends to be purposeful and instrumental, with finding a good job and passing entrance exams being their main goals. In this context, how can teachers, as the leading guides of teaching activities, help students carry out efficient English reading activities and enhance their interest in learning English? What English reading strategies should students adopt to achieve twice the result with half the effort?

## 2 OBE-Oriented Teaching Philosophy

Outcome-Based Education or OBE for short is an educational philosophy that drives the educational process through learning outcomes, with outcomes as the goal and students as the foundation. It is an educational philosophy that adopts a reverse thinking approach to the curriculum system. The OBE educational concept was first proposed by Spady et al.(1994) in 1981 and quickly developed into a mainstream educational concept in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. It has since become popular worldwide. OBE emphasizes that the allocation of educational resources and all teaching activities (including teaching design, teaching steps, and teaching reflection) should be closely centered around students' expected learning outcomes and ability development. The implementation of OBE teaching philosophy requires the subjective initiative of students and the leading role of teachers.

According to the talent cultivation plan for English majors at Zhaoqing University<sup>1</sup>, the main

teaching tasks of English majors are for students to master solid English subject knowledge, familiarize themselves with Chinese and foreign cultural knowledge, possess good English application ability, strong English teaching ability, and certain teaching and research ability, as well as cross-cultural ability, self-learning ability, critical thinking ability, and innovative consciousness. This is highly consistent with the OBE concept in terms of educational goals and implementation paths. College Comprehensive English courses should take the guidance of OBE concept as an opportunity to fully stimulate students' reading interest and improve their reading ability through the use of correct reading strategies. By reading, one can unconsciously absorb the good words and sentences in the article, become familiar with different literary styles, rhetorical devices, and logical frameworks. This is of great benefit to writing. Reading and listening belong to input processes, while speaking and writing belong to output processes. Once the input process of 'reading' is completed, the output will 'come naturally'. The improvement of students' comprehensive abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English, in turn, provides them with a sense of satisfaction and achievement. This sense of satisfaction will also enhance students' confidence, and the establishment of confidence will motivate and inspire more reading activities, forming a positive interaction cycle.

## 3 THIEVES Reading Method

Based on the above background, the writer of this paper proposes to implement the THIEVES reading method strategy in the design of comprehensive English curriculum teaching. The THIEVES reading method is first proposed by Manz(2002). As the name suggests, it refers to stealing information from text messages in advance like a "thief". THIEVES is an acronym composed of the first letters of different words. T represents title, H represents heading, I represents introduction, E represents every first sentence in a paragraph, V represents visuals and vocabulary, E represents end of chapter questions, and S represents summary. THIEVES is an activation strategy

<sup>1</sup> <https://wyxy.zqu.edu.cn/info/1084/4449.htm>

that helps students activate their previous knowledge (Kibui, 2017). Imagine what you would do if you took something that doesn't belong to you. If readers can obtain relevant information about an article in advance, in a sense, readers are ahead of the author of the article. It is possible to predict some of the author's central ideas, and then compare these predictions with the ideas we already know to grasp the content. The application of Thieves reading method can help students create a T-H-I-E-V-E-S "mental map", thereby enhancing their understanding and memory of the information and ideas encountered during formal reading. Most students open books and start reading when doing reading activities. This approach is very mechanical and passive. They do not know the theme of the article, nor are they clear about the connections and logical structure between paragraphs. Complaints are often heard from English learners that even after reading a paragraph, they still don't understand its meaning for some reason. This type of reading is a "lead by the nose" learning method, a passive process of obtaining information, and there is no effective link and connection established between the reader and the text. If the content of the reading material is far from the reader's personal knowledge background or experience, coupled with the reader's lack of endurance and perseverance, it is easy for them to find the reading material boring and give up halfway, terminate the reading, and lead to the failure of the reading activity. There is a saying in the translation circle that goes, "A professional translator should not do unprepared translation". Before translating, professional translators will definitely have a thorough understanding and speculation of the content that the spokesperson may express, the words and phrases that may be used, the language background, and even the tone of the speech. Do not engage in unprepared battles. This viewpoint is validated in an interview with the renowned translator Zhang Lu. According to Zhang (2012), Chinese former Premier Wen Jiabao likes to quote poems from ancient poets of Liu Yuxi, Wang Anshi, and Qu Yuan the most. Therefore, when translating for Premier Wen, it is important to consider the context in which

he is speaking and understand what kind of spirit he is trying to convey by quoting ancient poems at this moment. This is a reading strategy that can give you a comprehensive understanding of this chapter before starting to read. It is essentially about helping your brain better remember and understand the importance and relevance of the information in your course. The preparation work before the THIEVES reading method and translation activity can be said to lead to the same goal.

## 4 Literature Review

Foreign scholars tend to focus on quantitative research on THIEVES. Endang (2023) has confirmed through a one group pre-test post test design and analysis of sample data that the implementation of THIEVES strategy has a strong impact on teaching reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Elnaz (2019) has adopted a mixed method design to study 63 Iranian participants who speak English as a foreign language. The study has found that prior knowledge has a significant positive impact on reading comprehension; more interesting sentences are easier for readers to remember than less interesting sentences. The research results of Asmarini et al. (2022) indicate that THIEVES strategies can help students understand the content they are reading, especially narrative and report texts. The positive results of using THIEVES emphasize its value as an influential tool that can promote students' active participation and improve their reading comprehension abilities.

The writer of the paper has utilized the search engine on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) platform to search for the topic of "THIEVES Reading". So far, only 4 academic articles have been retrieved, most of which are qualitative research. The small quantity is astonishing. The earliest article published from CNKI can be traced to 2005 when Tang Xiangtao and Li Zuxiang (2005) have contributed their ideas to the topic of "THIEVES Reading" by the name of *English Reading Strategies and Application Techniques by "THIEVES"*. They suggest that the THIEVES English reading method is actually "summarizing and simplifying various effective

English reading techniques into an easy to master and understand strategy. This strategy is not only applicable to reading short English texts, but also to other genres. The second THIEVES-related work is a detailed study on the application of THIEVES strategies to English reading practice by Tang (2006) in ensuing year 2006. Another two articles have come into public view in recent years. Ding Haiying (2021) has explored various issues in reading science popularization texts in English in primary school from the perspective of practical teaching. It is believed that teachers can flexibly use the “THIEVES” reading strategy according to actual teaching needs, adjust the structure and order of “THIEVES”, make reading tasks more coherent and logical, and make reading more effective. Ru Yufeng (2023) has employed the THIEVES reading method adjusted by Ding Haiying to test the effectiveness of the teaching design, taking the teaching of the text “Only One Earth” as an example. Although the THIEVES method has many advantages and is more suitable for popular science explanatory texts, it still needs further verification for other genres of articles. After “thief reading” in both the topic and keyword search engine boxes have been typed in, and the result shows “no data available”. Likely it is because the English word “thieves” is translated as “ 贼 (zei) ”?! The term “zei” in Mandarin Chinese is not a word with a positive connotation, and according to the principle of “seeking benefits and avoiding harm”, there seems to be some reason for the limited research on the THIEVES reading method. Interestingly, after entering “THIEVES reading method” into Baidu’s search engine box, most of the pop-up content is similar to the brief introduction of this reading method and the curriculum design of THIEVES reading method on “Zhihu-an equivalent of Chinese Quora”, “Personal Library” and “WeChat official account”.

## 5 Exploration of THIEVES Reading Method Practice

Through literature review and daily teaching practice, it can be hypothesized that teachers can make flexible adjustments to certain content of THIEVES.

If I in the word THIEVES can refer to introduction, it can also represent information, that is, all the relevant information that the student “stole”. The first E can represent every first sentence in a paragraph, as not all topic sentences are placed at the beginning of the paragraph. It is possible that the topic sentence is placed at the end of the sentence or in the middle. Therefore, E can represent every topic sentence in a paragraph. If so, students will not be confined to the first sentence of each paragraph when using the THIEVES reading strategy.

Manz (2002) believes that through title reading, students must find information about the relevant topic, the relationship between the topic and the chapter, the viewpoint and textual information that the title should present. Taking a text *A Virtue Called Devotion* out of *A New English Course2* (Mei Deming (2022))(student’s book) as an example, students need to obtain the following information: the topic of this text is Virtue Devotion; Visually seeing the word “devotion” can activate the conceptual and categorical schemas previously associated with it. A series of questions might be raised. Does “devotion” signify “loyalty” or “dedication”? Is it devotion to a romantic relationship, a family relationship, a career, a nation, or even a religion? Students can identify their differences by consulting materials. You can also activate the situational schema and recall whether you have studied articles with similar topics. After understanding the general idea of the topic, think about a question - “What content may I read?”. Readers can further speculate whether the content of the article is intended to help them interpret the meaning of “devotion” or to provide an example to tell a story to help readers understand the true meaning of a specific devotion category; In terms of genre, predictions can be made as to whether it is expository writing, narrative writing, or argumentative writing.

The second step is heading. In this step, readers need to pay attention to how many parts the author plans to divide this topic into and what are the subheadings of each section. Based on these subheadings, guess what content each section will contain. If a text does not have subheadings, students can construct a



schema. Students can conduct this activity based on the post-reading questions, with each question corresponding to a reference answer, and each answer being a subheading. Taking the example of text *A Virtuous Called Devotion*, the first post-reading question is “In what physical condition is the writer’s grandmother?” It can be inferred that the answer to this question is related to physical condition. This answer can be assumed as a subtitle: Physical Condition of Grandmother. Due to the second question being “Why can the writer’s family hard put up with Grandma?”, it can be inferred that the second subheading revolves around “causal relationships” - reasons why family members cannot tolerate their grandmother. We can tentatively assume a title: Reason. Following this line of thought, and so on, we can derive the third title, fourth title, and so on. This approach breaks the passive teaching tradition of reading articles first and then finding answers. By virtue of questions, students can activate the program schema, purposefully read the text, and find answers to solve the problem. Through this programmatic operation, students can efficiently complete reading tasks.

The third step is information or introduction. In this step, students must identify the following information: whether the first paragraph provides an overview of the content or main idea of the article, and whether the reader is familiar with the topic. What do readers already know about this topic? The first paragraph of Text *A Virtue Called Devotion* introduces the grandmother’s age and physical condition with significant hearing loss. By using two parallel and parallel subordinate compound sentences, the changes in the grandmother’s thoughts and mentality after aging are highlighted, and the reader’s impression of the characteristics of grandmother’s aging is deepened: excessive or even harsh demands and pessimism. The Introduction section will benefit students in two aspects. From a vocabulary perspective, the first introduction can help enrich one’s vocabulary. Of course, this involves the use of language learning strategies, which are particularly important for foreign language learners. Specifically, the article mentions that my grandmother’s age

is ninety-four. If a student is a learner with a strong awareness of expanding their vocabulary, when they see the word ninety-four, the reader’s visual schema will immediately be activated. Reading comprehension is a process of interaction between various levels of schemas (Dong & Jiang 2021). After the visual feature schema is activated, it will automatically activate language schemas such as words, semantics, grammar, and strategic schemas for vocabulary memory. Strategic schemas are psychological structures related to achieving specific goals or outcomes, including cognitive patterns for selecting and implementing behavioral strategies, which influence our decision-making and behavioral choices. Under the guidance of strategic schemas, students will consciously search for age-related vocabulary. Ninety-four is a vocabulary selected by students, and the implemented strategy can be associative strategy. Students can associate different professional terms for different age groups in Chinese. That is to say, 60 years old is called the age of 花甲 (hua jia), and 70 years old the age of 古稀 (gu xi), 80 years old the age of 耄耋 (mao die), 90 years old the age of 鲐背 (tai bei), and 100 years old the age of 期颐 (qi yi). Furthermore, the corresponding English words are found to be sexagenarian, septuagenarian, octogenarian, nonagenarian, and centenarian respectively. Many vocabulary words are acquired by students through pre-class and post-class summarization and knowledge expansion. Relying solely on the vocabulary learned in the classroom text is far from meeting the requirements of exams and the goals of core English literacy. By activating strategic schemas and utilizing associative and imaginative strategies, students can doubtless achieve twice the result with half the effort. Secondly, this strategy is also applicable to the learning and consolidation of grammar knowledge points. The last two sentences of this paragraph are about the grammar knowledge points of result adverbial clauses. During the THIEVES stage, students can search for other categories of adverbial clauses in advance, such as adverbial clauses of time, adverbial clauses of place, adverbial clauses of reason and cause, adverbial clauses of comparison,

adverbial clauses of manner, adverbial clauses of concession, adverbial clauses of result, and adverbial clauses of purpose, etc. In fact, memorizing and mastering clauses is indeed one of the compulsory contents for English majors in the lower grades. Finally, while acquiring vocabulary and grammar, we further speculate on the content as follows: Grandmother is already an elderly person in her prime. Because the author of the text is a Westerner and the readers are Chinese, students will infer two different contexts: Chinese and Western. Because the Chinese context is relatively familiar, students may naturally speculate whether the following text will further discuss the traditional virtues of respecting and loving the elderly. The Western context is relatively unfamiliar, but students can still boldly guess a different text result based on their language foundation and knowledge accumulation.

The fourth step is to include every topic sentence in a paragraph. Students use reading skills to identify the central sentence of each paragraph and infer what the paragraph is going to say. Based on experience, topic sentences are usually placed at the beginning of each paragraph or at the end. However, if the rules are too absolute and the specificity is ignored, it can lead to overgeneralization errors. Some topic sentences appear explicitly or implicitly in the sentence, requiring students to summarize and refine them. For example, the first sentences of the fourth and fifth paragraphs are the central sentences of their respective paragraphs, which are “Grandma would not end up in a nursing home.” and “In many lands, the elderly are treated respectfully as the head of the household.” The last part is a story told by the mother, with the aim of conveying the importance of filial piety (孝顺) through words and deeds. And this gist does not appear directly at the beginning of the paragraph or as a summary at the end, but requires readers to summarize and generalize by themselves.

The fifth step is visual and vocabulary. Readers need to answer the following questions in order to become prepared during formal reading: Does this chapter include photos, illustrations, maps, charts, or graphics? What can be learned from the visual ef-

fects of a chapter? What is the most important visual effect in this chapter. Is there a list of key terms and definitions? Are there any important words in bold, italic, or underlined throughout the entire chapter? How much do I know about these special fonts? Can I distinguish the meanings of bold, italicized, or underlined sentences? The first six paragraphs of the text all contain content marked in blue font. There are ten words marked with superscripts in the upper right corner from the first to the sixth paragraphs, and some words (such as “her” and “my” in the fourth paragraph) are written in italics. These words and sentences with obvious special processing methods are the key and difficult knowledge points that need to be paid attention to when interpreting the text. The phrases “put up with” and “live with” in blue font in the first paragraph are a pair of synonyms; The words like “roomy” in the second paragraph, “discarded” in the third paragraph, and “heartless” in the fifth paragraph are all new vocabulary that needs mastering; Inexpensive and unappealing are knowledge points regarding negative prefixes “in-” and “un-”; The sentence structure in the blue font in the fourth paragraph is symmetrical, consisting of a subject predicate adverbial (SVA) structure. The symmetry of the structure can better serve as a contrast in semantics. Faced with the fact that “my” grandmother needs to be taken care of in her old age, other family members are deliberately avoiding the obligation to support the elderly, while my mother is different and actively proposes to take on the responsibility of supporting my grandmother.

The sixth step is End-of-chapter questions. Through learning the end-of-chapter questions, students can tell which information is important. If you can keep the questions in mind, you can annotate them in the text accordingly. Eight questions are raised after the text. All eight questions revolve around what, why, and how. What refers to the physical and mental condition of the grandmother and issues with the nursing home (questions 1, 3, and 4), the decisions made by the mother (question 5), and the author’s views on caring for the elderly (question 7) (question 8 is an open-ended question). Why

refers to the reason why family members cannot tolerate their grandmother (question 2). How refers to how different societies treat the elderly differently (Question 6). What, why, and how can be connected together to form the framework structure of the entire problem. If these eight problems are solved, then this article will be easily comprehended.

Step 7 is Summarize thinking. That is to identify the central idea of the author in the article. In some literary genres, the last paragraph often summarizes the main idea of the article, but this approach is not universal. Students need to analyze specific problems on a case-by-case basis.

Students before implementation have been informed of the THIEVES reading strategy and practice procedure. This method has been applied to actual teaching practice in class once. Based upon the after-class discussion and conversation on THIEVES reading strategy, students find it interesting and instructive to their English reading comprehension. Their feedback mainly includes the following 3 points: first, knowledge scope and breadth have been widened and intensified, since students need to consult relevant materials corresponding with the topic. The process of searching for information involves knowledge enriching and vision widening; second, students are prepared with a goal as far as to generally (from a macro perspective) and particularly (from a micro perspective) grasp the main idea and minute details of each paragraph, vocabulary and syntax and semantics included; third, students keep questions attached to the text in mind as to master the structure of the text and hopefully get to know some genres of various kinds of articles.

## 6 Summary

The THIEVES reading method has played an important role in fully mobilizing students' initiative in reading, reflecting the concept of "teacher as a guide and students as body", and changing the traditional teaching situation of "teachers proactively teach, but students passively learn". The learning objectives are more clear, and the learning strategies are more targeted. The THIEVES reading method is a specific

application of the OBE concept, which is a set of learning plans tailored to students' needs. Through the implementation of the THIEVES reading method, students have a basic grasp of the framework, main idea, and key and difficult knowledge points of the article, and are prepared for formal reading. At present, Thieves' reading method is mainly applied in elementary and secondary education stages such as primary school, junior high school, and high school, and is rarely mentioned in English teaching in universities. This article takes the text A Virtue Called Devotion as an example, combined with the author's teaching practice, to explore the feasibility of Thieves reading method in college comprehensive English classes from the perspective of OBE. Although the THIEVES reading method has its unique advantages, there are still many limitations in practice. Firstly, whether THIEVES is applicable to any other genre of articles has not been verified yet; Secondly, a large amount of qualitative and quantitative research is needed to provide theoretical and experimental support to test the feasibility of the THIEVES reading method in colleges and universities.

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