Review and Prospect of English Activity-based Approach in China (2018-2022)

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Abstract— *Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, this paper collects the literature on English activity-based approach published in 15 Chinese educational journals from 2018-2022, and has a review from four dimensions: development trend, research object, research content and research methods. The results show that: the number of studies is generally on an upward trend; the research objects are concentrated at the high school level, followed by middle school and the least at elementary school; the main contents of studies include conceptual research and design philosophy at the macro level, lesson design research, teaching strategies and literacy development at the micro level; the research methods are mainly non-empirical studies, and the empirical studies are mainly qualitative studies. This paper then analyzes the problems of the existing research and presents an outlook on the future development of English learning activity perspective research.*

Keywords— *Activity-based Approach; English Activity-based Approach; review and prospect*

I. INTRODUCTION

The English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the *Curriculum Standards*) (Ministry of Education, 2018) proposes six elements of curriculum content containing thematic contexts, discourse types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies, and English activity-based approach that integrates the six elements and points to the development of subject core literacy.

Specifically, the concept of English activity-based approach refers to a series of English learning activities, namely, learning, application, transfer and innovation that reflect the characteristics of comprehension, relevance and practice under the guidance of thematic meaning, so that students can promote their own language knowledge learning, language skill development, cultural connotation understanding, value judgment and learning strategy application in the process of analyzing and solving problems based on their existing knowledge and relying on different types of discourse. This process is not only a process of integrating and developing language knowledge and skills, but also a process of increasing cultural awareness, improving thinking quality, and improving learning ability. In other words, the concept of English activity-based approach is the basic organization form of

English class room teaching, the main way to implement the curriculum objectives, and its ultimate goal is to cultivate the core literacy of the subject. The proposed concept of English activity-based approach is a key element in solving the problem of "dumb English" that has long plagued Chinese students, and it is a key element in refining the establishment of moral education, implementing core literacy, and realizing the goal of educating people in English in the classroom (Li & Lu, 2021).

As a new concept proposed in the *Curriculum Standards*, the concept of English activity-based approach has received widespread attention from the educational community and become a hot topic as soon as it was proposed. Various articles have been published, but few scholars have conducted a comparatively comprehensive review of English activity-based approach in China. In view of this, this paper attempts to sort out the literature on English activity-based approach published in major English education journals in China during 2018-2022 and analyze the development of existing research in order to promote future research and practice on English activity-based approach.

II.   REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON ENGLISH ACTIVITY-BASED APPROACH

The literature for this study was obtained from 15 Chinese educational journals from 2018-2022, including two CSSCI journals, 10 PKU core journals, one AMI journal, and two CSSE (China Social Science Excellence) journals[1]. These journals have certain representativeness and authority, and can better reflect the current situation and dynamics of English activity-based approach research. The title of "Activity-based approach" and "English" are used as the search terms in CNKI, Wanfang, and CSSE database. After the search, "English Activity-based Approach" is used as the subject term to search additional literature. After eliminating irrelevant and duplicate literature, a valid sample of 97 papers is identified. The following paper will sort out and analyze the current situation of English activity-based approach research in four dimensions: the general trend of research, research objects, research contents and research methods.


Figure 1 Volume of literature in major journals on English Activity-based Approach from 2018 to 2022
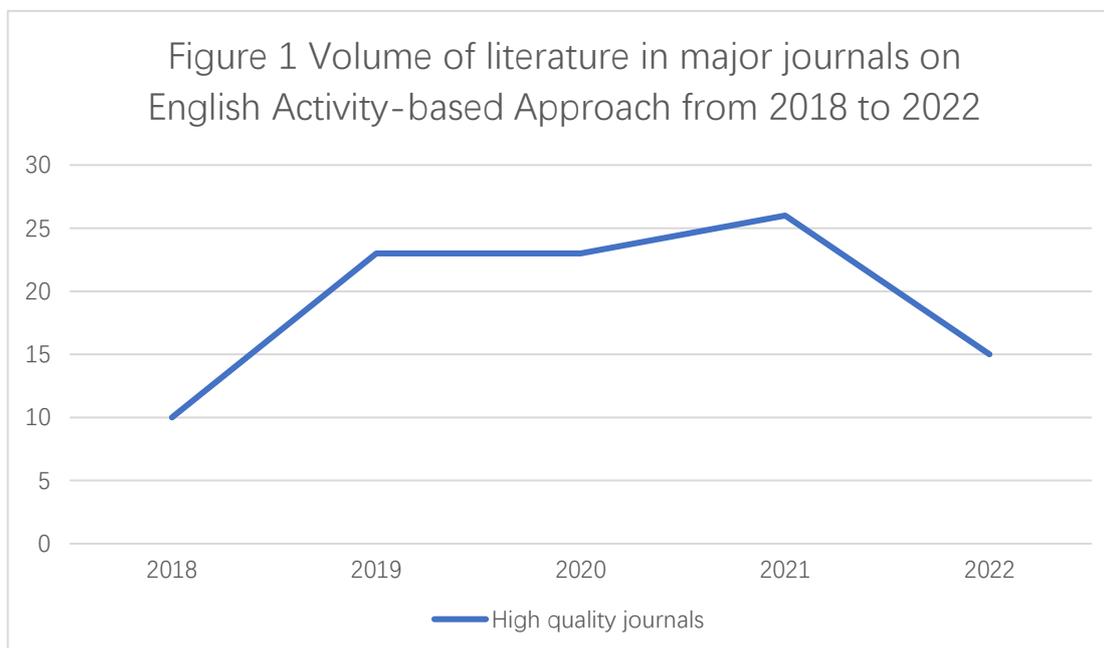
[1] 2 CSSCI journals are *Curriculum. Teaching Materials. Teaching Methodology.* and *Chinese Journal of Education.* 10 PKU core journals are *Teaching and Management*, *Teaching Monthly Secondary School Edition (Teaching Reference). Teaching Monthly Secondary School Edition (Foreign Language Teaching). Basic Education Curriculum. Shanghai Educational Research. Journal of Tianjin Normal University (Basic Education Edition). Modern Primary and Secondary Education. Foreign Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools. English Teaching and Research in Primary and Secondary Schools. Teacher Training in Primary and Secondary Schools.* One AMI journal is *Basic Foreign Language Education.* 2 CSSE journals are *Teaching and Learning of English in Primary Schools* and *Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages in Secondary Schools.*

2.1 General trends in the study of English activity-based approach

As of December 31, 2022, a total of 97 papers on the English Activity-based Approach were published in the educational journals mentioned above from 2018 to 2022, and their distribution is shown in Figure 1.

As can be seen from Figure 1, among the 15 educational journals, research on English activity-based approach was published in 2018 after the publication of the *Curriculum Standards*, reaching a peak in 2021 and decreasing thereafter. The author searched on CNKI with the subject term "English activity-based approach" and got 849 results including academic journals, dissertations, conference papers and special journals, and obtained the line graph shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Volume of literature on English activity-based approach from 2018 to 2022
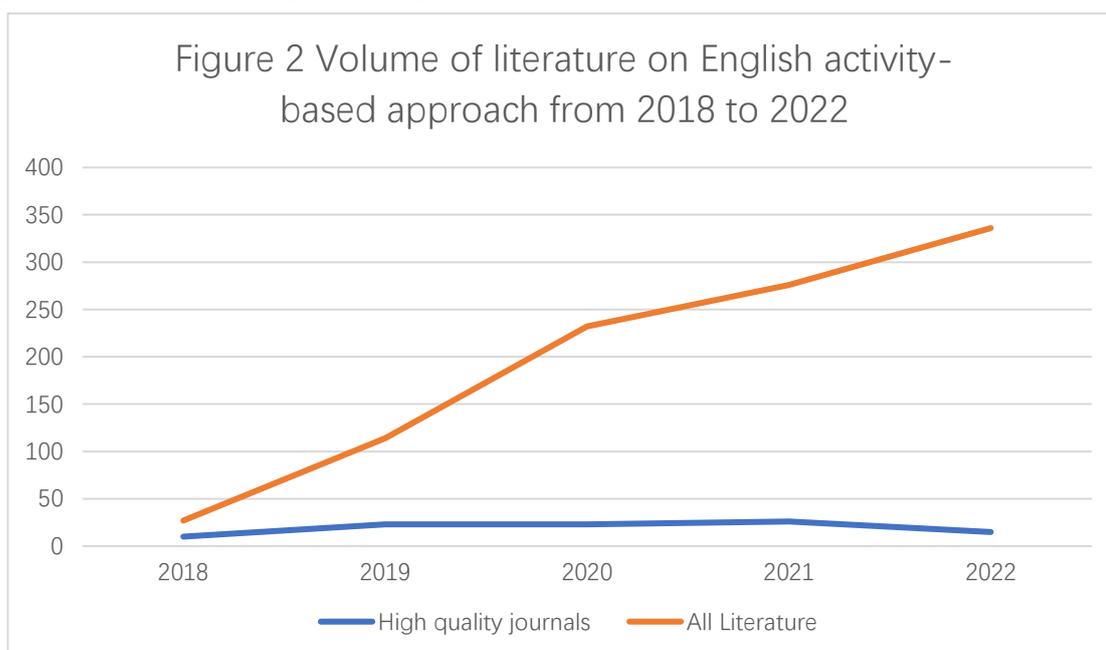
As can be seen from Figure 2, in general, the research result of literature on English activity-based approach is quite abundant, and the volume is increasing year by year, but the quality of the literature varies, and the quantity of high-quality literature is relatively small.

2.2 The objects of the study of English activity-based approach

The research on English activity-based approach in China from 2018 to 2022 covers different educational levels, including elementary, middle and high school levels, with the most research at the high school level, reaching 58.0%, and the research at the middle school and elementary school levels in decreasing order, at 27.2% and 14.8%, respectively. The research objects only involve basic education and general high school, and there is no literature related to higher academic levels and vocational education at this time.

Table 1 Distribution of objects of English Activity-based Approach (2018-2022)

Research object	Number	Proportion/%
Elementary school	12	14.8
Middle school	22	27.2
High school	47	58.0

Note: Some articles (e.g., non-empirical articles) did not specify the level of research objects, so the table only counts the number of articles that identified it.

2.3 The content of the study on English activity-based approach

The literature on English activity-based approach can be divided into two broad dimensions, namely macro and micro. Macro studies in turn include conceptual studies, and design philosophy. The micro literature is mainly based on different lesson types and deals with lesson design, teaching strategies and literacy development.

2.3.1 Macro level

2.3.1.1 Concept study

In terms of the conceptual definition of English activity-based approach, the *Curriculum Standards* has given a clear definition, and the relevant papers mainly provide supplementary explanations, such as on the characteristics of the English learning activity view, Gao (2018) argues that learning activities have three basic characteristics, namely, the objectives point to the core literacy of the subject, the integration of the six elements of curriculum content, and the embodiment of three types of activity levels. Wang (2019) adds to this that activities are the basic form of English learning and the macroscopic nature of activities. Zhang (2019) summarized the characteristics of learning activities with three characteristics: comprehensiveness, relevance and practicability. Wang et al. (2021) provide a more comprehensive explanation of the English activity-based approach in terms of background, connotation, structure, advantages, and doctrinal foundation.

Liu (2019), from the teacher's perspective, constructed the teacher's role in the classroom under the perspective of English activity-based approach as a "helper", "lifelong learner", "expander" of textbook content, "organizer" of students' learning activities, "reorganizer" of knowledge and information, and "trendsetter" of English curriculum reform.

2.3.1.2 Design philosophy

Ji and Dai (2018), Li and Tian (2021) summarized the current situation of the implementation of English activity-based approach and gave suggestions on conceptual follow-up, teaching different lesson types, teacher training, expert leadership, evaluation reform, and theoretical awareness and design points, respectively. Zhu (2019) proposed a deeper English curriculum teaching from both activity and quality perspectives. Li and Lu (2021) proposed four basic points and three paths for the design of English activity-based approach. Liu (2021) proposed the design of English activity-based approach from the perspective of activity theory. Fan and Liu (2022) integrated the design of all elements of English learning activities with subject core literacy as the guide. Zhu (2019) focuses on activities themselves and proposes to make the English activity-based approach "activated" in four aspects: language materials, content difficulty, brain storming and cooperative competition mechanism.

2.3.2 Micro level

As the basic organizational form of English classroom teaching, the activity-based approach is inevitably inseparable from actual teaching. More and more scholars and teachers are concerned with how to combine the activity-based approach with teaching, both in different levels of elementary, junior high and senior high school, and in the design and practice of teaching different types of classes such as reading, listening and reading and writing, as well as research on specific teaching strategies and the development of students' literacy.

2.3.2.1 Reading class design

Most of the teaching studies choose reading discourses as the teaching materials, including versions of textbooks such as the PEP edition and the FLTRP (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press) edition. For example, Sun et al. (2019) conducted a study on the reading passage "How Daisy Learned to Help Wildlife" in Module 2, Unit 4 of the PEP edition of high school. Zhang and Liu (2020) have a review and analysis of the reading teaching practice of Module 6, Unit2 of Grade 8 of FLTRP Edition.

In addition to the practical design of reading discourse in a particular unit, many scholars have subdivided the types of discourse and studied the teaching of one of the categories. For example, picture book is a very important learning resource in elementary school reading teaching. Qian et al. (2019) and Hang (2021) both designed the teaching of English picture book reading in elementary schools based on the English activity-based approach. Lu (2020) believes that newspaper reading, as a supplementary form of English classroom teaching, can stimulate students' interest in independent reading and designs a newspaper reading class. Xu and Liu (2019) and Xu and Gao (2019) applied the English activity-based approach to the teaching of reading literature in middle school and high school, respectively. Yan and Jiang (2021) further explore the practice of teaching literature reading based on the meaning of themes. Lu (2020) and Wang (2022) subdivide literary works and design poetry teaching class. Shi (2020), Wang and Zhang (2022) conducted a practical study on the reading of masterpieces based on the English activity-based approach. While Wang and Hou (2018) expanded the scope

of their study to examine the teaching of reading a book, using *The Secret Garden* as an example.

2.3.2.2 Other class designs

Many scholars have applied the English activity-based approach to the study of other lesson types besides reading, including both regular lesson types, such as speaking, listening, dictation, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, as well as special lesson types, such as drama and film.

The regular curriculum includes both single skill training courses. For example, Zhao (2020) designs six types of high school speaking activities, Xu (2021) explores grammar instruction and high school vocabulary instruction (Xu et al. 2022). Li (2019) proposes teaching strategies to effectively improve high school writing instruction. Zhou (2021) uses the "R+II" model to guide reading followed by writing. He et al. (2020) explores teaching on the appropriateness of letter writing.

It also includes courses that train multiple skills at the same time. In teaching reading and writing, Zhang (2019) innovatively designs reading (learning and understanding), imitation (application and practice) and writing (migration and innovation) learning activities with comprehensive, relevant and practical characteristics; Shen (2022) explores how to optimize the interactive teaching of English reading and writing. Chen (2020) subdivides reading discourses and explains the mode of teaching reading and writing of English literature in high school. Hu (2018) combines listening and writing to explore the teaching of "listening with writing". Zhang (2021) designs listening and writing classes.

Some scholars have conducted research on some special class types, such as English film appreciation elective (Li, 2018) and drama classes (Chen, 2020). Fu (2020) takes the school-based elective course "Spoken English" based on Kingsoft Word as an example to develop and implement the school-based elective course of high school English under the guidance of English activity-based approach.

In addition to teaching new classes, Fu (2019) also designed activities for review lessons in senior high school.

2.3.2.3 Other studies

Other aspects of the study include teaching strategies and literacy development. In terms of teaching strategies, He et al. (2020) implement reading instruction with English

activity-based approach using thinking visualization tools, such as timelines. Huang (2020) explored for the introduction session of high school reading. Feng and Fan (2021) design introductory question chains, progressive question chains and inquiry question chains to help students learn. Chen (2021), Wang and Luo (2022) propose homework design strategies guided by the activity-based approach.

Yang and Feng (2020) put emphasis on deepening thematic contexts, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies to develop students' reading literacy when teaching reading. Chen (2022) conducted a study on reading instruction to develop students' higher-order thinking qualities. Zhao (2020) focuses on learning comprehension activities in the three levels of English learning activities to explore the methods of constructing structured knowledge. Chen and Han (2018) on the other hand, investigated the latter two levels of activities to promote students' application practices and transferring innovative skills.

Zhang et al. (2018), from the perspective of evaluation, attempt to construct a listening-oriented and listening-integrated English listening classroom observation scale guided by English activity-based approach.

2.4 Methodology of research on English activity-based approach

According to Wen and Ren's (2010) classification, this paper classifies the research methods of the obtained literature into empirical and non-empirical studies, i.e., articles that provide information related to research subjects and tools, data collection and analysis are empirical studies, otherwise they are non-empirical studies. Table 2 shows that research on English activity-based approach mainly adopts the method of non-empirical research, with a total of 57 articles, accounting for 58.8% of the total literature, mainly in the categories of concept clarification and lesson design. Empirical studies accounted for 41.2% of the total number of articles, and were mainly qualitative studies, which are lesson case studies and action research. There was only one quantitative study, using experimental method, and one mixed study.

Table 2 Distribution of Research Methods of English Activity-based Approach from 2018 to 2022

Research methodology		Number	Total	Proportion/%
Empirical studies	Quantitative	1		
	qualitative	38	40	41.2
	mixed	1		
Non-empirical studies		57	57	58.8

III. REFLECTION AND PROSPECT ON THE ENGLISH ACTIVITY-BASED APPROACH IN CHINA

The above literature review shows that scholars have conducted a lot of research and exploration on English activity-based approach in recent years, and have achieved certain results as well as having some limitations. The following section will explain the reflections and outlooks on the existing research in three aspects: research objects, research contents, and research methods, respectively.

3.1 Research objects

Research on English activity-based approach in China covers three levels: elementary, junior high and senior high schools, and the number of studies is increasing in order, which is in line with the actual situation that English activity-based approach was first proposed in the 2017 edition of the new high school curriculum standards. However, as a new teaching concept and teaching organization form, the English learning activity view is still slightly under-researched in junior high school and elementary school levels; in addition, the above-mentioned literature has not yet applied the English activity-based approach to vocational education teaching. Therefore, future research should expand the scope of research objects, and while focusing on high schools, research on junior high and elementary schools should also follow up simultaneously to open up research on vocational teaching and learning.

3.2 Research content

The English activity-based approach in China is adopted in different lesson types, and there are many researches on lesson design or practice, among which the research on reading teaching is the main one, while other class types, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, vocabulary and grammar, is slightly lower, with a limited research perspective, mostly on the design or practice of one lesson. In contrast, the research on writing teaching incorporates some new teaching models, for example, Shen (2022) proposed the interactive teaching of reading and writing; Zhou (2021) applied the R+II model to the teaching of reading and subsequent writing. Even less research has been conducted on special courses such as film and drama. In addition to lesson studies, there are also studies from the teacher's perspective that construct the role of teachers in the English activity-based approach (Liu, 2019), and evaluate the implementation of the activity-based approach (Zhang et al.2018), but such literature is anecdotal.

Therefore, future research should refine the study of different lesson examples, which can be subdivided in the direction of teaching sessions and teaching strategies. In addition, it is also worth exploring how to evaluate the degree of implementation of the activity-based approach. The English activity-based approach emphasizes student-centeredness, and research on the implementation of the English activity-based approach from the student's perspective is still in a blank stage and needs to be explored.

3.3 Research Methodology

Research on the English activity-based approach is dominated by non-empirical studies, which mainly include two categories: conceptual analysis and lesson design. The empirical studies, in turn, are mainly qualitative studies, mostly in the form of lesson case studies, but many of them lack descriptions of students' responses and teachers' reflections. Very few involved quantitative studies and qualitative studies other than lesson case studies, and the research methods were rather homogeneous. Therefore, future studies should consider diverse research methods to improve the credibility of the articles.

IV. Conclusion

This paper presents quantitative statistics and content analysis of English activity-based approach papers in 15 Chinese educational journals from 2018-2022. The findings show that: the number of studies is generally on an upward trend; domestic studies are concentrated in high school level, followed by middle school and least in elementary school; the main contents of domestic studies include conceptual studies and design concepts at macro level, lesson design

studies, teaching strategies and literacy development at micro level; research methods are mainly non-empirical studies, and empirical studies are mainly qualitative studies.

In the future, research on English activity-based approach should expand the scope of research objects; subdivide the research content, explore the student's perspective on English learning and the evaluation of the implementation of the activity-based approach; and adopt diverse research methods.

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