

A Study on the Application of the Stratified Teaching Model in the Design of English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

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Abstract: With the progress of the reform of the basic education curriculum, the design of English after-school homework in junior high school has gained more attention. Traditional homework does not consider the different language abilities of the students. A teaching method that takes into account the differences among students is the stratified teaching model, and now it has been applied to homework. This paper studies the application of the stratified teaching model in the design of English after-school assignments for junior high school students and elaborates on this application from the following three aspects: theoretical basis, component structure and implementation mechanism. This paper introduces the idea of stratified teaching and how it can be applied in the design of assignments. The three components of the three levels of stratification are: diagnosis of learning conditions, regulation of cognitive load and development of metacognition. At the level of implementation, it studies how student stratification mobility works, the distribution of teacher roles, all kinds of feedback channels, and so on. The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical basis for the design of English after-school assignments in junior high school and to promote the shift in assignments from instruments for knowledge consolidation to means for cultivating language ability.

Keywords: Stratified Teaching, Junior High School English, After-school Assignments, Assignment Design, Cognitive Load, Metacognition.

Introduction

Homework serves as a key component of the junior high school English teaching system, as it carries the functions of knowledge internalization, skill development, and competency cultivation. Current after-school assignment design often adopts a uniform standard, which overlooks the differences among students in language foundation, cognitive style, and developmental pace. This oversight leads to students either feeling anxious or experiencing burnout, and the root cause lies in the failure of assignments to form an effective alignment with individual characteristics.

Stratified teaching, with its philosophy of attending to differences and dynamic adaptation, provides a pathway for addressing the aforementioned issues. The integration of stratification into assignment design allows the difficulty level to be anchored in students' Zone of Proximal Development, and it stimulates metacognitive engagement through structured tasks, thereby promoting the coordinated development of language ability and autonomous learning. This study explores this topic from three dimensions: theoretical logic, component structure, and implementation mechanism, aiming to construct a theoretical framework for the application of stratified teaching in junior high school English assignment design and to provide theoretical support for the shift of assignment design from uniformity to differentiation.

1. The Theoretical Logic of Stratified Teaching and the Design of English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

1.1 The Connotation of the Stratified Teaching Model and Its Pedagogical Basis

Stratified teaching is an organisation of teaching that divides the teaching materials into several homogeneous or heterogeneous groups according to the objective assessment of the current knowledge level, cognitive ability and learning style of the students. Therefore, teachers set different teaching

goals, use various teaching materials and various teaching methods, etc. It is not merely to group the knowledge; rather, it also demonstrates the idea that teachers should be flexible and adapt their teaching methods according to the individual characteristics of the students. At the level of particular operation, there are several kinds of stratification, such as objective stratification, process stratification and evaluation stratification; together they form a complete system of teaching strategies. First and foremost, it hopes to promote the full growth of every student according to their current abilities^[1].

In terms of its foundation for teaching, the stratified teaching model has a good theoretical basis. According to the theory of cognitive construction, people will actively create knowledge based on what they already know when they learn. Given that students at different stages of development have various ways of learning and different abilities to absorb knowledge, tiered teaching is often used to meet this need. The theory of differentiated instruction provides direct methodological support for stratification; that is, it believes that teaching should be adjusted according to the differences among students and address their individual learning needs by changing the content, process and results of learning. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences also suggests how to organise classes at different levels. The development paths of linguistic intelligence vary among individuals, so a stratified design can account for the different intellectual structures of learners and create an inclusive environment for English learning.

1.2 The Educational Value and Functional Position of English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

English after-school homework in junior high school has many educational values under the language teaching system, and it is not only for improving students' English skills. Based on the inherent laws of language acquisition, the preparation stage will create a suitable environment and motivate students to learn new words through interaction in class. When not in the classroom, learners will be able to complete tasks on their own or with others, and thus achieve a deeper level of learning and understanding. Autonomous language learning can help to form stable language skills, allow for the conversion of declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge, and expand the scope of language study from the cognitive level to the application level. At the same time, the assignment process can also be a good way for students to study the language materials more deeply. At this time, students can better understand what is being said and improve their ability to speak correctly.

In terms of functional placement, English after-school homework for junior high school students should be extended from a single function of knowledge consolidation to several other educational purposes. First, homework has a cognitive development function. Design Language tasks with high cognitive demands should be given to motivate students to think in higher-order ways, such as comparing, analysing and evaluating; thus, the all-around development of their language skills and other intelligences will be promoted. Second, homework has a metacognitive development function. As students plan the process of completing their homework, monitor the quality of their homework, and think about the results of their homework, they gradually develop the ability to regulate their own studies, which provides a foundation for the growth of autonomous learning ability. Third, assignments have an emotional education effect. At an appropriate level of difficulty and with various types of tasks, students can experience success, maintain their initial interest in learning a language, and avoid fatigue from too much frustration or boredom.

1.3 The Appropriateness and Interactive Logic of Integrating Stratified Teaching in Assignment Design

Stratified teaching can be added to the design of English after-school assignments in junior high school students, and this has been considered appropriate based on the laws of language learning and the developmental characteristics of students. The junior high school period is a crucial time for the development of students' language skills, and at this stage, differences in their language abilities, learning foundations and cognitive styles tend to be more pronounced. Therefore, the uniform assignment design cannot meet all the different learning needs. The addition of stratification can place the difficulty of the tasks within students' Zone of Proximal Development, so they are not too hard and thus cause anxiety about learning; at the same time, they are not too easy and will lead to cognitive boredom. According to the Input Hypothesis, understandable input is required for people to learn a language. Stratified Assignments can create an appropriate gap between the level of the input material and the students' current language ability to form an ideal input environment of $i+1$ and promote good language learning conditions^[2].

Stratified teaching and assignment design have a close correspondence in logic, and this logic is shown in the form of dynamic two-way construction. On the one hand, the concept of stratification is applied to all links in the design of assignments, including setting goals, choosing content and arranging format; all require considering the different characteristics of students to build a stratified assignment system. At the same time, finishing the homework will provide a good foundation for adjusting the class level. Data on students' cognitive functions, types of errors they make and how they use strategies in their homework can help teachers adjust their class grouping and improve class management. The above mechanism can ensure that the task is not just the end of teaching but also a way for students to learn actively. Homework helps teachers observe how students learn in their own lives and also learn about this process; therefore, they can adjust their teaching plans accordingly.

2. Deconstruction of Elements and Systematic Architecture of Stratified Design for English After-school Assignments in Junior High Schools

2.1 Stratified Objective Setting and Adaptation Mechanism Based on the Diagnosis of Learning Conditions

The logical starting point for the design of stratified assignments is a precise diagnosis of learning conditions, and this diagnostic process should go beyond mere differentiation based on performance to address the all-round development of students' language skills systematically. The scope of this diagnosis includes the breadth and depth of language knowledge reserves, the balance of language skills, the tendency of cognitive styles, and the type and strength of learning motivation. Based on the collection of information from various sources, such as formative assessment tools, diagnostic tests and analysis of learning portfolios, teachers can obtain a relatively complete picture of students' language learning, identify their strengths and weaknesses at different times in their language development, and adjust teaching plans accordingly. All these factors indicate the learning situation, so the purpose of the following division of labour should be to meet the real needs of the students.

Based on the diagnosis of learning conditions, the setting of stratified objectives should be in line with the principle of adaptation, and the assignment objectives need to form a moderate tension-filled match with the students' current levels of language development. For students in the foundational stage, the goals of the assignments are to consolidate their language knowledge and build basic skills; therefore, accuracy in language structure and cultivation of a general sense of language should be emphasized. For students at the developmental stage, the goals of the tasks are to apply their language knowledge in various situations and integrate various skills, focusing on producing language in relatively authentic environments. The goals of this task for advanced students are to encourage them to use language creatively, enhance their thinking abilities and cultivate a spirit of cross-cultural literacy. The vertical arrangement of this aim system is not a straight-line division but rather has a continuous characteristic of overlap and connection. The purpose of the adjustment mode is to set learning problems that are suitable in difficulty for all students based on what they have learned so far.

2.2 The Gradient of Assignment Difficulty and the Typology of Tasks Oriented Toward Cognitive Load

Cognitive load theory has provided a good analytical framework for the scientific design of assignment difficulty, as it divides the three types of cognitive load into intrinsic cognitive load, extraneous cognitive load and germane cognitive load, and thus offers an explanation for how assignment difficulty affects students' learning outcomes. Intrinsic cognitive load refers to the interplay among the difficulty of the learning material and a person's prior knowledge. In the Design of English assignments, this is shown by how well the complexity of the linguistic material matches the cognitive demands of the task and the learner's existing language schemas. A moderate amount of intrinsic cognitive load can motivate students to learn; however, if it is too large, they will find it overwhelming. Therefore, the position of the assignment difficulty gradient needs to be precisely regulated; it should be challenging enough for the students but not too difficult so that they can handle the information.

Given the regulation of cognitive load, the Design of the assignment difficulty gradient should be supported by a rich series of different types of assignments. According to the dimension of language input, assignment types can be divided into comprehension tasks, discrimination tasks and integration tasks, which correspond to the surface-level decoding, deep processing and meaning construction of linguistic materials. According to the dimension of language output, assignment types can be divided

into reproduction tasks, organisation tasks and generation tasks; thus, a continuum of ability development runs from imitation to creation. Various kinds of homework are set out to make students think in different ways; comprehension problems mainly use the language-processing system, while creation problems need to employ both this system and the executive-control system. Through the above typology, stratified assignment can be introduced to adjust the degree of difficulty and cognitive load, thus enabling students at various stages to participate in learning and develop language skills through their homework assignments^[3].

2.3 Construction of a Structural Model for Stratified Assignments that Promotes Metacognitive Development

Metacognition is a necessary condition for students to learn independently, so the goal of exploring stratified assignment design in more detail is to promote the development of students' metacognitive awareness and metacognitive regulation through organised tasks. The structure of the model for assignments that promote metacognition should integrate metacognitive guiding elements into the design of tasks so that students can be aware of, monitor and regulate their own learning processes during the completion of language tasks. Planning Prompts can be added to guide students in estimating the difficulty of the task and planning how to complete it; Monitoring Checkpoints can be added to have students evaluate their understanding at different times during the task and adjust their solutions accordingly; and a Reflection section can be added to help students look back on the entire process of completing the task, summarize effective methods, and identify any problems that still exist.

In the construction of this structure model, we should consider both the attributes of stratification and the stages of metacognitive development. For students in the foundation stage, the structure of the task will provide explicit metacognitive support by prompting them at various times during the completion process and offer a self-questioning checklist to help them begin to develop metacognitive awareness. For students at this stage of development, the assignment structure will be gradually simplified, and scaffolding support will be reduced; they will begin to learn how to learn on their own, such as summarizing the process of solving problems or discussing any difficulties encountered after completing the assignment. Students in the advanced class can choose how to complete the assignments themselves, set their own goals, and judge whether these goals have been achieved based on the demands of the tasks. Through this hierarchical structure, stratified assignments can help students gain knowledge in language learning and are also good ways to cultivate metacognition; gradually, students will be able to learn how to study and manage themselves better in their studies.

3. Interactive Mechanisms and Feedback Regulation in the Implementation Process of Stratified Assignments

3.1 Mobility of Student Stratification and Dynamic Adjustment Strategies for Assignment Tasks

Stratified assignments can be effectively applied only when it is known that students' language development is not uniform, and their ability to handle different kinds of tasks will also change over time. The main point of the student stratification mobility mechanism is to avoid the potential labeling effect caused by fixed stratification, and it helps identify the development paths and changes in students' language ability under various learning circumstances through regular evaluations of learning conditions and analysis of assignment results. Mobility is shown in the form of students moving up and down between grades, as well as in the expansion of strong areas at the same grade level; its goal is to ensure that the level of stratification is in line with the actual development needs of the students at all times.

Given the strata of mobility, changing the distribution of tasks should be done in an organized manner and flexibly. According to the time period, the adjustment plan is generally a whole-unit reset at the individual level and localised fine-tuning at the lesson level. The former is to readjust the assignment levels according to the results of periodic academic assessments, and the latter is to change the difficulty or type of a single task based on how well it has been completed. Dynamic adjustment of task elements refers to all kinds of changes in the tasks, such as modifying the difficulty level, changing the type of tasks, adding or removing scaffolding support, etc. Continuous operation of this adjustment mechanism will give some autonomy to the assignment system; thus, as students' language skills improve with age, problems can be solved in time, and the assignment tasks will remain within their Zone of Proximal Development.

3.2 Differentiated Configuration of the Teacher's Guiding Role in Stratified Assignments

At the start of the implementation of stratified classes, we need to change our regular approach to teaching by adopting a differentiated model that considers the different needs and abilities of the students. This is not to say that one should increase or decrease the amount of guidance; rather, it is about organising the functions, modes and times of guidance. For students in the initial stages of developing language ability, the teacher's guidance is mainly in the form of scaffolding; that is, through task decomposition, provision of examples, strategic prompting, etc., lower the cognitive demands of homework and help these students gain confidence and build a foundation for completing the work. For students with a good foundation in language, the teacher will gradually reduce support and allow the students to manage the tasks independently, thereby exercising their own language-processing abilities in the course of completing the assignments^[4].

Different Configurations for the Teacher's Guiding Role are also shown by the hierarchy of when and how to intervene. Depending on when the guidance takes place, it can be divided into pre-task guidance, in-task support for a problem, and post-task feedback, and at all these times, students of all ages show different levels of dependence on this support. Students in the foundational stage have a higher demand for the clarity of pre-task guidance and the timeliness of process intervention to keep up with the flow of the task. Students at the advanced level will be more greatly helped by the depth and thoughtfulness of post-completion feedback to promote the improvement and expansion of their language skills. Two kinds of ways to conduct the teaching will be direct teaching and indirect prompting. The former is suitable for transmitting knowledge in an orderly manner; the latter can inspire students to think critically and learn by doing. With the above differentiation, the teacher can meet the real needs of students at different stages more precisely, and thus the homework will serve as a platform for good communication between teachers and students.

3.3 Multiple Feedback Pathways Based on Stratified Assignments and Their Diagnostic Function

Feedback can help students improve their studies by pointing out what they have done and how to improve; therefore, in the framework of stratified assignments, feedback should go beyond simply evaluating correctness to become a comprehensive system of all sorts of diagnosis. The three kinds of this feedback system are shown in the three types of feedback subjects, feedback forms and feedback contents. In terms of the feedback recipient, the three-dimensional path of teacher feedback, peer feedback and self-feedback can be constructed. Teacher feedback is professional judgment and correction; peer feedback is a way for students to practice language exchange and social comparison; self-feedback can help students develop metacognition. The feedback form can take the form of written notes, spoken words, symbols, etc., and various types of feedback can be used according to the nature of the task and the grade of the student.

The Diagnosis function of multiple feedback serves as the main way to achieve the educational goals of homework. By examining the progress of stratified assignments in detail, teachers can find out whether there are problems with students' understanding of language knowledge, weaknesses in applying language skills, and tendencies to deviate from selected learning strategies. The diagnosis should cover the reasons for the problem as well as who is responsible; thus, students will know why they made mistakes and what to improve next. The implementation of the diagnosis function also needs to organise the collection of feedback information. Teachers need to integrate the diagnostic data collected in the process of grading, and then use this actual information to modify teaching goals and improve the design of homework. Based on the feedback mechanism and diagnosis, the stratification has gone through a full instructional cycle: Design and implementation have been completed, students have participated in them, teachers have provided feedback, and finally, continuous optimisation of the teaching system has been achieved.

Conclusion

This paper has systematically investigated the application of the stratified teaching model in the design of English after-school homework for junior high school students from the aspects of theoretical basis, structural features and implementation paths. The theoretical foundation of stratified teaching is reasonable, and it is in line with the educational goals of assignment design; therefore, the combination of the two can provide theoretical support for the optimisation of assignments. According to the diagnosis of the learning situation, set goals for all classes, create a difficulty gradient in line with

cognitive load, build a system to promote metacognition, and establish a complete system of stratified assignment design. At the level of implementation, dynamic adjustment of the mobility and assignment tasks for stratified students, differentiated configuration of the teacher's guiding role, and the diagnostic function of multiple feedback channels can all be employed to achieve the goal of stratified assignments in actual teaching.

Based on the above research, the main purpose of stratified assignment design is not to organize students into groups, but rather to create an active, open and self-optimising system that can continuously adjust according to changes in students' language skills and modify assignments. The following research will extend the above two directions. First, we need to know how to integrate the Design of stratified assignment with information technology and intelligent analysis tools effectively to improve the accuracy of diagnosing learning conditions and the intelligence of recommending tasks. Second, one can focus on the differences in impact of stratified assignments on all aspects of language skills and further refine stratification strategies for specific abilities, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, to advance research on stratified assignments in a more detailed way.

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