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Five-Step English Learning Model in Improving English of High School Students in Jinan, China

Li Juan ^{1,2}, Joseph Boon Zik Hong ³, Cheong Tau Han ⁴, Parmjit Singh ⁵

^{1,3,4,5} Department of Mathematics Education, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi, MARA Campus Selangor, Malaysia

². Shandong Jigang Senior High School, China

2021886286@student.uitm.edu.my, lijuanmailchina@163.com, josephboon@uitm.edu.my, cheongtauhan@uitm.edu.my, parmj378@uitm.edu.my, +601110666358:

Abstract

This research on the Five-Step English Learning Model of high school. Five steps model: starting, building, strengthening, using, reviewing. The study took place at a high school in Shandong, over three months. Challenges remain: many students rely heavily on rote memorization and exam drilling. The results provide evidence that the model enhances student proficiency through an interactive learning environment. Besides, the model enriches the discourse on learner-centered and constructivist approaches in the Chinese context. The findings offer implications for teachers aiming to balance test preparation with long-term language development, policymakers seeking scalable strategies to improve the quality of English education.

Keywords: Five-Step English Learning Model, senior high school students, English performance, effectiveness of the model

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1.0 Introduction

English, as the main international language in the world today, plays a crucial role in students' academic studies and their future careers. However, Chinese students continue to face significant challenges in learning English effectively. The outcomes of English education often fall far short of the effort invested by students (Liu, 2019). In China, English is introduced in primary schools from the third year onward for a four-year period, followed by six years in secondary schools and an additional two years at the tertiary level (Yue, 2016).

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This amounts to more than 2,000 hours of English instruction—more than any other subject—yet students' language proficiency remains unsatisfactory.

Superficial learning still dominates most English classes (He, 2019). Teachers tend to transmit knowledge directly, while students mainly memorize vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammar rules. There is little opportunity for learners to observe, think critically, or construct their own understanding. As a result, their comprehensive language ability, learning capacity, critical thinking, and overall personal development are not fully cultivated. Many students also lack intrinsic motivation to learn English (He, 2019). Under the influence of exam-oriented education, they are deprived of the joy of learning and experience constant pressure to achieve high scores. Few students learn English out of genuine interest; thus, classroom engagement is generally low, and teachers often have to push students to participate (Lu, 2019).

The essence of classroom teaching lies in a structured learning process with explicit goals and active student participation. According to cognitive psychology, classroom learning typically involves three major processes: acquiring learning outcomes, consolidating knowledge, and applying what has been learned. In addition to these, two auxiliary stages—starting and summarizing—are essential. Together, these five stages form the core elements of effective classroom learning, commonly known as starting, constructing, consolidating, applying, and summarizing.

The Five-Step Learning Model was first proposed by Liu Jingbo (2019) as a framework for enhancing students' learning effectiveness. In this study, the model was applied in English classrooms by the researcher. Within this framework, the acquisition of learning outcomes is referred to as construction, emphasizing that true learning should occur through active construction rather than passive indoctrination. The learning outcomes here encompass not only knowledge but also skills, methods, emotions, attitudes, values, abilities, character, and personal accomplishment. The structure of the Five-Step Learning Model is illustrated in Fig. 1.

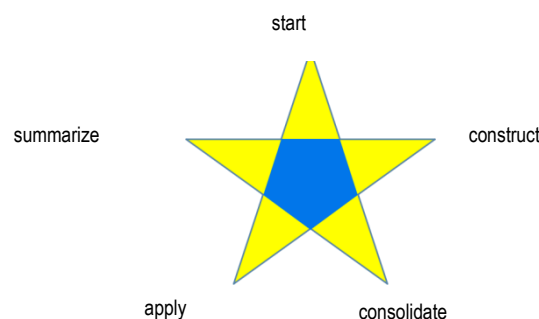


Fig. 1: *The Five-Step English Learning Model*

2.0 Literature Review

There are several references related to the Five-Step Learning Model. The five fundamental elements of this model are briefly introduced as follows (Liu, 2019).

Step 1: Start

The Start stage prepares students for learning. It is not merely a classroom introduction but a process of activating and recalling information, as described in information processing theory. Effective ways to begin include linking new content with students' past, present, and future experiences so they recognize the value of learning; creating authentic scenarios and posing meaningful questions to spark curiosity and thinking; and setting challenging tasks that promote competition and active participation in classroom activities.

Step 2: Construct

Construction refers to the interaction between external information and prior knowledge within the learner's mind, forming unique cognitive understanding such as developing ideas, grasping concepts and principles, and discovering rules and patterns. Construction differs from traditional indoctrination because it is built through interaction with teachers and peers—this embodies the essence of social constructivism.

This process has three key characteristics:

First, learning must begin from the learner's existing knowledge and experience. It is difficult to understand something entirely new without any relevant background.

Second, learning should be meaningful and connected to the learner's personal world so that new content can be interpreted through existing knowledge.

Third, new knowledge must occupy a specific position within the learner's cognitive or experiential framework. If learning is disconnected from prior structures, retention and understanding will be limited.

Step 3: Consolidate

According to information processing theory, newly acquired knowledge must be consolidated to remain in long-term memory. Understanding how the brain stores information helps clarify this process. Cognitively, the brain can be divided into four functional areas: the thinking brain, storage brain, skill brain, and instinct brain. The thinking brain handles reasoning and has limited capacity; it is where knowledge construction occurs. The instinct brain functions through inherited mechanisms. Knowledge itself can be categorized into two forms: declarative knowledge—facts, concepts, and principles—and procedural skills. Declarative knowledge is stored in the storage brain, while procedural skills reside in the skill brain, both having vast capacity.

Consolidation involves maintaining declarative knowledge in the storage brain and procedural knowledge in the skill brain over time. The former relies on memory, while the latter depends on practice. Thus, memorization and practice are the two essential methods for consolidation.

Step 4: Apply

The Application stage involves solving problems, completing tasks, and fostering creativity by applying constructed knowledge and consolidated skills to authentic or realistic situations. Through this process, students develop higher-order thinking abilities such as analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Real learning occurs only when students can use what they have learned in practical contexts.

Application can occur on three levels:

The first level involves using knowledge to solve real problems—this is practicality, aimed at addressing tangible challenges.

The second level refers to applying knowledge in simulated contexts to develop ability and prepare for future use; this commonly occurs during schooling.

The third level is the implicit use of knowledge, where learning unconsciously shapes character, habits, and attitudes through subtle influence and reflection. Among these, application is most crucial for students, as it strengthens their competence and bridges the gap between learning and real-life use.

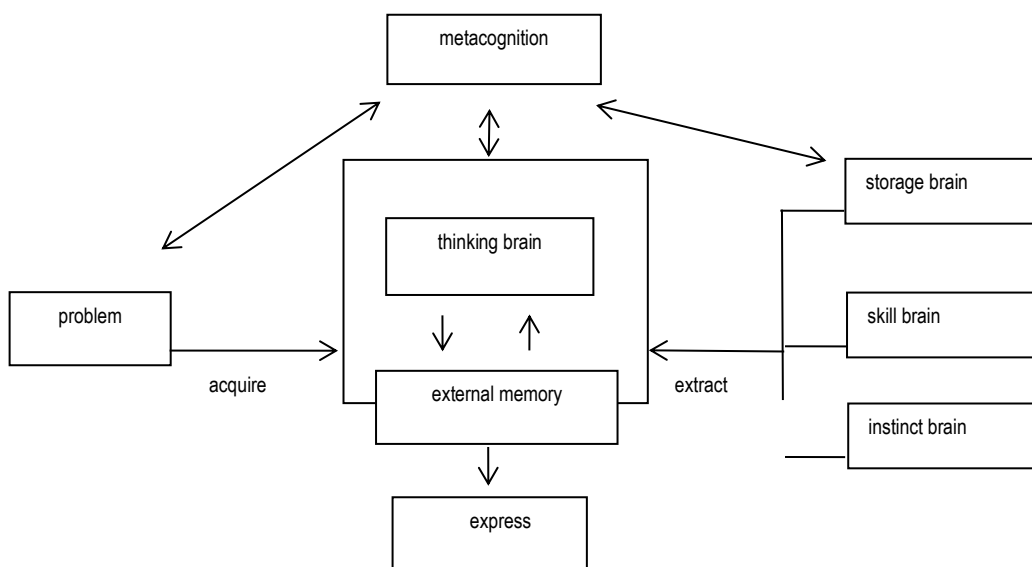


Fig 2: Application model diagram

Step 5: Summarize

Summarizing is a familiar practice for both teachers and students. Many students reflect on what they have learned in a lesson or throughout the day, and some even use mind maps to visualize their summaries. Summarization transforms failure into valuable

experience and helps make success repeatable. The purpose of this stage is to improve future learning and to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

An effective summary requires appropriate tools. Using systematic and professional tools enhances the accuracy and efficiency of reflection. Such tools may include guiding questions, tables, diagrams, or other visual aids. The following examples illustrate different summary approaches, though students are encouraged to design their own tools based on personal learning preferences.

Tool 1: Systematic Problem Chain Summary

What is my goal?

What have I actually achieved?

Why is there a difference between my goals and reality?

What lessons can I learn from this?

Tool 2: Learning Method Reflection

What did I learn?

How did I learn it?

Are there better learning methods I can use?

What insights did I gain from this experience?

Tool 3: Error Analysis Summary

What kind of mistake did I make?

Why did I make it?

How can I correct it?

If I cannot identify the problem, how can I seek help?

Tool 4: Chapter-Based Summary Example

After studying a topic such as “Exploring the Sum of Interior and Exterior Angles of Polygons,” the following reflective questions can be used:

What have I learned from this lesson?

What methods did I use to explore the sum of interior angles?

What mathematical concepts and approaches have I gained through this study?

Tool 5: systematic summary table.

Table 1: Systematic Summary Table

goal	assessment	reflection	sorting

Tool 6: Mind Mapping

Mind mapping is an excellent tool for summarizing because it transforms long lists of monotonous information into colorful, memorable, and well-organized visual diagrams that align with the brain's natural way of processing ideas. By using mind maps, students can clearly visualize relationships between concepts and establish meaningful connections among different topics. This technique not only enhances understanding but also improves memory retention and creativity in learning.

Tool 7: Error Correction Book

Error correction books are another effective tool commonly used by students. The purpose of maintaining such a book is not merely to record mistakes but to analyze their causes and identify specific strategies for improvement. Through consistent reflection and revision, students can recognize recurring errors, track their learning progress, and apply corrective actions more effectively. Each learner can develop a personalized error correction book suited to their own learning habits and goals.

3.0 Methodology

The use of interviews in research represents a shift from perceiving human participants as passive subjects and data as external to individuals, to viewing knowledge as co-constructed through human interaction and dialogue (Kvale, 1996, p.11). According to Kvale (1996, p.14), an interview is essentially an exchange of views between two or more individuals on a topic of mutual interest. It highlights the central role of human communication in knowledge creation and underscores the socially situated nature of research data.

The interview, as a qualitative research tool, offers flexibility and depth. It allows data to be collected through multiple sensory channels—verbal, non-verbal, visual, and auditory. In addition, modern research contexts extend this to written and digital modes, particularly in online settings. This multi-channel approach allows the interviewer to interpret meaning not only from words but also from tone, pauses, gestures, and expressions. The sequencing of interview questions can be guided while still leaving space for spontaneity, enabling the interviewer to probe for clarity and elicit comprehensive responses to complex and personal topics.

In this study, the Five-Step Learning Model was implemented at Jigang Senior High School in Jinan, Shandong Province, China, over a period of three months. Three English teachers and six classes participated in the research. Classes 1, 3, and 5 served as the control group, while Classes 2, 4, and 6 constituted the experimental group. During the intervention period, the experimental classes were

taught using the Five-Step Learning Model, whereas the control classes continued with traditional teaching methods. This design enabled a comparative understanding of how the model influenced teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

After the three-month implementation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three English teachers and three groups of students to gather their perceptions of the learning model. Each student group consisted of five participants drawn from Classes 2, 4, and 6 respectively. All interviews took place in the school office and lasted approximately 40 minutes. During each session, the researcher recorded the discussion and took detailed field notes to ensure that subtle expressions, emotional cues, and contextual nuances were preserved for later analysis.

Regarding ethical considerations, participants were informed in advance that the interviews would be recorded and that the data would be used solely for academic research purposes. All personal information was treated as confidential and not disclosed to any third parties. Before the recording began, the researcher reconfirmed the participants' voluntary consent and clarified that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences.

In addition to interviews, a supporting questionnaire was distributed to provide triangulation of the qualitative data. Respondents were clearly briefed about the objectives of the research and the intended use of their responses. Anonymity was maintained throughout the data collection process. The researcher assured all participants that their answers would be used exclusively for this study and would not be shared or repurposed for any other investigation.

To ensure reliability and validity, the researcher also performed data verification by cross-referencing interview notes with recorded transcripts. This step minimized potential bias and ensured consistency between participants' statements and the thematic analysis that followed. The combination of teacher and student perspectives allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the model's implementation, its classroom practicality, and its perceived impact on teaching and learning dynamics.

Data Analysis

Since qualitative method were applied in this study, hence thematic analysis used to analyse the interview data. Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts. There are various approaches to conducting thematic analysis, but the most common form follows a six-step process: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. This process was originally developed for psychology research by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. However, thematic analysis is a flexible method that can be adapted to many different kinds of research (Caulfield, 2022).

4.1 In-depth Analysis Based on Teacher Interviews

The following section presents a summary of the interviews, encapsulating the main insights and reflections shared by three senior high school English teachers. Based on the eight guiding questions posed during the interviews, the teachers demonstrated considerable similarity in their responses, suggesting a strong alignment and shared understanding of the Five-Step Learning Model and its classroom implications. Their feedback collectively reflects both enthusiasm and thoughtful critique of the model's practical use in daily teaching.

During the three-month implementation period, all three teachers reported largely positive transformations in their students' learning behaviors, attitudes, and overall academic outcomes. They observed that the Five-Step Learning Model provided a clear and systematic framework that encouraged active engagement, learner autonomy, and meaningful language application. Students became more confident in expressing ideas and participating in communicative tasks, showing increased motivation compared to the conventional exam-focused approach.

The teachers also noted a profound shift in their instructional roles—from being mere transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning experiences. They emphasized that this change required them to adopt a more reflective and student-centered mindset, carefully guiding students through each stage of the learning process. This pedagogical transition, while rewarding, also demanded greater preparation time and adaptability to meet varying student needs.

Despite the overall positive reception, the teachers expressed a shared concern regarding the need for greater flexibility in applying the model. They suggested that the “Application” stage, in particular, could benefit from additional materials, contextualized tasks, and differentiated strategies to cater to students’ diverse proficiency levels and learning paces. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of professional development workshops to help teachers implement the model more effectively and sustainably.

In summary, the teachers viewed the Five-Step Learning Model as an effective and inspiring approach that fosters deeper learning and communication skills. However, they also emphasized that its long-term success depends on continual refinement, sufficient institutional support, and the integration of flexible teaching practices that address classroom diversity.

4.2 In-depth Analysis Based on Students Interviews

Through semi-structured interviews with three groups of students, the researcher found that the model was generally perceived positively. Students regarded it as clear, systematic, and effective in enhancing their learning purpose, internalization of knowledge, and ability to apply what they learned. At the same time, they identified certain challenges encountered during practice and offered constructive suggestions for improvement at different stages. The three student groups were labeled A1–A5, B1–B5, and C1–C5, making a total of fifteen participants.

Effect Evaluation:

Most students reported a steady improvement in their grades, particularly in reading and writing, due to the model’s strong and coherent knowledge structure. The “Start” and “Apply” stages were highlighted as the most engaging, as they significantly increased students’ interest in learning and transformed English from a purely academic subject into a practical communication tool. Experiencing successful application, especially in speaking tasks, also strengthened their confidence in using English.

Challenges and Difficulties:

The most frequently mentioned and challenging stage was “Apply.” The main difficulties cited included a lack of real-life language environments, fear of making mistakes, and uncertainty about how to apply newly learned knowledge. As one student (C4) remarked, “It’s very simple to answer the questions during the consolidation stage, but it’s still difficult to use what we’ve learned creatively.”

Sustainability:

All students expressed a willingness to continue using this model in the future. They proposed several adjustments, such as incorporating more diverse and realistic application activities (e.g., role-playing and project-based learning). They also suggested that the “Summary” stage could involve more collaborative group work instead of relying solely on the teacher’s explanations. Additionally, the time allocation for each stage should be made more flexible and adjusted according to the complexity of the learning content.

5.0 Conclusion and Suggestion

From the interview analysis, the Five-Step Learning Model, as a structured teaching approach, has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in stimulating learning motivation, promoting knowledge internalization, and enhancing students' ability to apply what they have learned. It has been positively received by both students and teachers, producing significant improvements in classroom participation and language performance.

For teachers, the "Application" stage should be enriched with more low-risk yet high-interest language activities, such as class-based English days, video blog assignments, and other interactive tasks. These can encourage students to experiment with the language more freely and to overcome the fear of making mistakes. During the "Summarize" stage, teachers may guide students to adopt more efficient summarization tools, such as digital mind maps, to consolidate their learning outcomes effectively.

At the same time, students should strengthen their initiative during the "Summary" stage by treating it as an essential part of personal learning rather than a routine task. They should also seize more practical opportunities in the "Application" phase, develop the courage to face challenges, and learn from experience through active participation.

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