

Exploring Design Strategies of “Main Question Chains” in Senior High School English Teaching

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Abstract

The concept of a Main Question Chain refers to a carefully structured and logically connected sequence of essential questions that guide classroom instruction. This approach not only serves as an organizing framework but also acts as a catalyst to promote knowledge construction, language proficiency, and higher-order thinking. In senior high school English education, strategically designing such question chains significantly enhances deep learning, active engagement, and the cultivation of students' core competencies. Grounded in the 2017 English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (revised 2020), this paper explores the principles and strategies for designing main question chains along three dimensions: angle, breadth, and depth. Theoretical insights are integrated with practical classroom examples to provide a comprehensive framework for effective implementation.

Keywords

Senior High School English; Main Question Chain; Deep Learning; Critical Thinking; Core Competencies.

1. Angle Design: Aligning Questions with Cognitive Progression

Main questions serve as the cognitive backbone of a lesson, structuring instructional flow and stimulating students' thinking.[1] At the senior high school level, where learners transition from concrete to abstract reasoning, it is vital to design questions that progressively build conceptual understanding and cognitive complexity.

1.1. From Contextual Familiarity to Conceptual Insight

Taking Unit 1: Teenage Life as an example, a well-crafted question chain might proceed as follows:

What are your impressions of teenage life across different cultures?

What common challenges do high school students face?

How do cultural norms shape teenage values and behavior?

What advice would you offer to a foreign teenager adapting to life in China?

This sequence leads students from observation and description to analysis, evaluation, and application, effectively scaffolding higher-order thinking.

1.2. Genre-Sensitive Question Design

In genre-based reading instruction, such as analyzing news reports, employing the 5W1H framework (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) enhances students' grasp of both content and structure. For example:

Who is the report about?

What event occurred and what caused it?

How did the event unfold and what were the consequences?

What is your evaluation or personal response?

This approach not only strengthens comprehension but also develops students’ ability to transfer rhetorical and structural knowledge to their own writing.

1.3. Teaching Case: Angle Design in Practice

In a senior high school unit on Environmental Protection, the main question chain guides students from concrete observations to deeper conceptual reflection:

What environmental problems are common in your community?

How do these problems affect people’s daily lives?

What local solutions have been proposed or implemented?

If you were a policymaker, what strategies would you prioritize to improve the environment?

This progression encourages students to connect personal experience with analysis, evaluation, and creative problem-solving, effectively scaffolding cognitive demands.[3]

2. Breadth Design: Integrating Knowledge, Activities, and Competencies

Breadth in question chain design ensures holistic learning beyond rote memorization. It requires aligning linguistic knowledge, task engagement, and competency development to create a multidimensional learning experience.

2.1. Building a Coherent Knowledge Structure

In Unit 3: Festivals and Celebrations, an effective question chain might include:

What traditional festivals are celebrated in China and abroad?

What are the origins and cultural values of these festivals?

How do different cultural practices express similar human emotions?

How would you introduce a Chinese festival to an international audience?

This structure activates prior knowledge and cross-cultural awareness, organizing content thematically and logically.

2.2. Task Integration: Fusing Skills Through Sequenced Activities

Each main question links to targeted language tasks, creating a seamless, integrated learning process. For example:

Listening: Analyze an audio clip about Christmas customs.

Reading: Examine a passage on Spring Festival traditions.

Speaking: Debate in groups “Which festival best represents family values?”

Writing: Compose a letter introducing the Mid-Autumn Festival to a foreign friend.

This multimodal approach encourages meaningful language use rather than isolated skill drills.

2.3. Competency Alignment: Linking Questions to Literacy Goals

Main Question	Core Competency	Expected Output
How do festivals reflect cultural values?	Cultural awareness	Oral or written cultural interpretation
What problems do teenagers face today?	Critical reasoning	Argumentative speech or essay
How can we promote Chinese culture abroad?	Language application	Proposal or creative campaign in English

Such alignment ensures students not only learn English but also learn through English, deepening both cognitive and communicative skills.

2.4. Teaching Case: Breadth Design in Practice

In the Environmental Protection unit, breadth is reflected in integrated, authentic activities:

Listening to a podcast about local pollution issues to enhance comprehension.

Reading articles on environmental policies to build knowledge.

Participating in group discussions or debates on community engagement.

Writing proposals or campaigns advocating greener practices.

This multi-layered approach links language skills with content knowledge, fostering competency development in a meaningful context.

3. Depth Design: Advancing Inquiry and Critical Thinking

Depth refers to the cognitive challenge embedded in the question sequence. Deep learning requires questions to be carefully layered, guiding students from basic understanding to thoughtful application, analysis, and innovation.

3.1. Contextualized Problem-Solving

Authentic situational questions boost engagement.[2] For example, in the Environmental Protection unit:

What environmental challenges exist in your city?

How do these problems affect daily life?

What local solutions can be implemented?

If you were a policymaker, what would be your top priorities?

This design integrates language use with real-world issues, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving.

3.2. Logical Coherence Within Question Sequences

Effective question chains maintain clear logical progression, such as:

Progressive complexity: What is a friend? → What makes a good friend? → What defines a true friend?

Causal reasoning: Why do students experience stress? → What are the effects? → How can we address it?

Comparative judgment: How does online learning compare with face-to-face learning? → Which format is more effective?

Such sequences nurture analytical skills and deeper engagement.

3.3. Embracing Openness and Diversity of Thought

Open-ended questions nurture independent thinking and personal engagement. Examples include:

What career path best matches your interests and abilities?

Should all students study abroad? Why or why not?

What does “Think globally, act locally” mean to you?

These prompts encourage personal response, debate, and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

4. Conclusion

Designing main question chains transcends being a mere technical procedure; it represents a deliberate and strategic pedagogical approach that places inquiry, cognitive development, and communicative competence at the very heart of English language education. By carefully and thoughtfully constructing questions that address the dimensions of angle, breadth, and depth,

educators are empowered to craft intellectually rigorous and engaging lessons that closely align with curriculum standards and learning objectives.

Such lessons not only facilitate effective language acquisition but also actively cultivate students' critical literacy, cross-cultural awareness, and global competence—skills essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected world. Furthermore, this approach fosters lifelong learning habits by encouraging learners to question, analyze, and articulate their ideas with clarity and confidence.

Ultimately, harnessing the potential of well-sequenced and thematically coherent question chains transforms the senior high school English classroom into a dynamic and inclusive learning environment. Here, students are motivated to become independent thinkers and effective communicators who are equipped to engage meaningfully with complex issues, diverse perspectives, and real-world challenges. This pedagogical strategy thus bridges language learning with higher-order thinking, empowering students to not only master English but also to grow as reflective, responsible global citizens.

References

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