

# Optimization of Primary School Chinese Reading Instruction Based on Spencer's "Happy Education" Concept

-- A Case Study of Teaching Lu Xun's Texts in the Eighth Unit of the Sixth Grade Unified Curriculum

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**Abstract.** There are misunderstandings regarding the concept of "happy learning" in current primary school Chinese language teaching. Some teachers overly emphasize superficial enjoyment, neglecting the challenges and personal growth that come with learning. Guided by Spencer's "Happy Education" philosophy, this study explores strategies to optimize reading instruction in primary school Chinese classes, aiming to stimulate students' reading interest and enhance their literacy skills. The study emphasizes that happy education is not merely about surface-level enjoyment, but about respecting students' independence and balancing individual and societal values to help them experience deeper joy through meaningful learning. Using the teaching of Lu Xun's works as an example, this paper demonstrates how instructional strategies such as the "1+X" text grouping approach, whole-book reading guidance, and creative writing can help students transition from basic text reading to deep reading, ultimately improving their overall language proficiency. Under the guidance of the Happy Education concept, optimizing primary school reading instruction can effectively enhance students' learning engagement and promote holistic development, offering valuable insights for future educational reforms.

**Keywords:** Happy Education; Primary School Chinese; Reading Instruction; Lu Xun's Works; Group Reading; Differentiated Assignments.

## 1. Problem Identification (Concept Definition)

As an educational philosophy, "happy learning" advocates for fostering students' holistic development within an enjoyable educational atmosphere. It aims to stimulate students' interest in learning in a positive psychological state, thereby improving learning efficiency and educational quality. Current trends in quality education reform and burden reduction policies reflect the influence and application of happy learning in today's educational landscape.

Happiness serves as a key driving force that encourages students to actively engage in learning. By igniting their passion for specific subjects, students can enhance their learning motivation and commitment. When teachers design course content and instructional methods based on students' interests, it significantly boosts their enthusiasm and satisfaction, resulting in an enjoyable learning experience—the essence of "happy learning."

For instance, many teachers frequently use situational teaching methods during lesson introductions to increase student engagement and attract their interest. Literary scholar and educator Xia Mianzun pointed out in *The Background of Education*:

"Providing context adds depth and richness to a text. For example, 'The wind howls, the Yi River turns cold; the warrior sets off, never to return.' These lines are profoundly heroic, but without the first sentence, they lose their tragic meaning."

This illustrates that learning Chinese language in primary school should be contextualized. Furthermore, researchers such as Li Jilin have deeply explored situational teaching, using visual representation, music immersion, performance experiences, and descriptive language to fully engage students and create an interactive classroom atmosphere.

However, in current teaching practices, there are misconceptions about happy learning. Renowned special-grade teacher Wang Songzhou highlighted:

"Our current issue is that every lesson must have a situational context. One moment, students become little detectives, learning Chinese just for that role; the next moment, they design an exhibition, only to learn because they need to decorate it..."

Clearly, many teachers superficially interpret situational teaching, treating classroom scenarios merely as tools to create a sense of "fun" rather than as instructional scaffolds that support learning. Their unclear understanding of happy learning leads to various challenges in the classroom, where form outweighs substance, ultimately affecting the effectiveness of teaching.

## **2. Analyzing the Connotation of "Joyful Learning" from Spencer's Concept of Joyful Education**

Spencer's concept of joyful education is a significant component of 19th-century British educational thought, emphasizing that education should be based on students' interests and happiness. Spencer proposed an essential proposition: "Efforts should be made to make early education enjoyable, and all education should be accompanied by pleasure." He argued that stimulating students' intrinsic motivation is crucial to promoting their holistic development. This concept not only had a profound impact on educational practices at the time but also reflected a distinct combination of individualism and utilitarianism. These two ideologies formed the theoretical foundation of Spencer's educational philosophy, serving as its key pillars.

### **2.1. The Value Orientation of Individualism**

At the core of Spencer's joyful education philosophy lies an individualistic value orientation, which places great emphasis on personal development, individual freedom, and personal interests. In his book *Spencer's Joyful Education*, he explicitly stated: "I believe that education, whether it takes place at home or in school, should not only involve knowledge transmission and moral cultivation but also respect for children's rights. Without understanding this, even the most painstaking educational efforts will fail." This perspective reveals the essence of Spencer's joyful education theory—that children are not mere appendages of adults but independent individuals with their own thoughts and consciousness. They are entitled to the same rights as adults, including independent thinking, self-respect, and personal judgment.

Thus, Spencer advocated that children should acquire knowledge through their own thinking and practice rather than relying solely on teachers or textbooks for passive learning. He argued that knowledge obtained through self-exploration is far more lasting and profound than knowledge received passively. "The mental preparation, concentration, and excitement of victory required in such achievements combine to imprint knowledge deeply into memory—something that mere instruction from teachers or parents can never achieve." Through self-exploratory activities, children's enthusiasm and interest are fully stimulated, enabling them to recognize the value of their exploration and affirm their self-worth.

On a deeper level, naturalistic educational thought had a profound influence on Spencer's joyful education philosophy, particularly the educational philosophy of Rousseau, which closely aligns with Spencer's ideas. Rousseau asserted in his writings that "true education does not lie in verbal instruction but in practice" and "only through action do we realize that certain things are not inherently part of us." These ideas reinforce the notion that students must engage in hands-on practice and overcome challenges in order for joyful education to be fully realized. Rousseau's *Émile* introduced the "natural consequences method," a core principle of naturalistic education, which emphasizes guiding children's learning and behavior through natural consequences rather than external coercion or intervention. In *Émile*, Rousseau wrote: "When they are teething, let them experience fever; when they have abdominal pain, let them endure cramps; when they have severe coughs, let them suffer from fever; an excess of blood will corrupt their circulation, and various enzymes will ferment within them, causing dangerous rashes." Although this view may seem extreme in certain aspects, its affirmation of children's right to independent practice still holds significant implications for modern

education. Rousseau's philosophy highlights that while children will inevitably encounter difficulties and setbacks in their self-directed learning process, these challenges align with their developmental patterns and help them internalize knowledge deeply through experience, ultimately realizing the true value of joyful education.

Therefore, joyful learning is not merely about surface-level pleasure; its deeper significance lies in the sense of achievement and satisfaction students gain when solving problems, realizing self-worth, and deeply understanding knowledge. In other words, genuine joyful learning is not simply about fulfilling immediate interests but about experiencing a profound sense of intellectual and personal growth through self-directed practice, overcoming obstacles, deepening cognition, and achieving goals. This transformation shifts students from passive receivers of knowledge to active explorers, allowing them to experience the intrinsic joy of self-driven learning.

## **2.2. The Utilitarian Value Orientation**

At the end of the 18th century, British philosopher Jeremy Bentham was the first to introduce the term utilitarianism, asserting that the purpose of morality is the pursuit of happiness. He argued that the fundamental source of happiness lies in the fulfillment of interests, making personal benefit the sole purpose and standard of human behavior and the foundation of human well-being. A key principle of Bentham's utilitarianism, the greatest happiness principle, posits that the moral value of an action is determined by its consequences—particularly whether it maximizes happiness or pleasure while minimizing pain. This principle is encapsulated in the idea of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."

Building on his predecessors' ideas, Spencer integrated utilitarianism into the field of education and proposed two dimensions of joy. The first is the individual's experience of happiness, emphasizing that "one should observe whether something brings joy to children and whether it stimulates their interest." Spencer believed that the ultimate goal of education is to enable individuals to achieve a "complete life." The second dimension pertains to society, where Spencer viewed education as "a tool for improving society." Scholar Zhang Bing, in *Exploring Utilitarian Educational Thought*, pointed out that "Spencer focused on human happiness and believed that 'education is obliged to serve the goal of a perfect life.' At the same time, he argued that to achieve such a life, one must first 'generalize the universal principles that guide behavior correctly in all aspects and circumstances.' These principles are not only related to individual happiness but also to social welfare." This perspective highlights that the "joy" in joyful education extends beyond the individual to encompass broader societal concerns.

Happiness, according to this view, is not merely a personal preference or an idiosyncratic habit, nor is it a motivation rooted solely in the self-interest of a particular group. Instead, it is elevated to a universal human principle, representing a fundamental interest shared by all of humanity. More than that, it forms the deep cognitive foundation upon which knowledge is constructed. This universal joy of learning transcends the boundaries between individuals and communities, becoming a fundamental cognitive inclination that drives humanity's engagement with and exploration of the world. Like an invisible guiding force, it silently shapes the direction of human thought, laying an indispensable foundation for the accumulation and expansion of knowledge.

Thus, joyful education is an approach that balances both individual and collective well-being. It is not solely concerned with personal emotional experiences but also with fostering a correct value system that considers others and society at large. This educational philosophy emphasizes that the ultimate goal of education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but also the cultivation of character and the guidance of moral values.

### **3. In-Depth Interpretation of Joyful Learning: The Pursuit of Inner Value Beyond Surface-Level Pleasure**

#### **3.1. The Emotional Aspect of Joyful Learning**

Drawing from Spencer's philosophy of joyful education, the concept of joyful learning can be understood as a student-centered approach that emphasizes creating a pleasurable learning environment where children engage in educational activities with a positive emotional experience. This approach is most conducive to children's holistic development. A pleasant learning environment significantly enhances students' chances of success. For instance, a positive environment can stimulate students' motivation to learn, whereas negative emotions or excessive stress can suppress cognitive functions and hinder learning outcomes. When children experience negative emotions, their attention, memory, and creativity are likely to be impaired. If they are subjected to reprimands or pressure in such moments, not only will the intended educational goal remain unachieved, but they may also develop resistance toward learning, potentially damaging their self-confidence and psychological well-being. Educators should, therefore, be attuned to students' emotional states and cultivate a supportive and encouraging learning environment that enables children to explore and grow in a joyful manner.

#### **3.2. Respecting Students' Independence**

To truly understand joyful learning, one must move beyond the superficial pursuit of pleasure and focus on its intrinsic value. The learning process itself is a complex and multidimensional experience. Spencer asserted that "education should be a process of respecting students' rights," implying that education is not merely about acquiring knowledge but also about honing students' cognitive abilities, enhancing their problem-solving skills, and deepening their self-awareness through firsthand experience. Joyful learning does not mean an effortless, pressure-free learning environment, nor does it involve passive knowledge transmission from teachers to students. Instead, it entails a learning process in which students, through moderate challenges and active engagement, develop intrinsic motivation and derive a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from overcoming difficulties. The deeper form of joy in learning arises from students' profound understanding of knowledge and their continuous self-improvement, rather than from transient sensory pleasure.

Learning is inherently a challenging process, and students will inevitably encounter confusion, setbacks, and even failures during their educational journey. However, these very challenges provide invaluable opportunities for growth. Through problem-solving, knowledge accumulation, intellectual refinement, and the formation of independent perspectives, students gradually achieve self-actualization and recognition of their own value. Encouraging students to perceive challenges as opportunities for intellectual and personal development enables them to experience genuine joy in learning, fostering their comprehensive growth. Authentic joyful learning integrates knowledge acquisition, intrinsic motivation, and hands-on practice. Only when students recognize the inherent excitement in what they learn can they develop the drive for active learning and in-depth exploration. Therefore, joyful learning is not limited to pleasurable experiences during the learning process but also encompasses students' sustained curiosity and enthusiasm for further exploration. The joy derived from this exploratory process becomes a driving force for enhancing their lifelong learning motivation and overall well-being.

#### **3.3. Cultivating the Right Values**

The notion of joy should not be confined to the individual level; rather, it should extend beyond personal experiences to include consideration for others and society. Joyful learning should encourage students to develop empathy and a sense of social responsibility. By fostering insights into societal issues and reflections on human nature, students can deepen their comprehension of texts and concepts. When students transcend an egocentric perspective and pay attention to the emotions and needs of others, they cultivate a form of happiness that extends beyond personal gratification. This

deeper sense of joy enriches their emotional experiences and fosters empathy and social identity. Consequently, educators' understanding of joyful education should expand beyond the individual to the societal level, guiding students to engage with marginalized groups, social issues, and global affairs. By doing so, students can broaden their international perspectives, develop keen analytical skills, and cultivate fundamental compassion.

A superficial or one-dimensional interpretation of joyful learning can lead to various negative consequences in educational practice. Overemphasizing joy in learning may result in an approach that caters excessively to students' immediate preferences, potentially neglecting the systematic depth of subject knowledge. This, in turn, could hinder the development of students' ability to concentrate for extended periods and their resilience in the face of challenges. Furthermore, joyful learning should not be mistaken for mere emotional gratification; rather, it encompasses the deeper sense of accomplishment that arises from overcoming complex problems, realizing one's potential, and gaining a profound understanding of knowledge. If educators prioritize short-term enjoyment over these more substantial sources of intellectual fulfillment—such as the satisfaction of solving a difficult problem, the resilience built through perseverance, and the intellectual stimulation of deep thinking—they risk overlooking the key elements that contribute to lasting and meaningful joy in learning. These elements are essential for fostering lifelong learning habits and well-rounded personal development.

Therefore, educators should approach the concept of joyful learning with caution, recognizing both its value and its limitations. In practice, a balance must be struck—while respecting and addressing students' need for joy in learning, teachers should also guide them toward a deeper engagement with knowledge and intellectual inquiry. Only by achieving this equilibrium can educators ensure that joyful learning truly fosters both immediate enjoyment and long-term personal and academic growth.

#### **4. Teaching Practice of Lu Xun's Articles in Primary School Chinese Under the Concept of "Happy Education"**

According to Spencer's concept of Happy Education, happiness is not merely a casual personal preference but is deeply rooted in cognitive and practical activities. It possesses both directionality and motivation, reflecting a psychological tendency that emphasizes both personal growth and social awareness. This idea plays a crucial guiding role in primary school Chinese reading instruction and also helps to encourage whole-book reading among young students.

##### **4.1. Insights from the "Happy" Theory for the Innovation of Primary School Chinese Reading Strategies**

Reading holds a fundamental position in primary school Chinese education. The Compulsory Education Chinese Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the Standards) state that reading is an essential means of acquiring information, understanding the world, developing thinking skills, and gaining aesthetic experience. Reading instruction is a dialogic process involving students, teachers, textbook editors, and texts. Through reading, students can broaden their horizons, enrich their knowledge, cultivate their character, and develop a correct outlook on values and life.

In the primary school stage, reading Lu Xun's works can be challenging for students due to their cognitive level and limited life experiences. Therefore, teachers need to adopt appropriate teaching strategies to help students appreciate Lu Xun's works. In the eighth unit, "Getting Closer to Lu Xun," of the sixth-grade textbook in the national Chinese curriculum, four texts are included: Young Runtu, A Good Story, My Uncle Lu Xun, and Some People—Thoughts on Commemorating Lu Xun. These texts not only include Lu Xun's own works but also reflections on him by others, providing students with a multidimensional reading experience.

#### **4.1.1. Fundamental Orientation of Linking Learning with Practice**

Spencer proposed that "education should be a respect for students' rights," emphasizing that the core principle of Happy Education is to cultivate students' ability for independent thinking and judgment. This requires students to gain an in-depth understanding of knowledge through firsthand experience and practice.

For example, in teaching *Young Runtu*, teachers can organize role-playing activities, where students take on the roles of Runtu and "I" to reenact key scenes—such as Runtu's experience of guarding the melon field by the sea and his first conversation with "I." During these activities, teachers should guide students to reflect on key questions: Why did Runtu engage in such labor? What did his work mean for his family and livelihood? How did the different social backgrounds and life experiences of "I" and Runtu shape their friendship?

Teachers can further supplement the lesson with relevant historical and social context, helping students understand how feudal ideology instilled rigid hierarchical distinctions. Given that "I" was the son of a landlord while Runtu was from a peasant family, their friendship was exceptionally rare under such social constraints.

Through firsthand experiences and deep reflection, students can gain a profound understanding of the social class differences, the hardships of laboring people, and the pure emotional bonds between individuals depicted in Lu Xun's work. This approach allows students to see that reading Lu Xun is not merely about understanding words on a page—it is about touching the social fabric of that era and closely linking literature with real-life experiences.

#### **4.1.2. Gain the ability to overcome difficulties and solve problems.**

Building on the natural education philosophies of Rousseau and Pestalozzi, Spencer emphasized that Happy Education is fundamentally rooted in natural education principles and aligns with children's natural tendencies and interests. He asserted that "no other educational method is more effective or beneficial than following the natural order and interests of children." This approach requires students to identify and solve problems independently as part of their self-realization process, thereby cultivating their ability to overcome difficulties and resolve challenges.

In the teaching of Lu Xun's works, teachers can design thought-provoking and challenging questions to guide students in deeper textual analysis. For example, when teaching *Young Runtu*, students can be encouraged to engage in group discussions, where each group must extract relevant textual evidence to support their interpretations. Teachers can facilitate discussions from multiple perspectives, such as Lu Xun's childhood experiences, the education system of that time, and the broader social and cultural background.

Through analyzing and solving problems, students not only gain a deeper appreciation of Lu Xun's distinctive emotional expressions and ideological depth, but they also develop critical thinking and independent reasoning skills. Teachers should emphasize that solving these questions is not about simply finding answers, but about learning to analyze texts from different angles. By incorporating structured reading methods and analytical frameworks, students can acquire scientific reading strategies. This "challenge-based" educational approach encourages students to stretch beyond their current abilities, fostering deeper textual engagement and comprehension.

#### **4.1.3. Integrating Correct Values**

Scholar Zhang Bing, in *An Exploration of Utilitarian Educational Thought*, stated that Spencer viewed education as a means to human happiness, believing that "education has an obligation to contribute to our fulfillment in life." He argued that achieving a "perfect life" requires the ability to "generalize specific problems into broader universal issues and to guide behavior according to established principles." These principles, according to Spencer, are not only essential for personal well-being but also for social welfare. Therefore, Happy Education is not merely a matter of personal inclination or group interests; rather, it reflects a fundamental human concern for both individual and collective well-being.

In this unit, *Young Runtu*, excerpted from Lu Xun's novella *Hometown*, primarily narrates the childhood friendship between the narrator ("I") and Runtu, as well as their reunion in adulthood. As children, their friendship was pure and beautiful—Runtu, an energetic village boy, fascinated "I" with stories about catching birds in the snow and hunting weasels in the melon fields. These stories filled "I" with admiration and envy, and their friendship transcended social class differences.

However, in adulthood, when "I" meets Runtu again, Runtu is no longer the lively boy of the past but a burdened, exhausted farmer. He addresses "I" respectfully as "Master", his manner reserved and distant. The intimacy of childhood is now replaced by an unspoken social barrier.

Since *Young Runtu* is only an excerpt from *Hometown*, it focuses solely on childhood memories, omitting the emotional progression and thematic depth of the full story. As a result, the emotional expression in the textbook is somewhat disconnected from the novella's overarching themes.

The Curriculum Standards (2022) emphasize the need to select high-quality resources that facilitate integrated and comprehensive language learning activities, encouraging a diverse and open system of teaching materials. Based on this principle, teachers can creatively interpret and utilize textbooks, guiding students toward multi-perspective, meaningful reading experiences.

"Cluster Reading" is an instructional approach where, within a short learning period, students explore multiple texts around a central theme. This method enhances students' reading proficiency and broadens their literary understanding. To help students comprehensively understand the text, teachers can implement a "1+X" cluster reading model, supplementing the textbook excerpt with the full version of *Hometown*. Students can then discuss questions such as: Why did Runtu change from a lively young boy to a numb, overburdened farmer? What led to the emotional and social distance between "I" and Runtu?

By engaging with these questions, students gradually realize that Lu Xun's works go beyond individual destinies—they serve as critiques of broader societal issues. Through the contrast between childhood innocence and the emotional detachment of adulthood, students can grasp Lu Xun's underlying critique of servility and feudal oppression.

This teaching approach not only deepens students' comprehension of the text but also nurtures their social responsibility and humanistic awareness, fostering a critical understanding of literature as a reflection of social reality.

#### **4.2. Cultivating the Ability to Explore Deep Reading Based on "Happy Education"**

Under the guidance of the "Happy Education" theory, teachers can encourage students to engage in deep reading of Lu Xun's works spontaneously. For example, when reading Lu Xun's essays, students can appreciate his unique linguistic style and analyze how the author uses language to express delicate emotions and profound thoughts. When reading Lu Xun's novels, students can analyze character depictions and explore the social issues reflected behind the characters.

After class, teachers can assign tiered homework and establish a homework marketplace, providing diverse learning tasks to meet the needs of students at different levels. Basic-level assignments for most students may include reading Lu Xun's classic works, such as *From Hundred-Grass Garden to the Three-Flavored Study*, and completing simple reading comprehension questions or writing reading reflections. For students with a strong interest in Lu Xun's works, advanced tasks can be offered. For instance, teachers may introduce relevant research materials and academic perspectives, recommending books such as *Qian Liqun's Fifteen Lectures on Lu Xun's Works* or *Wang Xiaoming's A Life That Cannot Be Faced: A Biography of Lu Xun*. These readings allow students to analyze the ideological roots of Lu Xun's works through his life experiences, helping them understand different scholars' interpretations, broaden their reading scope, and cultivate critical thinking skills. Teachers may also suggest reading scholarly papers, such as discussions on the frequently appearing "onlooker" imagery in Lu Xun's works. Students can analyze excerpts from Ren Xianpin and Li Siyu's research, *The Complementary Relationship Between Indifferent Spectators and Survival-Oriented People: A Study on the Onlookers in the Works of Lu Xun and Mo Yan*.

Furthermore, students are encouraged to engage in creative writing activities, such as rewriting or continuing parts of Lu Xun's works. For example, they could rewrite the reunion scene in *Hometown*, imagining how the story would unfold if Run Tu did not address "I" as "Master". Another task could be continuing the story of *The True Story of Ah Q*, describing the villagers' reactions after Ah Q's execution. Through a series of rewriting and continuation exercises, students can grasp the core meanings of the stories, deepen their understanding of Lu Xun's works through practice, improve their language skills and literary creativity, and continuously explore and enhance their comprehensive Chinese literacy in the process of deep reading.

To ensure the effective implementation of the homework marketplace, teachers need to clearly define task descriptions and evaluation criteria for each level while providing students with relevant reading materials, research papers, and writing samples. Additionally, teachers should offer personalized guidance based on student needs, such as organizing book clubs or holding assignment showcase activities, where advanced students can share their reading insights or present their rewritten works to inspire others. The content and difficulty levels of the homework marketplace should be dynamically adjusted based on student completion rates and feedback to maintain engagement and ensure continuous learning progress.

## 5. Summary

Through an in-depth exploration of the "Happy Education" concept and its practical application in teaching Lu Xun-related texts in elementary Chinese language classes, this study has preliminarily addressed the question of how to develop effective reading instruction strategies under the guidance of "Happy Education" to stimulate students' interest in Lu Xun's works and enhance their Chinese literacy and critical thinking skills.

The research found that Spencer's concept of Happy Education provides important theoretical support for elementary Chinese language teaching—emphasizing respect for students' independence, valuing both personal and social development, and using practice-oriented teaching methods to help students experience deep-seated joy while overcoming challenges. By implementing tiered assignments through a homework marketplace, guiding group reading, and engaging in creative writing, students not only gain a deeper understanding of Lu Xun's works but also develop independent thinking and social responsibility through reading and writing.

Under the guidance of "Happy Education," we can further optimize elementary Chinese reading instruction by enriching reading materials, providing diverse reading resources, and catering to students' different reading interests. In addition to encouraging students to read, activities such as book clubs, storytelling sessions, and role-playing exercises can be introduced. Thematic reading can also be designed, aligning with festivals, seasons, or current social issues, allowing students to share outstanding short stories in an engaging way. Collaboration between schools and families should be encouraged to foster parent-child reading habits and implement daily reading check-ins to create a strong reading atmosphere. By enhancing students' language proficiency and reading comprehension, reading can serve as a powerful tool for fostering their holistic development.

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