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English Large Unit Instructional Design Oriented by Core Competencies

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Abstract: English large unit instructional design guided by core competencies is an important direction in the current reform of basic education. This paper focuses on the design of English large unit teaching, analyzing progress in the transformation of teaching philosophy, the exploration of unit design, and the construction of evaluation systems. It points out key problems such as the disconnection between competency goals and teaching content, insufficient linkage among instructional activities, and weak support from evaluation approaches. To address these issues, the study proposes strategies including reconstructing the goal system, building an integrated design model, and establishing a diversified evaluation loop. Drawing on regional reform outcomes and classroom practice breakthroughs, it further explores future development pathways. The research aims to provide practical references for grassroots teachers, promote the implementation of the core competency concept in English teaching, and foster the coordinated development of students' language ability and comprehensive competencies.

Keywords: Core competencies; English large unit teaching; instructional design; competency goals; evaluation methods

Introduction

With the deeper implementation of the core competency education concept, English teaching is shifting from a knowledge-centered approach to a competency-oriented one. Large unit teaching, as an important way to integrate curriculum content and achieve competency goals, has attracted wide attention^[1]. In basic teaching practice, teachers' understanding of large unit teaching has gradually improved, but there are still many challenges in goal setting, activity design, and assessment. Some teachers are aware of the importance of competency cultivation, but find it difficult to turn this idea into concrete teaching

actions, which leads to a gap between the actual effect and the expected results. Based on actual teaching practice, this paper reviews the current situation and main problems of English large unit teaching, explores optimization strategies and future directions, and aims to provide both theoretical and practical reference for improving the quality of English teaching.

1. Main Problems in the Design of English Large Unit Teaching

1.1 Disconnection Between Competency Goals and Unit Content

The concept of core competencies is pushing English



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teaching from knowledge transmission to competency development. More and more teachers realize that language learning is not only about vocabulary and grammar, but also about the growth of thinking ability and cultural awareness. In teaching and research activities, terms like "exploration of thematic significance" and "deep learning" appear more often, and lesson plans increasingly highlight goals such as "cultivating critical thinking" and "improving intercultural communication skills" instead of just listing language knowledge ^[2]. Although some teachers explicitly refer to the four dimensions of core competencies when setting unit teaching objectives, they still follow a traditional knowledge-centered approach when selecting teaching materials and designing learning content. For example, in a unit themed "Environmental Protection," teachers may emphasize vocabulary differentiation and sentence pattern drills, while neglecting how to foster students' critical thinking and intercultural awareness through text interpretation. As a result, competency goals risk becoming a mere formal statement in lesson plans, failing to form an organic connection with specific language learning content. This disjunction prevents students from developing thinking quality and cultural awareness simultaneously while acquiring linguistic knowledge ^[3].

1.2 Teaching Activities Lack Strong Connections

Another problem is that teaching activities often lack depth and logical connections. Many activities look like they are under the same theme, but are actually separate and independent. For instance, in a unit on "Healthy Living," students may first memorize food-related vocabulary, then do a short dialogue on exercise, and later watch a health documentary clip. These activities fail to build a progressive ladder of knowledge construction and do not reflect the spiral development of language skills. As a result, students can only gain fragmented language experiences during participation, making it difficult for them to develop a deep understanding of the unit theme or achieve a comprehensive improvement in language application ability. This superficial tendency in activity design hinders the full realization of the integrative advantages of large unit teaching.

1.3 Evaluation Does Not Support Competency Development

The issue that evaluation methods fail to support

competency development is equally noteworthy. Current English unit assessments rely excessively on standardized tests, which primarily focus on examining students' mastery of isolated knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar, while lacking effective measures for dimensions of competency such as language application ability, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. Even when formative assessment is adopted, it often remains at the level of simply recording classroom performance, without in-depth analysis of the learning process or providing targeted feedback. This misalignment between evaluation methods and the objectives of core competency cultivation results in an inability to comprehensively reflect students' development levels, nor does it provide scientific guidance for instructional improvement. Consequently, the competency-oriented teaching philosophy struggles to be effectively implemented in practice ^[4].

2. Optimization Strategies for English Large Unit Teaching Design

2.1 Reconstructing the Goal System to Strengthen the Link Between Competencies and Content

To address the problem of disconnection between competency goals and unit content, teachers need to reconstruct the goal system so that competency objectives are genuinely integrated into teaching. Based on curriculum standards and unit themes, it is crucial to analyze how different dimensions of core competencies can be embodied in the unit, and to refine abstract competency goals into specific, observable, and actionable learning objectives. For example, in the unit "Environmental Protection," the goal of cultivating critical thinking can be set as: "Students should be able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of different environmental protection plans and propose their own improvements." The goal of intercultural awareness can be refined as: "Students should compare differences between Chinese and foreign concepts and practices of environmental protection and explain the multicultural implications." ^[5]

When selecting teaching materials, teachers should choose texts that align with these refined goals and that carry ideological, contemporary, and cultural value. Materials such as research reports on cutting-edge environmental issues or news reports from international

environmental conferences are suitable, as they allow students to engage with content that naturally connects to competency development. Breaking down goals into each lesson is essential to ensure that competency objectives are achieved. For instance, during reading lessons, teachers can guide students to extract viewpoints on environmental protection through close reading, fostering logical thinking; during writing lessons, students can compose advocacy pieces for environmental protection, enhancing both their language use and problem-solving skills. In this way, competency goals and teaching content can be integrated into a coherent whole.

2.2 Building a Situation-Task-Activity Model to Enhance the Coherence of Teaching Activities

Constructing a situation-task-activity model can effectively solve the problem of weak connections between activities. Teachers should create authentic and challenging situations. For example, in the unit "Healthy Living", setting the context of "Planning a Community Healthy Living Week" is highly appropriate, as it immerses students in a real problem-solving scenario. Based on this situation, a sequence of tasks can be designed, such as "Investigating the current health habits of community residents," "Designing a health promotion plan," and "Creating posters and videos for publicity." These tasks have clear objectives and a logical progression, with each one building the foundation for the next. To accomplish the tasks, corresponding teaching activities should be developed. For instance, under the task "Investigating the current health habits of community residents," students can design questionnaires and conduct interviews, which enhance their skills in information gathering and communication. For the task "Designing a health promotion plan," group discussions and proposal writing activities can be arranged, cultivating teamwork and planning abilities. These activities are closely connected, allowing students to repeatedly apply and consolidate their language knowledge, while also deepening their understanding of the unit theme from multiple perspectives. Ultimately, this model promotes both language skills and overall competencies, maximizing the advantages of large unit teaching.

2.3 Establishing a Multi-Dimensional Evaluation Cycle to Support Competency Development

To address the limitations of current evaluation

methods, establishing a multi-dimensional evaluation cycle is an effective solution. Evaluation should be diversified: besides traditional tests, classroom performance observation, learning portfolios, and group project assessments should also be included.

For example, in the unit "Technological Development", teachers can observe and record students' classroom performance by focusing on their engagement and originality during discussions on the pros and cons of technology. Learning portfolios can be used to collect students' mind maps and reflections throughout the unit, providing a comprehensive record of the learning process. Group projects such as "Future Technology Outlook" can be assessed from multiple dimensions, including planning, outcomes, and teamwork.

A feedback mechanism is also essential. Teachers should provide detailed feedback on students' learning performance, clearly pointing out strengths and weaknesses and offering targeted suggestions for improvement. After completing a writing task on "The Impact of Technology on Life," for instance, teachers should not only give a score but also comment on content depth, language accuracy, and logical coherence, guiding students to revise. Student participation in self-evaluation and peer evaluation is equally important. After a group project, members can assess each other's contributions and cooperation, while students should also reflect on their own learning and growth. This process forms a cycle of "evaluation-feedback-improvement-re-evaluation", allowing for a comprehensive and accurate assessment of competency development and providing strong support for both teaching improvement and student growth.

3. Practical Progress and Future Directions of English Large Unit Teaching Reform

3.1 Typical Achievements in Regional Teaching Reform

In some regions, systematic promotion of English large unit teaching reform has led to the formation of localized practice models. For example, in one eastern province, a provincial-level research team served as the core to establish a regional promotion mechanism of "theme guidance-quality stratification-resource integration." Key teachers were organized to develop a large unit teaching guide covering elementary to high school. Among them, the junior high school unit themed "Cultural Heritage"

has already been piloted in several cities. This guide refines both language ability goals and cultural awareness cultivation into observable learning performance indicators. An accompanying interdisciplinary case database contains a wide range of real-life contextual materials. For instance, when learning about "Traditional Festivals," students not only master the linguistic structures for festival expressions but also develop cultural identity through comparing Chinese and Western festival customs. Since the implementation of the reform, students in pilot schools have shown significant improvement in their ability to apply English to solve real-world problems in provincial assessments, while teachers' efficiency in designing unit-based teaching schemes has also increased.

3.2 Breakthroughs in Classroom Practice

At the front-line classroom level, large unit teaching has demonstrated multiple breakthrough practices. In vocabulary instruction, teachers no longer limit themselves to word list explanations but embed vocabulary learning into the thematic exploration of the unit. For instance, in the "Future City" unit, teachers guide students to design city planning maps, during which students naturally acquire vocabulary while describing building functions, thus greatly improving vocabulary recurrence rates.

Reading instruction has also shifted from analyzing single texts to conducting thematic comparative reading across multiple texts. For example, in the "Technology and Ethics" unit, a key high school integrated three types of texts—scientific expositions, news commentaries, and excerpts from science fiction. By comparing how different genres describe the same technological event, students developed critical reading skills^[6]. Classroom observations showed that under such teaching models, students were more proactive in asking questions during class, and their engagement in extended inquiry after class also increased significantly.

3.3 Key Areas for Future Development

Reform of large unit English teaching needs to achieve substantial breakthroughs in the following areas. In terms of digital resource development, it is necessary to design intelligent unit platforms that support personalized learning. Such platforms should be capable of automatically recommending adaptive learning tasks based on students' performance. For instance, if the system detects that students encounter

frequent logical gaps in argumentative writing within the "Environmental Protection" unit, it can immediately push micro-lessons on the use of logical connectors and examples of argumentative frameworks. Regarding teacher professional development, a clinical training model based on authentic classroom cases should be established. By creating inter-school unit-design workshops, teachers can engage in action research on specific issues such as "how to integrate the cultivation of thinking quality into grammar instruction," thereby forming a professional growth cycle of "design-implementation -reflection-improvement." As for the innovation of assessment tools, it is essential to develop competency-based scales that integrate both quantitative and qualitative measures. In addition to measurable indicators such as language accuracy, these scales should incorporate qualitative dimensions such as "empathy in cross-cultural communication" and "strategic adjustment in complex problem solving," in order to achieve comprehensive tracking of core competency development.

Conclusion

The reform of English large unit teaching guided by core competencies has achieved phased results in terms of conceptual transformation and practical exploration. However, challenges such as the disconnection between competency goals and teaching content, weak coherence among activities, and insufficient support from evaluation still remain. By reconstructing the goal system, establishing the situation-task-activity model, and developing a multi-dimensional evaluation cycle, teaching can shift from a knowledge-oriented to a competency-oriented paradigm. Looking ahead, further efforts are needed to deepen the dissemination of regional reform experiences, strengthen classroom-level innovations, and achieve breakthroughs in digital resources, teacher professional development, and evaluation tools. Ultimately, large unit teaching should become an effective approach to enhancing both students' language proficiency and overall competencies, providing sustained momentum for the high-quality development of English education.

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