

DESIGNING THEMATIC UNITS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHING
IN CHINA

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Abstract

DESIGNING THEMATIC UNITS IN
PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

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Under the Supervision of David Gillota, Ph.D.

In primary school English teaching, teachers should not only pay attention to students' academic performance, but also pay attention to whether students really acquire meaningful knowledge, and can apply knowledge to daily life. With the newly promulgated curriculum reform in China, English teachers should follow the direction of the reform, actively create a good topic context, and design the whole English thematic unit according to this context. English teachers should also pay attention to the overall information of the unit and encourage students to learn English in a good learning environment and atmosphere. Teachers help students to have a good understanding of English, improve overall cognition, expand the scope of students' knowledge, and encourage students to explore the deep connotation of English knowledge. Therefore, this paper makes an in-depth discussion on the overall teaching of primary school English units under the guidance of thematic meaning.

Keywords: primary school English teaching, thematic units, China

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Introduction

English is a crucial topic in China's compulsory education, and its significance is obvious. Early English instruction in China makes it clear that students had difficulty making the connection between their newly acquired English knowledge and the material in English textbooks. By aiding students in understanding, improved English learning content enhances English learning results. Early on, a small group of English teachers who were on the front lines progressively became aware of how traditional teaching methods affected pupils' acquisition of English. As a result, in order to carry out effective teaching, teachers started to incorporate the actual situation of the students more while creating lesson plans and teaching tactics.

When we look back on the previous 20 years of English instruction in China, we can see how the educational philosophy has evolved from "double-base teaching" in the 1980s to the "three-dimensional aims" in the early 21st century to the current "core literacy." Every catchphrase bears a strong mark of the Times. However, China's textbook authors have kept up with the advancement of fresh concepts in English instruction. This implies that English education now emphasizes the integration and perfection of instrumental and humanistic nature rather than the instrumental application of English.

Under the guidance of the new teaching concept, teachers' multi-class teaching centered on the whole unit theme is becoming more and more popular in English teaching circles in China. Ju (2013) noted that in traditional teaching, there is a kind of "standard" idea in the teaching of each section between units, and there is a lack of

an "overall" idea. Teachers often only seek for a wonderful and complete lesson, which greatly weakens the function of the unit as a whole. Unit holistic teaching is more conducive to the integration of unit curriculum components than traditional teaching techniques, and it provides students with a richer and more fruitful educational experience.

The renowned Chinese professor Wang Qiang proposed themed units' design in 2020 as a means for teachers to create associations in content in accordance with the fundamental principle of discourse mining in textbooks, to sort out pertinent information in accordance with the theme, and then to construct an entire teaching unit based on the theme's significance. Two other English teachers, Hu & Chen (2020), stress the need for creating unit-themed teaching designs, which incorporate teaching content, objectives, and activities based on textbook units and their thematic value. Because of this, teachers need to make clear the connection between the teaching objectives of each module and the teaching objectives of each unit, comprehend its significance, and use it as a bridge to connect the teaching content.

Although thematic units teaching is not unfamiliar to teachers or students in primary schools, how teachers construct effective thematic units' lessons is still a challenge that merits research and practice. This paper focuses on instructional design ideas and procedures that primary school English instructors can utilize to implement thematic units successfully.

Statement of the Problem

Primary school English is the initial period of English education, which is of

great significance to students' whole English learning. In order to do a good job in this period of teaching, English teachers should take the actual situation of students as the teaching starting point in order to develop a reasonable and appropriate English teaching program. The holistic teaching of thematic units effectively caters to this teaching concept. The holistic teaching mode guides students to obtain rich English learning experiences and demonstrates the efficient goal of primary school English classroom teaching. The question to be addressed in this paper is, why does the design of thematic units contribute to students' learning? In this study, I examine researchers' attempts to examine the effective application of thematic units' design in primary school English teaching.

Definition of Terms

When using a theme-based approach, the curriculum's various components are combined rather than broken down into individual courses. It is believed that integrating a theme into the classroom helps children learn in their own way (Cameron, 2001). Theme-based units are lessons developed from a single theme or topic. They are similar to literature-based units of study. The difference being literature-based units start with a single book or a series of books.

The concept of Core Competencies originated in the West. Today, China is applying this idea to the teaching of English in English. Based on the core competencies concept, the foreign language academia put forward the concept of core competencies in EFL learning, namely, language ability, critical thinking ability, cultural awareness and learning capacity.

ESL stands for English as a second language. It is a traditional term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers in an English-speaking environment (it is also known as English for speakers of other languages).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to focus on how ESL teachers reasonably implement instructional design and teaching strategies in primary school English classrooms under the concept of large unit themes. I hope to help the majority of ESL teachers to improve the level of English teaching and guide students to achieve the peak of their comprehensive English learning ability through this way of learning.

Significance of the Study

English can be said to be the second language for most people in China. Because most students are exposed to English in primary school. However, teachers' traditional teaching only brings knowledge to students, but does not introduce English related topics to students in a real and systematic way. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in that teachers should implement unit overall teaching strategies in English classroom teaching and carry out teaching in the form of themes, which is the demand of teachers' teaching skills improvement and the continuous development of students' learning.

Methodology

This paper mainly adopts the action research method and the teaching case analysis method.

The researcher will constantly reflect and summarize the practice of unit theme

instructional design, and apply the results of research into practice in time. The teacher studies the textbook in depth and fully excavates the connotations of the text, reconstructs the text, and designs the whole topic teaching task of theme-based discourse. In addition, the researcher practices, explores and improves the teaching process. Through a comprehensive discussion and analysis of teaching cases, problems are found out and effective strategies are sought for how to design a thematic unit discourse.

Review of Literature

As we all know, English is a universal tool for international communication. As China continues to open up, many people begin to pay attention to learning English, because learning English at an early age can broaden children's vision. It turns out that more and more children are exposed to English before the age of five. This is because parents believe that the earlier a child learns a language, the stronger the mastery of the language. Therefore, in recent years, English has gradually become the main subject in Chinese teaching and has become popular among the public.

Nowadays, English is very important in Chinese education. In the future, generations of Chinese people will be exposed to more and more information in English. 90% of the information on the global Internet is based on English, so learning English well is very important for the development of students.

With the development of the Times, along with the reform of English teaching, Chinese education and teaching experts put forward the concept of thematic units teaching. Thematic units teaching of primary school English teaching helps students to link the fragments of information together to form a whole structured learning process. In conclusion, thematic teaching ensures the formation of students' core literacy.

1. A review of English teaching in China

In the first part of my literature review, I would like to focus on English teaching in China. This mainly includes the development, characteristics and current situation of primary school English teaching.

1) Development of English teaching in primary schools

Adamson, B. (2004) mentioned in his book that the development of English language in China is a long and interesting process. The first appearance of the English language in China dates back to the early 17th century, in Guangzhou, in the south of China.

Wang (2009) shows that in the 1850s, English teaching in China was deeply influenced by the Soviet model. Chinese English teaching at that time focused only on the system and structure of the target language. Teachers use static teaching, such as memorizing new words and explaining grammar. Generally, English is learned by rote, and English learning is regarded only as a process of imparting knowledge. Hu (2004) pointed out that since the reform and opening up in the 1970s, China has gradually attached importance to the study of English. The state has issued a series of policies to support and encourage students to learn English. More and more people begin to pay attention to the study of English. Some areas start learning English in the first grade of primary school, and some areas that are less advanced start learning English in junior high school. Gradually English learning is becoming common throughout China at the beginning of the 21st century. English classes can be held in remote areas. With the progress and development of society, the traditional teaching concept can no longer meet the requirements of Chinese English learning. Most English classes ignore the language creativity of students; students can not apply what they have learned, and eventually lead to the lack of communicative ability of students. Therefore, Communicative Language Teaching, which is a useful tool into

Chinese English teaching, has a great influence on the foreign language field of China with its basic theory and principle. This theory has been used by English teachers all the time to promote students' oral English expression.

2) Characteristics of primary school English teaching in China

(a) Low interest in learning English

The lack of students' interest in English learning is an important factor affecting the effect of primary school English teaching. From the perspective of English teaching methods, there are two reasons for this situation. First, the teaching method is not interesting and fails to create a teaching situation in line with students' interest and cognitive characteristics, leading to the classroom teaching atmosphere being too serious, which inhibits students' interest in learning. Second, the teaching method does not fully reflect the charm of the English language, and students cannot get pleasure or a sense of achievement from English learning, and gradually lose interest in learning.

(b) Fragmented teaching content in English textbooks

Due to the lack of timely updating of English teaching textbooks in China, many front-line teachers take "class hours" as the unit of teaching design and fail to integrate the content of textbooks effectively, which leads to the fragmentation of teaching content and the lack of overall grasp of knowledge points, thus ignoring the improvement of students' discipline literacy. With fragmented teaching for a long time, students cannot acquire systematic knowledge and have an unclear conception of the "theme" and are thus unable to deeply learn and perceive English.

3) Current situation of primary school English classroom

Qiu (2020) proposed that primary school English teaching, as the enlightenment stage of English education, should not only impart basic English knowledge, but also cultivate students' English learning thinking and habits. Therefore, English teaching in primary schools has gradually shifted from attaching importance to the teaching of basic knowledge (taking English as a tool) to the improvement of students' thinking ability (Using English to spread culture). Nowadays, China's new English curriculum standards (2022) advocate combining the two characteristics together, so as to make English classes more meaningful and students' learning more effective.

2.A review of Thematic units teaching in English

1) Foundations of Thematic units teaching

In fact, as far back as the 1880s, the concept of "integration" was proposed. But more curriculum reform dates back to 1930s and Dewey's (1933) creation of meaningful learning. Vars (1991) puts forward the idea that the process of upgrading teaching and learning needs to be through the integration of courses. Lipson, M. Y., Valencia, S. W., Wixson, K. K., & Peters, C. W. (1993) points out that curriculum integration should be used as a way to change the traditional teaching model of schools. Cameron (2001) clarifies that theme-based teaching is a way of bringing together different areas of the curriculum, rather than being separated into different subjects. In fact, it can also be said that it is a way to break the relationship between disciplines, so that students can obtain more complete and systematic knowledge.

Many educators believe that teaching around a topic suits children's natural way of

learning and helps students to learn.

2) Strategies for designing thematic units in English class

(a) Achieve thematic units as a whole

The content selected in primary school English textbooks is close to students' actual life, such as meeting and greeting, introducing families, animals, colors, food, drinks and shopping, etc. Each unit theme has strong purpose and pertinence. In the process of primary school English teaching, teachers should first grasp the unit content as a whole, then carefully divide the teaching in an orderly way, and formulate specific individual goals. The first step in learning English courses is to accumulate basic knowledge. Primary school English teachers need to carefully study and explain knowledge methods and skills to help students master learning tips. And the overall interpretation of the unit theme but also to enhance the students' overall grasp of English knowledge.

(b) Achieve the unity of a variety of teaching methods

The integrated teaching of primary school English units requires teachers to flexibly exercise a variety of teaching methods. The integration of unit content can effectively save class time and improve teaching efficiency. In terms of new vocabulary teaching, teachers can start from the text or sentences, not only to help students remember the letter combinations of vocabulary but also to understand its specific meaning. Every English sentence has phrases that match verbs, nouns, prepositions, etc. By integrating words into the specific context, students can practice the use of English phrases. The learning of English knowledge is originally a

combination of sentences, especially in the unit teaching mode, through the reasonable application of a variety of teaching methods, students can systematically master the expression skills of English language.

(c) Realize the optimization and integration of new knowledge expansion

In the process of primary school English teaching, teachers adopt a unit integrated teaching design to enable students to develop appropriately on the basis of accumulation and break through the limitations of teaching materials and integrate with actual life organically. Therefore, primary school English teachers need to lead students to skillfully transfer what they learn in class to specific situations to achieve natural extension. The arrangement of each unit theme in primary school English textbooks mostly belongs to the continuous knowledge content. Teachers can make overall planning for them, adjust the order appropriately, and realize text reorganization, which conforms to the learning needs and cognitive rules of primary school students. In addition, it is beneficial for students to learn and accept new knowledge on the premise of inherent experience, and then realize the gradual expansion and upgrading of new knowledge through gradual class arrangement.

3) Strategies for improving students' core competency

The cultivation of the core competency of primary school English can help students improve their learning enthusiasm, establish self-confidence, develop good learning habits, make students dare to speak, read and write, and improve their English quality in practice.

The core competency of English discipline is the goal that requires students to

learn English. English learning has developed so far, from improving subject knowledge and skills to the overall application level of the subject. This will promote students' patriotic feelings, broaden their horizons and improve their core qualities. In addition, it will also improve the level of communication and interaction among different disciplines to some extent.

Thinking and observing under the framework of decoupling of core competency, it is not difficult to find that in primary school English classroom, most teachers only focus on teaching grammar knowledge, but do not go deep enough in cultivating students' quality. Therefore, teachers should cultivate students' core competency from the following aspects.

(a) Master comprehensive language ability

Language competence is the ability to do things with language, including language knowledge, language awareness, language skills, communication strategies, oral expression and written language expression ability. Teachers should use good classroom language, oral language should be standardized, speaking speed should be moderate. Teachers should try to use English with inspiring language and rich emotional color to create a pleasant language learning environment for students, but also encourage students to open communication, forming a dare to speak, love to speak English learning atmosphere.

(b) Cultivate good thinking quality

The quality of thinking is the ability of thinking discrimination, including analysis, reasoning, judgment, rational expression, multi-thinking in English and other

activities. The quality of thinking is an aspect that teachers must pay close attention to in classroom teaching. Teachers should study and research the textbooks before class, and pay attention to cultivating students' logical, critical and creative thinking. Some teachers use direct indoctrination to make students learn passively, which limits the independence of learning. In the classroom, teachers should take care of the ideas of students, so that students can dare to express their own opinions, form their own judgment, and find out the solution to the problem in their own way rationally.

(c) Cultivate students' cultural character

The most important part of English teaching is to cultivate students' cultural character. In primary school, it is necessary to cultivate students' learning awareness, understand and learn the cultural differences between China and Western countries, appreciate the diversity of exotic cultures, and feel the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, which can well improve students' cultural character.

(d) Train students' autonomous learning ability

Strengthening the cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability in the process of primary school English classroom teaching can not only improve the quality and efficiency of classroom teaching, but also improve the classroom learning atmosphere, strengthen the communication and exchange between students and teachers, so as to enhance the ability of students to solve practical problems.

Cultivating students' independent learning ability in primary school English class can not only cultivate their awareness of independent learning, maintain good learning habits, but also cultivate their spirit of exploration, so as to cultivate more high-

quality talents with strong independent comprehensive ability in line with the requirements of the new era.

The cultivation of core literacy cannot be separated from unit theme teaching. Because only when students learn big concepts in big units can they do so in a way that reflects their core competency. This requires our English teachers to adhere to unit - themed teaching for a long time. As long as each of us can keep pace with the Times, strive to explore and study unit - themed teaching, and devote ourselves to the cultivation of core literacy, our professional quality can be greatly improved. It has a positive influence on English teaching in our country and is the icing on the top of the cultivation of core English literacy in primary schools.

Summary

In primary school English classroom teaching, the implementation of the overall teaching strategy of the main body unit is the demand of teachers' teaching skills improvement, but also the demand of students' learning development. Teachers should pay attention to the combination of daily teaching and students' actual life when implementing thematic units teaching. Teachers need to accurately understand the overall classroom teaching significance of thematic units, fully grasp the direction of English classroom teaching and carefully design the content of theme teaching, so as to cultivate students' comprehensive learning ability of primary school English. In the end, students would develop their English learning abilities in an interesting and enriching experience.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

In China, as the teaching theory of thematic units teaching has just been advocated to be applied by teachers in English teaching, it is found through investigation that there are not many papers on the design of thematic units in English teaching. The shortcomings of this paper: as there are few related articles and papers, the research may not be comprehensive. In addition, I am inexperienced in education and lack of research ability, which may affect the validity. However, when writing this paper, I am deeply aware that in order to better achieve the teaching objectives, the overall teaching of units cannot be separated from the overall thematic design of teachers. Therefore, I come to the following conclusion:

Designing thematic units fills the loopholes of teaching materials and innovates teachers' view of teaching materials. I found that if each related element in the unit can coordinate, the whole element will be in an orderly state, which can realize the optimization of the overall structure of the unit. For English teachers, when organizing units, they will set the teaching objectives of each unit and each class period as a whole, so that the whole unit is very structured. Even, when teachers assign English homework, they will be more systematic, and the content between units will practice each other, closely linked. Therefore, this teaching concept puts forward higher requirements for teachers' teaching design. Teachers should design logical teaching content according to students' learning characteristics. At the same time, higher requirements are put forward for teachers' education and teaching ability, such as integrating teaching content and detoxifying teaching materials.

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