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

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Abstract: *Period-based instruction struggles to address the integrated demands of core competencies, making integrated unit teaching a focal point of research. This study focuses on the integrated unit teaching design for junior high school English, unfolding across three dimensions: theoretical connotations, content reconstruction, and task design. It reveals the logic of paradigm shifts under the guidance of core competencies, clarifies the mechanisms of content reconstruction guided by thematic meaning and integrated through big ideas, and establishes a framework for goal stratification, task chain design, and problem chain embedding aimed at deep learning. This research advocates for the integration of language learning with meaning exploration, cognitive development, and character cultivation through thematic meaning, big ideas, and task chains.*

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

Introduction

The introduction of core competencies marks a shift in English curriculum goals from a knowledge-and-skills orientation to an education-in-values orientation. The integrated nature of its four dimensions determines that instructional design must break free from the fragmented approach of period-based instruction. As a relatively complete learning segment, the unit possesses the capacity to accommodate complex objectives and organize integrated content, which has brought integrated unit teaching into the research spotlight. However, existing studies largely remain at the level of experiential summary and lack systematic exploration of the intrinsic mechanisms of integrated unit teaching design. This study focuses on the core issues of integrated unit teaching design for junior high school English under the guidance of core competencies, aiming 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, and explore the design mechanisms of large-unit teaching task chains oriented toward deep learning, thereby providing theoretical grounds 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 fundamental guideline for curriculum design and implementation, core competencies require concrete and operational interpretation within the context of the English discipline. The core competency framework for English is not a simple accumulation of language knowledge and skills, but rather an organic integration of four dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability, which together constitute the key endowments for learners to achieve comprehensive development through English learning. Language ability serves as the foundational carrier, embodying the infusion of cultural awareness and the cultivation of thinking quality. The cultivation of cultural awareness transcends superficial introductions to foreign cultures, aiming instead at the development of cross-cultural understanding and international perspectives. The development of thinking quality requires English learning to move from information reception to deep processing,

promoting the synergistic enhancement of logical, critical, and innovative thinking in learners through language use[1].

These four dimensions are interwoven and mutually reinforcing, collectively defining the educational function and value orientation of the English curriculum. The unique educational value of the English curriculum lies in the fact that it not only equips learners with tools for cross-cultural communication, but also promotes learners' identity construction, value shaping, and spiritual world expansion through the multicultural content embedded in the language. Language learning thus transcends the limitations of instrumental training and becomes a pathway for learners to understand the world, comprehend themselves, and cultivate their character. The subject-specific interpretation of core competencies establishes the value orientation and goal framework for integrated unit teaching design, requiring instructional designers to move beyond the fragmented transmission of knowledge points and take responsibility for learners' holistic development.

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

Integrated unit teaching is an instructional design paradigm based on systemic thinking, which takes the unit as the basic component and conducts integrated planning and structural organization of teaching objectives, teaching content, teaching activities, and teaching evaluation around core themes or big ideas. What distinguishes integrated unit teaching from traditional period-based instruction is that it regards the unit as an organic whole with inherent logical connections, where individual lessons within the unit are both relatively independent and mutually reinforcing, collectively serving the achievement of the unit's core objectives. The theoretical foundation of integrated unit teaching can be traced back to systems theory. According to the fundamental principles of systems theory, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the function of a system depends on the structural relationships among its elements rather than on the simple accumulation of those elements.

Applying this principle to the field of instructional design implies that the effectiveness of unit teaching depends not only on the quality of individual lesson instruction, but also on the organic connections and synergistic interactions among lessons, content, and activities. Integrated unit teaching emphasizes the interrelatedness, hierarchical structuring, and dynamic nature of instructional elements: interrelatedness requires that the content of each lesson forms a network of meaning centered around the thematic significance; hierarchical structuring requires that cognitive objectives progress step by step from perceptual understanding to application and transfer; dynamic nature requires that teaching activities be flexibly adjusted in accordance with the trajectory of learners' cognitive development. Integrated unit teaching from the perspective of systems theory provides theoretical support for overcoming the fragmentation tendency in instructional design and achieving the overall optimization of teaching effectiveness.

1.3 From Period-Based Instruction to Unit Construction: A Paradigm Shift in Instructional Design Logic

The shift from period-based instruction to unit construction reflects a deep paradigm shift in instructional design logic. Period-based instruction has long dominated the thinking model of English teaching design, which takes the lesson as the basic unit for setting objectives and arranging activities, focusing on the completeness and immediate effects of individual lessons while often neglecting the coherence and cumulative effects between lessons[2]. This design logic tends to result in the fragmentation of teaching content and the discontinuity of learning experiences, making it difficult for learners to integrate the knowledge points encountered in isolated lessons into structured cognitive schemas, and leaving the development of language abilities without sustained support. Unit construction, in contrast, achieves a fundamental reorientation of design logic: the unit of design rises from the lesson to the unit, the focus of design shifts from teacher instruction to student learning, and the basis of design moves from the sequence of textbooks to the logic of cognition.

This shift entails a reconstruction of the concept of teaching objectives, where objectives are no longer merely the behavioral outcomes measurable within a single lesson, but rather the comprehensive performances that can only be achieved through sustained construction across multiple lessons. The organizational logic of teaching content changes accordingly, transforming from a linearly arranged sequence of knowledge points into an exploration of meaning unfolded in layers around big ideas. The design logic of teaching activities is also renewed, where activities are no longer isolated from one another but form a task chain characterized by coherence and spiral progression, guiding learners to

achieve the synergistic development of language abilities and core competencies through the continuous pursuit of meaning. This paradigm shift echoes the findings of learning sciences regarding the mechanisms of deep learning, providing theoretical support for the evolution of English teaching design from experience-based to professionalized.

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

2.1 The Refinement of Unit Thematic Meaning and Its Oversight of Teaching Content

Unit thematic meaning serves as the core and soul of integrated unit teaching design, and its refinement process determines the educational dimension and value orientation of the teaching content. From the perspective of subject-based education, thematic meaning is not an inherent attribute of textbook units, but rather the result of in-depth interpretation and creative construction by instructional designers under the guidance of core competencies. Refining the thematic meaning of a unit first requires moving beyond a superficial grasp at the topic level, delving into the deeper implications and cultural values carried by the unit's texts, and identifying the educational opportunities embedded within them. For instance, for a unit centered on festival celebrations, its thematic meaning may extend beyond merely introducing festival customs and can be refined as a bidirectional reflection on cultural identity and cross-cultural understanding[3].

The establishment of thematic meaning provides a unifying framework for the selection and organization of teaching content. Under the guidance of thematic meaning, originally scattered linguistic elements such as vocabulary, sentence patterns, and texts acquire meaningful connections and become integral components oriented toward thematic exploration. Teaching content is no longer a static collection of knowledge, but rather a network of meaning unfolded in layers around the thematic meaning. Vocabulary learning serves the needs of thematic expression, sentence pattern practice relies on the creation of thematic contexts, and textual reading deepens the understanding of thematic connotations. This approach to content organization, anchored by thematic meaning, enables learners to remain immersed in an atmosphere of meaning exploration throughout the language learning process, allowing the enhancement of language abilities and the deepening of thematic understanding to advance in tandem, thereby preventing language learning from falling into the trap of mechanical drills.

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

As a high-level abstraction of the core concepts within a discipline, big ideas provide the cognitive framework and logical thread for the integration of unit texts. In integrated unit teaching design, texts are no longer isolated reading materials but rather meaningful carriers that embody big ideas and support the construction of big ideas. The integration of texts based on big ideas requires instructional designers to first identify the disciplinary big ideas underlying the unit, and then examine the ways and extent to which individual texts within the unit relate to and support these big ideas. Different texts may elaborate upon or substantiate the same big idea from different perspectives and through different means, forming relationships of complementarity, progression, or contrast with one another.

The task of text integration lies in discovering and reinforcing these intrinsic connections, enabling multiple texts to form a cohesive whole that collectively serves the deep understanding of big ideas. Text integration inevitably leads to the reconfiguration of lesson structures. Traditional lesson divisions often follow the natural sequence of textbook organization, with lessons lacking inherent logical connections. Lesson reconstruction based on big ideas, in contrast, requires the cognitive logic of idea construction to serve as the guiding thread for redesigning the division and articulation of lessons. Some lessons may focus on the initial perception of big ideas, others may be dedicated to exploring big ideas from multiple perspectives, and still others may culminate in the transfer and application of big ideas. The progression trajectory between lessons is no longer determined by the page sequence of textbooks, but rather by the cognitive ladder learners need to ascend in order to understand big ideas. This reconstruction transforms unit teaching into a process of meaning construction in which ideas are progressively deepened, allowing learners to engage in continuous dialogue with the same big ideas across different lessons and to continuously enrich and refine their understanding of those ideas.

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

The ultimate realization of the educational value of the discipline depends on achieving organic synergy between the development of language ability and the cultivation of character in the organization form of teaching content. Traditional instructional design often treats language learning and character education as parallel or separate threads, with character education reduced to an additional component outside language instruction. The content organization form for synergistic development requires breaking this binary opposition by embedding character cultivation within the process of language learning. Its core essence lies in selecting and organizing teaching content that carries both the value of language learning and the opportunity for character cultivation. Specifically, content organization needs to attend to synergy at three levels[4].

First, the selection of textual materials should balance linguistic exemplarity with humanistic enrichment, allowing learners to be immersed in positive values while engaging with authentic language expressions.

Second, the design of language tasks should embed authentic moral situations or value conflicts, guiding learners to engage in value judgment and choice through language use.

Third, the design of learning activities should promote interpersonal interaction and collaborative sharing, fostering social virtues such as respect, tolerance, and cooperation through language communication. This content organization form for synergistic development enables language learning to serve as a vehicle and pathway for character cultivation, while character cultivation becomes a natural extension and deeper pursuit of language learning.

In the process of using language to explore thematic meaning and construct big ideas, learners not only develop their language communication abilities, but also cultivate their emotional attitudes, values, and behavioral tendencies, thereby achieving the unity of language learning and character development. Teaching content is thus elevated from a medium for knowledge transmission to an arena for holistic education.

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

3.1 The Layered Deconstruction and Coherent Articulation of Unit Teaching Objectives

Unit teaching objectives serve as the projection and concretization of core competencies within a specific instructional unit, and the quality of their design directly determines the overall orientation of the task chain and the feasibility of achieving deep learning. Unit teaching objectives oriented toward deep learning need to transcend the fragmented listing characteristic of behaviorism-oriented approaches and move toward an organic unity of layered deconstruction and coherent articulation.

Layered deconstruction requires instructional designers to divide unit objectives into several progressively deeper levels based on the fundamental principles of the taxonomy of cognitive objectives, covering different cognitive tiers such as remembering and understanding, applying and analyzing, and evaluating and creating. The objectives at each level are both relatively independent and interrelated, with the achievement of lower-level objectives providing foundational support for the realization of higher-level objectives, while the pursuit of higher-level objectives in turn deepens the understanding of lower-level objectives[5].

The significance of layered deconstruction lies in its ability to avoid the insufficient cognitive challenge caused by the flattening of teaching objectives, ensuring that learners undergo a complete cognitive process in unit learning, moving from information acquisition to meaning construction and then to innovative expression. Coherent articulation requires the formation of a clear internal logic among the objectives of individual lessons within a unit, where the achievement of objectives in a preceding lesson serves as a prerequisite for the development of objectives in the following lesson, while the objectives of the following lesson in turn provide new perspectives for deepening the objectives of the preceding lesson.

This coherence is not a simple accumulation of linear sequencing, but rather a spiral progression of organic evolution, where learners repeatedly engage with core concepts across different lessons, each engagement enabling a renewed understanding of those core concepts at a new level. Unit teaching objectives thus become the soul that governs the entire task chain, providing directional guidance and

evaluative criteria for subsequent task design.

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

Authentic contexts serve as the external conditions and meaningful carriers for deep learning, and the design of unit task chains needs to be fundamentally grounded in authentic contexts. An authentic context is not a simple replication of real life, but rather the result of pedagogical adaptation of real situations based on teaching objectives and learner experiences, with its core characteristic lying in its ability to trigger learners' cognitive conflicts and pursuit of meaning. Guided by authentic contexts, unit tasks are no longer a collection of isolated exercises, but rather a coherent sequence of tasks unfolding around core issues. The design of task chains needs to follow several basic principles.

First, the starting point of the task should be rooted in learners' existing experiences and cognitive levels, ensuring that learners can enter the task context and develop a willingness to explore. Second, the progression of the task should advance along a trajectory of increasing cognitive difficulty, with each task phase providing the necessary experiential preparation and capability support for the subsequent phase. Third, the endpoint of the task should be oriented toward the achievement of the unit's core objectives, enabling learners to develop a deep understanding of core concepts and the ability to transfer knowledge after completing the entire task chain.

The articulation mechanism of task chains is key to achieving organic transitions between tasks. Articulation can be realized through various means such as question guidance, work presentation, and reflective communication, with its essence lying in making learners aware of the intrinsic connections between the preceding task and the subsequent one, and in helping them understand their position within the task chain and the direction for further exploration. Effective task articulation can sustain learners' continuous engagement and prevent cognitive disruption and motivational decline caused by task switching.

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

Higher-order thinking serves as the core representation of deep learning, and the design and embedding of classroom question chains provide critical support for the development of higher-order thinking. A question chain is not a random collection of questions raised in the classroom, but rather a carefully designed sequence of questions with intrinsic logical connections, aligned with unit teaching objectives and task chain requirements[6].

For question chains guided by higher-order thinking, their core characteristic lies in transcending the recall and repetition of factual information and targeting higher-order cognitive activities such as analysis, evaluation, and creation. The design of question chains needs to attend to the hierarchical structure and progressive nature of questions. The hierarchical structure of questions is reflected in different questions targeting different cognitive levels, ranging from comprehension questions to application questions and then to evaluation questions, forming a gradient design that covers the complete cognitive spectrum. The progressive nature of questions is reflected in the formation of logical chains between questions, where the resolution of a preceding question creates conditions for the posing of the subsequent question, while the exploration of the subsequent question in turn deepens the understanding of the preceding question.

The embedding mechanism of question chains determines the degree of integration between question chains and task chains. Question chains should not be regarded as an additional component separate from tasks, but should be embedded within the various nodes of task chains, serving as the internal driving force for task progression. At the task initiation stage, question chains can be used to activate existing experiences and trigger cognitive conflicts; at the task development stage, question chains can be used to guide the direction of inquiry and promote deep thinking; at the task completion stage, question chains can be used to facilitate reflection and synthesis and promote transfer and application. The effective embedding of question chains enables learners to maintain an active state of thinking throughout the process of task completion, continuously constructing their understanding of core concepts through problem-solving, thereby achieving the synergistic development of language proficiency and higher-order thinking qualities.

Conclusion

This study systematically addresses the core issues of integrated unit teaching design for junior high school English under the guidance of core competencies, constructing an analytical framework for integrated unit teaching design from three dimensions: theoretical connotations, content reconstruction, and task design. The study reveals the prescriptive requirements imposed by the subject-specific interpretation of core competencies on instructional design, and clarifies the systems theory foundation of integrated unit teaching as well as its significance as a paradigm shift relative to period-based instruction.

At the level of content reconstruction, the study demonstrates the unifying role of unit thematic meaning, the logic of text integration based on big ideas, and the content organization form for the synergistic development of language ability and character cultivation, providing a theoretical basis for transforming teaching content from a collection of knowledge points into a network of meaning.

At the level of task design, the study explores the layered deconstruction and coherent articulation of unit teaching objectives, the design and articulation of task chains guided by authentic contexts, and the embedding mechanism of classroom question chains guided by higher-order thinking, offering pathways for realizing deep learning at the unit level. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in elevating integrated unit teaching design from discussions of techniques at the operational level to theoretical construction at the principled level, revealing the intrinsic relationships among core competencies, integrated unit teaching, and deep learning.

Subsequent research may further explore issues related to the construction of evaluation systems for integrated unit teaching design, investigate variations and adaptation mechanisms of integrated unit teaching design across different educational stages and text types, as well as explore innovative possibilities for integrated unit teaching design within technology-supported environments, thereby continuously deepening the understanding of integrated unit teaching design for English under the guidance of core competencies and providing richer theoretical resources for the full realization of the educational value of the English curriculum.

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