

The Application of Project-Based Learning in Junior High School English Whole-Book Reading Instruction: A Case Study of *The Jungle Book*

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Abstract: Project-Based Learning (PBL) facilitates students in autonomously posing questions centered on challenging learning themes during reading. Through collaborative group inquiry, they engage deeply with the material, thereby enhancing their reading proficiency and developing core competencies. As a supplement to conventional textbook-based reading, whole-book reading guides students toward profound and personalized literary engagement, making the reading experience more complete, multi-dimensional, and in-depth. This paper integrates Project-Based Learning with whole-book reading, using the Black Cat graded reader *The Jungle Book* as a case study to explore the instructional design of whole-book reading for junior high school English classrooms within a PBL framework.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning; Whole-Book Reading; Junior High English; Reading Instruction.

1. Introduction

The junior high school stage is a critical period for cultivating students' English reading abilities. However, English reading instruction at this level in China currently faces numerous challenges. Firstly, classroom content is often confined to discrete language points such as vocabulary and grammar, rarely delving into the deeper meanings behind the text. Secondly, the curriculum is characterized by a scarcity of dedicated English reading courses, with most instruction oriented towards preparing for high-stakes entrance examinations, reflecting a pronounced "exam-oriented" tendency. Furthermore, regarding reading materials, the available English textbooks in primary and secondary schools are often insufficient in volume and scope, which prevents students from developing core competencies through in-depth reading^[1].

From a pedagogical perspective, the focus of many junior high school teachers remains on "teaching" rather than on facilitating student "learning"^[2]. Consequently, upon completing a reading course, students often fail to grasp the relationship between language acquisition, textual structure, and thematic understanding, resulting in superficial learning. Many educators also lack professional guidance on the principles and patterns of English reading, leading to unscientific reading training for students. This pedagogical model is increasingly misaligned with broader educational goals. The emphasis on cultivating "core competencies" reflects a significant, top-down policy shift in Chinese education, moving away from rote memorization toward holistic student development. The instructional approach proposed in this paper is a direct response to this national reform, presenting a practical, classroom-level solution for educators tasked with its implementation. To address these systemic issues, it is imperative to integrate Project-Based Learning (PBL) with whole-book reading. This combination allows students to engage in deep, personalized reading, making the experience more holistic, multi-dimensional, and profound, ultimately enhancing their reading abilities and core competencies.

2. Related Concepts

2.1. Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Project-Based Learning (PBL) originated from the educational reform movements of the early 20th century, which aimed to shift the focus of instruction from mere knowledge transmission to the cultivation of students' practical abilities and skills. The American progressive educator William Heard Kilpatrick was the first to propose the concept of the "project method." Subsequently, American primary and secondary schools began to focus on and research project-based teaching in the 1930s. China introduced PBL in the 1990s, and after a period of academic familiarization, it emerged as a research hotspot in the Chinese education sector in 2019. The prevailing academic consensus defines PBL as a teaching model where, within an authentic learning context, the teacher designs meaningful tasks, and students focus on a specific topic to conduct open-ended inquiry. This process enables students to engage in meaningful learning, construct their own knowledge systems, and ultimately enhance their capabilities. While various scholars and institutions have offered different interpretations, several core characteristics of PBL are widely recognized:

First, learning activities are founded on a driving question that is aligned with curriculum standards and aims to enhance students' foundational knowledge, skills, and core competencies^[4]. Second, learning is inherently collaborative, necessitating the creation of a learning community that includes teachers, students, and all project designers who work together from problem generation to final project management. Third, the inquiry focuses on authentic, real-world problems, allowing students to develop their own understanding through the problem-solving process. Fourth, the research problems are closely linked to practical life and production, enabling students to solve problems in realistic contexts. Fifth, the evaluation throughout the project includes both formative (process-based) and summative (final) assessments^[6].

2.2. Whole-Book Reading

The concept of whole-book reading first appeared in China in 1931, when Mr. Xia Mianzun proposed the "reading of whole volumes" in his work *On the Study of Chinese Language*. Mr. Ye Shengtao later echoed this idea. Today, the *Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition)* has elevated "Whole-Book Reading and Discussion" to the forefront of its designated learning task clusters. While it is a prominent research topic in language education, a single, universally accepted definition remains elusive. However, a synthesis of scholarly views reveals three primary characteristics. First, it emphasizes the *integrity of the reading object*, meaning the reading of an entire, independent book, followed by the reflection on its content. Second, it highlights *personalized reading*, positioning the student as the primary agent with the teacher acting as a facilitator. Third, it stresses the importance of *habit formation*, encouraging students to develop consistent reading habits to acquire experience and improve their reading skills.

The integration of these two frameworks creates a powerful pedagogical synergy. They are not merely combined but are mutually essential for the model's success. Whole-book reading provides the rich, authentic, and complex content necessary for a meaningful project. A complete novel offers a far deeper context for exploring complex themes like law, society, and identity than a typical textbook excerpt. In turn, PBL provides the structure, motivation, and purpose that guides students through the potentially daunting task of reading an entire book. It transforms the passive act of reading into an active, goal-oriented investigation. This fusion creates a virtuous cycle: the project drives the reading, and the reading fuels the project, fundamentally redefining the student's role from a passive consumer of text to an active researcher and creator.

3. Application of PBL in Whole-Book Reading Instruction: A Case Study

PBL centers learning around a project, enabling students to enhance their core competencies and problem-solving skills within authentic contexts. The process of "whole-book reading" itself can be conceptualized as a project, encompassing stages such as selecting reading material, creating a reading plan, producing and showcasing reading outcomes, and reflecting on the effectiveness of the reading process. By merging PBL with whole-book reading, the instructional process is structured into four distinct phases: the Preparation Phase, the Implementation Phase, the Showcase of Reading Outcomes Phase, and the Evaluation and Reflection Phase. The following instructional design, based on the Black Cat graded reader *The Jungle Book*^[11], illustrates this four-stage model.

3.1. Preparation Phase

This initial phase involves a preliminary exploration of the book's thematic significance. The teacher must conduct a thorough analysis of the text, deconstructing its theme from the perspectives of *What, How, and Why* to prepare for instruction. *The Jungle Book*, by Rudyard Kipling, chronicles the journey of Mowgli from an innocent young boy to a master of the jungle. The novel uses Mowgli's development to explore the process of self-growth and breaking through limitations, prompting readers to reflect on the essential qualities required for such growth and the "survival of the

fittest" laws of the jungle. Structurally, the narrative unfolds across five key settings: the jungle, Council Rock, the Lost City, the village, and the gorge. The primary plotline follows Mowgli's growth, while a secondary, underlying plotline centers on the Law of the Jungle. The story is told chronologically, highlighting both the crucial guiding role of the Jungle Law and the decisive impact of virtuous character traits on an individual's development.

Based on the novel's content, themes, and the characteristics of junior high school students, the teacher can establish the following learning objectives for this PBL unit:

Upon completion of this project, students will be able to:

1. Interpret information from the author's biography, plot summary, and table of contents to understand the novel's background, main plot, and chapter structure.

2. Appreciate the novel's vivid language and delicate writing style through chapter analysis, and grasp its imaginative beauty; summarize the story and perform key scenes to enhance artistic appreciation, performance skills, and oral confidence; cultivate critical, logical, and innovative thinking skills through collaborative reading and project tasks.

3. Analyze characters comprehensively using mind maps and master vocabulary for describing character traits; analyze and judge characters' qualities by studying direct and indirect characterization, learning from their virtues such as courage, kindness, and mutual support.

4. Engage in evidence-based reading to understand the novel's themes and the issues it explores, such as bravery, friendship, justice, adherence to laws, and mutual understanding, thereby connecting the text to their own lives and social realities.

5. Master the structure and expression of a book review by studying examples, enhancing their output and expressive abilities to accurately convey the book's core themes and values.

3.2. Implementation Phase

The implementation of whole-book reading instruction via PBL is divided into three stages: project launch, project progression, and project showcase and evaluation. The project launch can be allocated one class period with light, engaging tasks focused on introducing the novel's background and sparking student interest. The project progression is the core of the instruction and should be allocated approximately six class periods, during which students will complete analyses of chapters, characters, and themes. The final project showcase can be allocated one class period for students to present their work and complete evaluations.

3.3. Project Launch Stage

This stage corresponds to the first lesson. Students first learn to read a whole book effectively by examining its cover, title page, introduction, background information, and table of contents. They then discuss the key elements of a book recommendation report and collaboratively create an evaluation rubric, which serves to stimulate their interest in reading the entire book.

The core question for this lesson is: How can we create an effective book recommendation report?

To begin, the teacher can play the trailer for Disney's 2016 film adaptation of *The Jungle Book*. The visual preview helps students quickly grasp the characters, story, and setting, facilitating their entry into the reading state. The teacher then poses pre-reading questions, such as, "What can we get from

the cover?" This prompts students to extract basic information, developing their ability to quickly capture key details and interpret images while gaining an initial understanding of the main characters. Next, a question like, "What can we get from the content?" guides them to examine the table of contents, inferring the main plot points and settings. The teacher can also design a matching activity with pictures of animals and their names/roles to clarify character relationships. To address the core question, the teacher introduces the project's final task—creating a book recommendation—and students discuss the driving question in small groups. They decide on the format for their final product and collaboratively establish the evaluation criteria, fostering ownership and motivation for the reading journey.

3.4. Project Progression Stage

This is the central phase of the PBL unit. It is allocated five class periods: four for analyzing the novel's chapters to understand, appreciate, and reflect on the work, and one for in-depth character and theme analysis.

(1) Chapter Analysis

The four lessons dedicated to chapter analysis are structured around activities such as extracting key vocabulary and sentences, answering core questions, summarizing chapter meanings, and creating personalized works based on their understanding.

In the first lesson, students read while considering four core questions:

1. *Why does Mother Wolf say that the man cub is theirs?*
2. *Who is the leader of the pack? What is he like?*
3. *Who speaks for Mowgli? What do they say?*
4. What are the laws of the jungle?

While reading, students accumulate language by taking notes on useful words and phrases. More advanced students can also create their own sentences using the new vocabulary.

The second lesson focuses on using core questions and reading tools to organize chapter content. This reveals a deliberate and sophisticated scaffolding strategy designed to guide students from concrete comprehension to abstract synthesis. The teacher introduces tools like the "Story Mountain," "Reader's Theater," and "Venn Diagrams." This progression demystifies the process of critical thinking for young learners.

1. The process begins with concrete tasks, such as answering direct questions like, "What lessons does Mowgli have with Baloo?"

2. It then moves to structured analysis with visual tools. The Story Mountain helps students map the narrative arc and identify conflicts, a transferable skill for analyzing other texts. The Venn Diagram is used to compare and contrast Mowgli's two mentors, Baloo and Bagheera, making the analytical process visible and manageable. Students write similarities in the overlapping section and differences in the separate circles, which encourages nuanced thinking and a deeper understanding of the characters.

3. Next, the instruction transitions to empathetic and interpretive tasks. In the Reader's Theater activity, students select, rehearse, and perform scenes from the text. Through embodied performance—using their voices, facial expressions, and gestures—they internalize the characters' emotions and the cultural subtext of the story, enhancing their innovative abilities and creating a positive reading experience.¹

By the third lesson, students have a solid grasp of the

novel's content and can attempt to summarize chapter meanings. The teacher can set core questions like:

1. *How do Mowgli's feelings change in the Lost City?*
2. *What do you think of Kaa's dance? Why?*
3. What does Mowgli learn from his experience in the Lost City?

Students can use tools like the Story Mountain or flowcharts to summarize the beginning, climax, and resolution in their own words.

The fourth lesson culminates in open-ended creative synthesis. Students are given a choice of activities to express their understanding of the story's themes: drawing a comic strip, writing a song or poem, or selecting and explaining the significance of their favorite quote. This optionality allows students at all levels to find a suitable method for expressing their unique interpretation, fostering both innovative and critical thinking. This carefully designed cognitive ladder systematically moves students through Bloom's Taxonomy—from understanding and applying to analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

(2) Character and Theme Analysis

This lesson is divided into three tasks. First, students are given the freedom to choose a character they find interesting for analysis, summarizing their personality traits and finding textual evidence to support their claims. Second, the teacher provides an example of a cinquain poem. After studying its structure, students create their own cinquain for their chosen character. Finally, the teacher guides students to understand the symbolic meaning of the characters, laying the groundwork for a deeper thematic exploration. Students can connect the characters to real-life people, share their thoughts, and discuss the story's themes in groups, finding evidence from the text to support their interpretations.

3.5. Showcase of Reading Outcomes Phase

The core task of this lesson is the completion of the book recommendation report. By studying a sample report (as outlined in Fig. 2), students learn the conventional structure and language for writing a book review, which enhances their expressive capabilities.

Fig. 2 outlines the sample structure for the book report, including sections for Background Introduction, Plot Analysis, Character Analysis, and Theme Exploration. This template provides a clear framework for students' final project.

The teacher provides this template, and students work in groups to draft their reports. Each member is responsible for a specific section. Through a process of peer and teacher feedback, the best drafts are selected for a class presentation. After class, students revise and polish their reports. The final, best works are chosen through self, peer, and teacher evaluation to be showcased and potentially submitted for publication. This challenging, open-ended task requires students to synthesize all their previous sub-tasks, forming a holistic understanding of the book.

3.6. Evaluation and Reflection Phase

In this final phase, students use the evaluation rubric they helped create (an example is shown in Table 1) to conduct self-assessment and group assessment. As students share their takeaways and reflections from the whole-book reading experience, the teacher provides constructive feedback to further enhance their positive reading experience and optimize their outcomes. The teacher also uses the rubric to observe and record student performance across various

dimensions, offering timely advice and using the feedback to refine future instruction. The involvement of other stakeholders, such as parents, in the evaluation process can

further boost students' motivation and ensure the quality of their reading engagement.

Table 1. Evaluation Rubric for the Whole-Book Reading Project

Evaluation Dimension	Criteria	Self-Evaluation (1-5)	Peer Evaluation (1-5)	Teacher Evaluation (1-5)
Reading Process	Actively participates in class discussions; Completes reading tasks on time; Takes detailed reading notes.			
Collaborative Work	Contributes actively to group discussions; Respects teammates' opinions; Fulfills assigned responsibilities.			
Project Outcome	The book report is well-structured and logical; Content is rich and well-supported by evidence; Language is fluent and accurate.			
Creative Expression	Demonstrates unique insights and creativity in final presentation; Presentation is engaging and clear.			
Reflection	Can articulate personal growth and learning from the project; Offers constructive suggestions for improvement.			

4. Conclusion

The application of Project-Based Learning to whole-book reading instruction effectively positions students as the central agents of their own learning. In this model, the teacher's role transforms from a dispenser of knowledge to that of a "senior reader" who guides and facilitates students' deep engagement with literature. PBL serves as a powerful supplement to conventional teaching methods, requiring educators to leverage their professional expertise to integrate the content of a whole book into a series of diverse and meaningful learning activities. Through these activities, students not only acquire knowledge and skills but also develop critical abilities and core competencies.

Reading instruction acts as a bridge connecting text, life, and the human spirit. Great literary works often embody timeless human values such as integrity, courage, love, and loyalty—qualities that are intrinsic to the development of core competencies. By reading a complete book, students follow an entire plot, appreciate the complexities of its characters, and explore its profound themes. This process involves a range of cognitive activities, including extracting, integrating, internalizing, analyzing, comparing, critiquing, and evaluating. Such engagement is instrumental in promoting the development of advanced reading abilities, critical thinking skills, and overall intellectual growth.

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