

## INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL ENGLISH EDUCATION

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**Abstract.** This article examines the implementation and effectiveness of inquiry-based learning methodology in English language instruction for preschool children, drawing extensively from Chinese educational practices. The study analyzes how inquiry-based approaches foster active learning, critical thinking, and communicative competence among young learners. Through comprehensive examination of Chinese kindergarten programs, the research identifies key implementation strategies, pedagogical adaptations, and outcomes associated with this methodology.

**Keywords.** Inquiry-based learning, early childhood education, English language teaching, Chinese methodology, active learning, communicative competence, preschool instruction, pedagogical innovation.

Inquiry-based learning is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment rather than passively receiving information. This framework draws from the work of influential educators including John Dewey, whose progressive education philosophy emphasized learning through experience, and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlighting social interaction's importance.

The most recognized framework for implementing inquiry-based learning is the 5E instructional model: Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate. During the Engagement phase, educators capture student interest through compelling questions or intriguing phenomena. The Exploration phase provides opportunities for direct investigation and collaborative inquiry. The Explanation phase involves systematic concept clarification, while Elaboration extends understanding through diverse applications. Finally, Evaluation assesses learning through multiple methods including self-reflection and performance-based assessment.

Preschool-aged children demonstrate distinctive characteristics requiring specific pedagogical adaptations. Their attention spans are relatively short, they understand concepts best through tangible materials rather than abstract explanations, and their memory systems privilege visual and episodic information. These characteristics suggest that inquiry-based English instruction should emphasize visual supports, hands-on manipulation, frequent movement, and emotionally positive experiences.

Young children's language development follows predictable patterns, with receptive abilities typically preceding productive capabilities. This suggests that inquiry activities should emphasize comprehension before requiring extensive verbal output, while gradually building towards more complex communicative exchanges.

### **2. Chinese implementation strategies**

Chinese kindergartens have developed sophisticated approaches to integrating inquiry-based learning into English instruction. Several distinctive features characterize Chinese implementation:

**Technology Integration:** Extensive use of multimedia enhances inquiry experiences. Interactive whiteboards, tablets, and specialized software create engaging environments for virtual exploration, vocabulary games, and collaborative research projects.

**Cultural Integration:** Systematic incorporation of cultural content enriches learning experiences. Children investigate celebrations in English-speaking countries, compare family



structures across cultures, and explore traditional foods and customs, fostering intercultural competence.

**Family Involvement:** Comprehensive parent engagement amplifies learning beyond the classroom. Programs provide training workshops, home learning resources, and structured family activities, ensuring consistency between home and school experiences.

**Progressive Differentiation:** Carefully sequenced curricula introduce inquiry skills gradually while accommodating varying developmental levels. Younger children engage in simple observation activities, while older preschoolers conduct more complex investigations.

**Assessment Systems:** Comprehensive monitoring tracks student progress through multiple methods including observation checklists, portfolio documentation, and peer evaluation protocols.

### **3. Pedagogical adaptations for English language learning**

#### **3.1. Language Scaffolding Strategies**

Adapting inquiry-based learning for English instruction requires careful language scaffolding while maintaining investigative authenticity. Teachers provide appropriate linguistic support through pre-teaching vocabulary, offering sentence frames, providing visual supports, and allowing strategic home language use when necessary.

#### **3.2. Authentic Communication Opportunities**

Inquiry-based approaches position English as the medium through which meaningful investigation occurs. Children use English to ask questions, share observations, negotiate collaborative tasks, and present findings. This functional language use promotes communicative competence more effectively than decontextualized practice.

#### **3.3. Question-Driven Activities**

Strategic questioning lies at inquiry-based instruction's heart. Effective questions progress from factual to higher-order thinking, invite multiple valid responses, and connect to children's experiences. Example progression for "Food" unit:

Knowledge: "What colors are these foods?"

Comprehension: "Which foods are healthy?"

Application: "Can you make a healthy meal?"

Analysis: "Why is this food healthy?"

### **4. Implementation advantages and challenges**

#### **4.1. Documented Benefits**

Research evidence documents substantial advantages of inquiry-based learning:

✓ **Deeper Understanding:** Knowledge constructed through active investigation achieves greater depth and durability than transmitted information.

✓ **Enhanced Motivation:** Self-directed inquiry satisfies psychological needs for autonomy and competence, fostering genuine engagement.

✓ **Critical Thinking Development:** Learners analyze information, evaluate sources, and construct reasoned conclusions rather than accepting information uncritically.

✓ **Collaborative Skills:** Group investigation necessitates negotiation, perspective-taking, and cooperative problem-solving.

✓ **Transfer of Learning:** Knowledge constructed through diverse contexts transfers more readily to novel situations.

#### **4. Assessment and evidence of effectiveness**

##### **Assessment Approaches**

Inquiry-based instruction requires responsive assessment methods:

**Observation-Based Assessment:** Documenting linguistic and cognitive behaviors during investigation activities provides valuable insights into children's learning processes.



**Portfolio Assessment:** Collecting diverse evidence including drawings, photographs, transcripts, and reflection artifacts demonstrates comprehensive development.

**Performance Assessment:** Children present investigation findings, participate in structured interviews, or engage in problem-solving scenarios requiring both language use and inquiry thinking.

#### Research Evidence

Meta-analyses examining inquiry-based language instruction document enhanced language proficiency, increased motivation, improved transfer capabilities, and significant affective gains including reduced anxiety and increased confidence.

#### Implementation Framework

Creating contextually appropriate models requires systematic development:

**Phase 1: Preparation** - Stakeholder consultation, teacher professional development, resource assessment, and curriculum mapping.

**Phase 2: Pilot Implementation** - Selected classroom implementation with documentation, observation, and iterative refinement.

**Phase 3: Expansion** - Broader implementation with vertical alignment, assessment refinement, and increased family engagement.

Successful adaptation requires alignment with national standards, cultural appropriateness, resource accessibility, systematic teacher development, and meaningful family engagement.

#### Conclusion

Inquiry-based learning represents a theoretically grounded, empirically validated approach to early childhood English education that transcends traditional methodologies. By positioning learners as active investigators and facilitating collaborative exploration, IBL develops not merely linguistic competence but essential capacities for lifelong learning.

Chinese educational contexts demonstrate the viability and effectiveness of inquiry-based approaches. Strategic adaptation of these models to diverse educational environments—incorporating national curriculum standards, cultural values, and contextual resources—offers pathways toward modernizing language education.

Successfully implementing inquiry-based instruction requires comprehensive teacher development, adequate resourcing, systemic institutional support, and meaningful family engagement. Yet documented benefits—deeper understanding, intrinsic motivation, enhanced proficiency, and 21st-century competency development—justify substantial investment.

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