

A Study on the Integrated Unit Teaching Design of Junior High School English Based on Core Competencies

Ti Wang*

No. 126 Middle School Changbai Education Group, Shenyang, 110000, China

*Corresponding author: giraffetea@163.com

Abstract: *Period-based teaching cannot meet all the demands of core competencies, so integrated unit teaching has become the subject of research. The three contents of this study are the theoretical connotations, content reconstruction and task design of the integrated unit teaching plan for junior high school English. Explain the reasons for the paradigm shift under the leadership of core competencies, show how to reconstruct content in line with thematic meaning and integrate it with big ideas, and set up a structure for goal stratification, task chain design and problem chain embedding to achieve deep learning. Integrate language learning with the exploration of meaning, cognitive development and character education through thematic meanings, big ideas and task chains in this paper.*

Keywords: *core competencies; integrated unit teaching; junior high school English; teaching design; deep learning*

Introduction

The introduction of core competencies has changed the goal of the English curriculum from knowledge and skills to education in values. Given that the four areas are interconnected, instructional design should no longer be divided by time periods as in the past. As a relatively complete learning unit, it has the capacity to achieve various goals and organise all relevant materials; thus, integrated unit teaching has attracted the interest of scholars. However, most of the previous studies have only provided an overview of the experience and have not explored in depth why integrated unit teaching is designed. The main problems in the design of integrated unit teaching for junior high school English under the guidance of core competencies are addressed in this paper, and its purpose is to reveal the theoretical connotations and logical shifts of integrated unit teaching, clarify the mechanisms of content reconstruction from the perspective of subject-based education, explore the design mechanisms of large-unit teaching task chains oriented towards deep learning, and finally provide theoretical support for breaking away from the period-based instructional mindset and realizing the educational value of the English subject.

1. Theoretical Connotations and Logical Shifts of Integrated Unit Teaching under the Guidance of Core Competencies

1.1 The Subject-Specific Interpretation of Core Competencies and the Educational Value of the English Curriculum

As the basic direction for curriculum construction and implementation, core competencies need to be specified and realised in the context of English courses. The main competence framework for English is not just a set of language knowledge and skills; rather, it is an organic combination of four areas: language proficiency, cultural literacy, thinking ability and learning ability, all of which constitute the necessary strengths that learners need to achieve all-around development in their studies of English. Language ability is the foundation that carries the inheritance of culture and fosters the growth of thought. Cultivating cultural literacy is not to learn about foreign cultures superficially; rather, it is to develop cross-cultural literacy and an international perspective. To promote the all-round development of students' thinking abilities, English teaching should move away from simple information absorption and enable them to actively explore, evaluate and create knowledge through

language learning^[1].

The four are closely related and work together to set the educational goals and values of the English curriculum. The special educational value of the English curriculum is that it can help students interact with people from different cultures, form a sense of identity, values and a broad view of the world through multicultural content in the language. Therefore, learning a language is no longer just about practical skills; it can also be a way for students to learn about life and themselves and develop good character. Subject-specific interpretation of core competencies can provide values and goals for the design of integrated unit teaching, so instructional designers should move away from presenting knowledge points in isolation and take responsibility for the all-round development of learners.

1.2 The Definition of Integrated Unit Teaching and Its Foundation in Systems Theory

Integrated unit teaching is an instructional design system based on the idea of wholes and parts, which takes the unit as its basic element and conducts integrated planning and structural organisation of teaching goals, teaching content, teaching activities and teaching assessments around core themes or major ideas. The main difference between integrated-unit teaching and traditional period-based teaching is that the unit is regarded as a whole with internal logical connections, and each individual lesson within the unit can be somewhat independent but is still in support of achieving the overall objectives of the unit. The first ideas for integrated unit teaching can be traced back to systems theory. Based on the basic ideas of systems theory, the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and the function of a system is determined by the structural relationships among its elements rather than by the simple addition of these elements.

Applying the above idea to instructional design, it can be seen that the effectiveness of unit teaching depends not only on the quality of individual lesson teaching but also on the close connections and synergy among lessons, content and activities. Integrated unit teaching is based on the idea of interrelation among the components of teaching, hierarchy, and change; it is necessary that the content of each lesson is interconnected and forms a network of meaning centered on the thematic significance; there should be a clear hierarchy of cognitive objectives, progressing from perception and understanding to application and transfer; finally, according to the development trajectory of learners' cognition, teaching activities should be flexibly adjusted. Based on the system theory, integrated unit teaching can be introduced to solve the problem of fragmentation in instructional design and achieve all-round optimisation of teaching effectiveness.

1.3 From Period-Based Teaching to Unit Construction: A Change in the Logic of Instructional Design

The change from period-based teaching to unit construction is a change in the basic idea of lesson planning. Period-based instruction has long been the thinking model for designing English teaching, and the lesson is taken as the basic unit for setting objectives and organizing activities; thus, it focuses on the completeness and immediate effects of individual lessons but often overlooks the coherence and cumulative effects among lessons^[2]. The design logic is likely to result in the fragmentation of teaching content and a discontinuity in learning experiences; it will be difficult for learners to integrate the knowledge points from various lessons into an organised cognitive schema, and the development of language ability will lack continuous support. Unit construction, on the other hand, has fundamentally shifted the Design Logic: the unit of Design is derived from the lesson to the unit, the focus of Design has moved from teacher instruction to student learning, and the basis of Design is no longer the sequence of textbooks but the logic of cognition.

Therefore, the concept of teaching objectives needs to be revised; they will no longer be just the behaviour changes students show in a single class but rather the overall achievements that can only be reached through continuous development over several lessons. The organisation logic of teaching content is also changed to explore meaning at various levels around the big idea, rather than presenting knowledge points in a linear manner. The Design Logic of the teaching activities has also been modified; they are no longer independent but have been arranged in a task chain with coherence and spiral development to help students achieve synergistic growth in language skills and core competencies through continuous exploration of meaning. Given what learning scientists have discovered about the reasons for deep learning, the design of English teaching has changed from an experience-based method to a more professional one.

2. Mechanisms of Content Reconstruction in Junior High School English Teaching from the Perspective of Subject-Based Education

2.1 Refinement of Unit Thematic Meaning and its Oversight of Teaching Content

The thematic sense of a unit offers a foundation and spirit for designing integrated unit teaching, so in its development, we need to consider the educational goals and values to be promoted. The thematic meaning of a textbook unit is not contained in the textbook itself; rather, it is the result of deep interpretation and creative construction by instructional designers under the guidance of core competencies. First, to refine the thematic meaning of a unit, one should move beyond a superficial understanding of the topic and explore the deeper connotations and cultural values in the texts of that unit, as well as the educational opportunities they provide. For example, in a unit focusing on the celebration of festivals, the theme can be to introduce the customs of a particular festival and then elaborate on how this is reflected in people's cultural identity and cross-cultural communication^[3].

First, a theme of meaning will be selected to organise all the teaching materials in this way. Based on the direction of thematic meaning, the previously dispersed linguistic elements of vocabulary, sentence patterns and texts are given a purpose and become the building blocks for exploring the theme. The teaching content is no longer a fixed set of knowledge but a network of meanings spread out in various layers around the thematic meaning. Vocabulary learning meets the demand for thematic expression; sentence pattern practice is based on the creation of thematic contexts; and textual reading enhances the understanding of thematic connotations. The first way is to organise the content by themes; thus, learners can continuously be involved in the process of making sense of the language during their study of the themes, thereby improving their language skills and deepening their understanding of the topics; otherwise, their learning will likely be limited to memorisation.

2.2 Integration of Unit Texts and Lesson Reconstruction Based on Big Ideas

Big Ideas are general systems of basic ideas in a particular field that offer a cognitive system and logical structure for linking all the unit materials. In the design of integrated-unit teaching, the texts are no longer independent reading materials but have meaning and carry major ideas to support the construction of these major ideas. To integrate texts based on big ideas, instructional designers should first identify the disciplinary big ideas in the unit and then investigate how and to what extent the individual texts in the unit are connected with and support these big ideas. Different texts can expand on or support the same general idea in various ways, and they may have different relationships of complementation, progression or opposition to each other.

The aim of text integration is to find and promote the natural connections among the texts so that they can be used together to explore deep ideas. Text Integration will change the form of our lessons. Traditionally, the division of lessons follows the order in the textbook and lacks internal logical connections. Lesson reconstruction based on big ideas, on the other hand, needs the cognitive logic of idea construction to serve as the guiding thread for redesigning the division and articulation of lessons. Some lessons will focus on the first perception of a big idea; others will explore a big idea from all sides; some will achieve transfer and application of a big idea. The progress path of the lessons is no longer determined by the page order in the textbooks, but rather by the cognitive ladder learners need to climb to grasp the big ideas. The reconstruction changes the way unit teaching is conducted from direct presentation to construction of meaning; thus, students can gradually explore and internalise the ideas, keep interacting with the same large ideas across various lessons, and continuously expand and improve their understanding of these ideas.

2.3 The Content Organisation Form for the Synergistic Development of Language Ability and Character Cultivation

The end result of the educational value of this subject will be to promote both the development of students' language ability and the cultivation of good moral character in teaching materials and organisation methods. Traditional instructional design has often treated language learning and moral education separately, and moral education has been placed on the sidelines of language teaching. To promote the goal of joint development, the form of content organisation should be changed to integrate moral education in the learning of language. The purpose is to select and organise teaching materials that can promote students' learning in language and the development of good character simultaneously. The organisation of the content should have synergy at all three levels^[4].

First, in the selection of textual materials, one should balance linguistic exemplarity with humanistic enrichment so that learners can be immersed in positive values and encounter authentic expressions of language.

Second, the design of language tasks should include real moral situations or value conflicts to motivate learners to express their values and make choices in language.

Third, the Design of learning activities should promote interaction among students and collaboration in learning, cultivating social skills such as respect, tolerance and cooperation through language. Such organisation of content for synergistic development can take language learning as a way and a path for character education, and, in turn, character education will be naturally extended and deepened through the study of language.

In the process of using language to explore thematic meaning and construct big ideas, learners can improve their language communication skills, develop positive emotional dispositions and values, cultivate good moral character, and achieve the integration of language learning with moral education. Teaching content is thus no longer only a carrier of knowledge but also a space for all-round education.

3. Design of Large-Unit Teaching Task Chains Oriented Towards Deep Learning Design

3.1 Layered Deconstruction and Coherent Articulation of Unit Teaching Objectives

The goal of unit teaching is to present and make concrete the core competencies of a particular teaching unit; therefore, the quality of its design will determine the whole direction of the task chain and whether deep learning can be achieved. The teaching goals of deep learning should be different from the list of behaviours in behaviourist teaching, and they need to achieve an organic combination of layered deconstruction and coherent articulation.

Based on the general principles of the taxonomy of cognitive objectives, instructional designers should divide the goals of a teaching unit into several levels of increasing difficulty and cover all stages of cognitive development, such as remembering and understanding, applying and analysing, evaluating and creating. The goals at each level are relatively independent but also interrelated; the goals of the lower level provide a foundation for achieving the goals of the higher level, and by pursuing the higher-level goals, one can gain a deeper understanding of the lower-level goals^[5].

The purpose of layered deconstruction is to avoid weak cognitive stimulation caused by the simplification of teaching goals, so that students can experience all stages of cognition in the unit study, from acquiring knowledge to interpreting meaning and finally creating new ideas. Coherent articulation requires the formation of an obvious internal logic among the objectives of individual lessons in a unit, so that the achievement of objectives in a previous lesson serves as a prerequisite for the development of objectives in the following lesson, and at the same time, the objectives of the following lesson also provide new directions for deepening the objectives of the preceding lesson.

This coherence is not merely the result of adding up the order of lessons; rather, it is an organic spiral development in which learners repeatedly encounter the main ideas in various classes, and each time they are revisited, a new level of understanding is achieved. Therefore, the goals of unit teaching provide the general direction and evaluation criteria for all other tasks in the task chain.

3.2 Design and Articulation of Unit Task Chains Guided by Authentic Contexts

Authentic contexts are the external conditions and meaningful carriers for deep learning, so the design of unit task chains should be based on authentic contexts. An authentic context is not just an imitation of real life; it is the result of pedagogical adaptation to actual circumstances based on teaching goals and students' experiences, and its defining features are the induction of cognitive conflicts and the inspiration to find meaning among students. Based on the actual situation, the unit tasks are no longer a group of independent problems but rather an integrated series of problems related to the main topic. The Design of Task Chains should meet the following general conditions.

First, the starting point of the task should be based on the learners' previous experiences and cognitive levels to help them enter the task situation and develop a desire to learn. Second, the progress of the task should be in line with increasing cognitive difficulty, and each stage of the task should provide the necessary experience foundation and ability support for the next stage. Third, the end goal of the task should be to achieve the main objectives of this unit; that is, students should be able to learn

the key knowledge in this unit and use it effectively in other areas after completing all the sub-tasks.

The Articulation Mechanism of Task Chains is to ensure the smooth progress of tasks. Articulation can be achieved in various ways, such as questioning, presenting work and reflection; its essence is to help learners be aware of the necessary connections among the current task and the next one, understand where they are in the sequence of tasks, and know which way to proceed next. Good task division can keep students interested in learning and prevent problems with cognition and motivation caused by changes in tasks.

3.3 The Embedding Mechanism of Classroom Question Chains Guided by Higher-Order Thinking

Higher-order thinking is the main form of representation in deep learning, and the design and embedding of classroom question chains offer important support for the development of higher-order thinking. A question chain is not a random collection of questions that students ask in class; rather, it is an organised series of logically linked questions with specific purposes related to the learning goals of a section and task chains^[6].

Question chains that promote higher-order thinking have the main feature of going beyond simple recall and repetition of facts to aim for higher levels of cognition, such as analysis, evaluation and creation. Attention should be paid to the hierarchy and progress of the questions in the Design of question chains. The hierarchy of questions is shown by the different levels of cognition in the questions; that is, some are for comprehension, others for application, and finally some are for evaluation; this gradient design covers all aspects of cognition. The gradual increase in the difficulty of the questions is shown by the formation of logical chains among them; that is, the answer to an earlier question provides the foundation for posing a new one, and by exploring this new question, one can deepen the understanding obtained from the previous one.

The Embedding Mechanism of question chains determines the degree of association between question chains and task chains. Question chains should not be regarded as an additional item outside of tasks, but rather need to be incorporated into all the nodes of task chains to serve as internal motivators for the progress of tasks. At the beginning of a task, question chains can be used to draw out prior knowledge and create cognitive conflicts; during the exploration of the problem, question chains can guide students' inquiry and deepen their understanding; at the end of a task, question chains can help students review what they have learned and apply it in other areas. Good embedding of question chains can help students stay in an active state of thinking during the completion of a task, continuously build their understanding of core concepts through problem-solving, and thus achieve synergistic development of language proficiency and higher-order thinking abilities.

Conclusion

Systematically explore the main problems in the design of integrated unit teaching for junior high school English under the guidance of core competencies and build an analytical framework for integrated unit teaching design based on the three dimensions of theoretical connotations, content reconstruction and task design. Based on the above research, specific requirements for instructional design have been identified through the analysis of core competencies in various subjects, and also the foundation of systems theory for integrated unit teaching and its status as a paradigm shift from period-based teaching have been clarified.

At the level of content reconstruction, this study shows that unit thematic meaning unifies the reconstruction, the logic of text integration is based on big ideas, and the form of content organisation promotes the synergistic development of language ability and character education; thus, it offers a theoretical foundation for transforming teaching content from a collection of knowledge points into a network of meaning.

Task Design will be employed to study the layered deconstruction and coherent articulation of unit teaching objectives; at the same time, it will investigate the design and articulation of task chains in authentic contexts and the embedding mechanism of classroom question chains guided by higher-order thinking to promote in-depth learning at the unit level. The theoretical contribution of this paper is to raise the level of discussion on integrated unit teaching design from that of techniques at the operational level to that of principles, and to explore the inherent connections among core competencies, integrated unit teaching and deep learning.

Further research can explore problems in the construction of evaluation systems for integrated unit teaching design, investigate variations and adaptation mechanisms of integrated unit teaching design at different educational stages and for various types of texts, and explore new options for integrated unit teaching design in technology-supported environments; thus, continuous deepening of the understanding of integrated unit teaching design for English under the guidance of core competencies can be achieved, and richer theoretical resources will be provided for the full realisation of the educational value of the English curriculum.

References

- [1] Zhao, Wenjuan, Li, Jinhui, and Mao, Wen. "An Exploration of the Iterative Upgrade Path for Integrated Unit Teaching of Junior High School English from the Perspective of Core Competencies." *English Learning*, no. 1 (2026): 17-22.
- [2] Zhong, Shanglan. "An Analysis of the Integrated Unit Teaching Path for Junior High School English Based on Big Ideas Under Core Competencies." *Examination Weekly*, no. 14 (2023): 95-98.
- [3] Qiu, Feili. "The Design and Implementation of Large-Unit Integrated Teaching for Junior High School English Under Core Competencies." *Campus English*, no. 3 (2023): 112-114.
- [4] Yang, Liuqing. "Integrated Unit Teaching Design for Promoting the Development of Core Competencies in English." *Teaching and Research in Primary and Secondary School English*, no. 11 (2020): 32-36.
- [5] Liang, Zongnan. "A Study on the Design and Implementation Strategies of Large-Unit Integrated Teaching for Junior High School English Under Core Competencies." *Journal of Lanzhou Vocational Technical College*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2024): 88-90.
- [6] Qin, Chunping. "Large-Unit Integrated Teaching Strategies for Junior High School English Based on Core Competencies." *Read, Write and Calculate*, no. 10 (2024): 149-151.