

Research on Practical Strategies of English Large Unit Teaching Design Oriented by Core Literacy

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Abstract: General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2025) clearly identifies four core competencies of the English subject, namely linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability, which serve as the fundamental educational objectives of senior high school English teaching. As a vital approach to address fragmented class-hour teaching and realize competency-based objectives, large-unit English teaching transforms English classrooms into holistic, structured education guided by thematic contexts. Centered on the core competencies of English, this paper defines the connotation of large-unit English teaching and summarizes its four core features: holism, progression, contextualization and comprehensiveness. It further constructs operable practical strategies from five dimensions: restructuring unit objectives, integrating teaching contents, designing inquiry-based activities, establishing multi-dimensional assessment systems and optimizing unit assignments. It provides theoretical references and practical approaches for frontline English teachers to carry out competency-oriented large-unit teaching design, facilitating the realization of the educational value of “fostering people through language” in English education.

Keywords: Large-unit English Teaching; Subject Core Competencies; Holistic Unit Design; Senior High School English.

1. Introduction

General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2025) explicitly proposes to “prioritize big disciplinary concepts to structure curriculum contents and adopt thematic guidance to contextualize curriculum contents” [1], which promotes the effective cultivation of core English competencies. Nevertheless, prevailing problems persist in current English teaching practices, including fragmented knowledge delivery[2], linearized teaching procedures[3] and detached competency objectives[4]. Traditional class-hour-based teaching design fails to help students establish internal connections between knowledge points, let alone realize knowledge transfer and competency development.

As a teaching paradigm responding to the demands of core competencies, large-unit teaching advocates breaking away from the knowledge-based compilation logic of textbook units and taking thematic meaning exploration as the main thread to reorganize teaching contents into an organically connected learning whole. This philosophy is inherently consistent with the four-dimensional objectives of English core competencies: linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. The holism, progression, contextualization and comprehensiveness pursued by large-unit teaching constitute the curriculum prerequisites required for the development of core competencies.

2. Connotation and Feature Analysis of Large-Unit English Teaching Oriented by Core Competencies

2.1. Connotation of Large-Unit English Teaching

To comprehend the connotation of large-unit English teaching, it is necessary to distinguish the concept of “unit”. The modifier “large” does not refer to expanded content volume, but to the reconstruction of learning units. A large

unit represents a relatively complete learning unit that conforms to language acquisition rules, students’ cognitive development laws and life experience, enabling effective alignment between teaching design and competency objectives[5]. This means the essence of large-unit teaching lies in replacing the disciplinary knowledge logic with students’ learning logic, organizing teaching contents into meaningful learning experiences for students.

From the perspective of English education, large-unit teaching refers to holistic unit teaching guided by big concepts and oriented toward core competencies. It is not confined to the predefined unit divisions in textbooks and can even span multiple units to form new teaching clusters[6]. Its core lies in driving learning through thematic meaning exploration, integrating the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, development of language skills, deepening of cultural understanding and improvement of thinking quality into a complete process of thematic inquiry. It requires teachers to shift from “teaching the textbook” to “teaching with the textbook” by reorganizing and reconstructing teaching resources, turning each unit into a relatively independent teaching unit targeting competency cultivation.

2.2. Feature Analysis of Large-Unit English Teaching Design

Core-competency-oriented large-unit English teaching is not a simple expansion of traditional class-hour teaching, but a fundamental transformation of teaching philosophies and design paradigms. Based on the theoretical frameworks of the English Learning Activity Perspective and holistic unit teaching, four interrelated core features of large-unit teaching design are summarized below, collectively supporting the integrated development of students’ core competencies.

2.2.1. Holism

Holism is the most fundamental feature of large-unit English teaching, which addresses the fragmentation of knowledge in traditional class-hour teaching. Firstly, holism embodies systematic thinking in instructional design: the

overall unit planning and individual class-hour design must be reconstructed based on in-depth analysis of curriculum standards, core subject contents and students' learning status[7]. Secondly, it manifests in the intrinsic relevance of teaching contents. Guided by curriculum standards and specific themes, teachers need to interpret, analyze, integrate and reorganize textbooks and other teaching resources[8], forming logically coherent teaching units governed by an overarching unit theme with interconnected sub-themes for each text. Under holistic design, language learning, cultural perception, thinking cultivation and learning ability development can advance synergistically within a unified context.

2.2.2. Progression

Progression runs through the entire process of large-unit English teaching and reflects respect for students' cognitive development laws. In line with the English Learning Activity Perspective, learning activities within large units should follow the progressive path of "perception and comprehension - application and practice - transfer and innovation", ensuring relevance, progression and developmental value of activities[9]. In practice, progression is realized through hierarchical design of major and minor tasks[10]: the unit's core major task is a representative, meaningful learning task with inclusiveness and systematicity; the decomposed minor tasks are targeted and sequential, with each task extending the previous one and laying the groundwork for the next. This design allows students to engage in sustained inquiry by completing minor tasks step by step before accomplishing the core major task, thus achieving in-depth learning.

2.2.3. Contextualization

Contextualization is an essential attribute of competency-oriented large-unit teaching. As a language discipline, English requires students to apply knowledge in authentic linguistic contexts, making contextualization a defining feature that distinguishes large-unit teaching from conventional unit instruction. The General High School English Curriculum Standards emphasizes thematic guidance to contextualize curriculum contents[1]. For one thing, contextualization entails constructing authentic problem scenarios, as the ultimate goal of knowledge transfer is to tackle real-world challenges, and authentic scenarios can spark meaningful discussions. For another, teachers should integrate unit contents around driving big questions to organize learning activities, embedding learning within concrete problem contexts[11] and centering instruction on students' learning. All segments of large-unit teaching should incorporate authentic scenarios and tasks, enabling students to construct knowledge and develop competencies while solving real-life problems.

2.2.4. Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness refers to the multi-dimensional integration of objectives and contents in large-unit teaching. In terms of objectives, it demands integrated and progressive development of the four core competencies (linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability) within a single teaching process rather than isolated cultivation. In terms of contents, it involves the organic integration of six curriculum components: themes, texts, linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies[1]. A "unit", the core concept in instructional design, integrates scattered, unstructured

learning contents and activities into logically coherent, structured teaching units centered on specific themes, questions or objectives, highlighting holistic knowledge construction and systematic design of practical activities[12]. In terms of learning approaches, comprehensiveness unites contextualization and practice. Students complete integrated output tasks by comprehensively deploying multiple language skills, achieving seamless integration of learning and application, and translating capabilities into core competencies[13].

3. Practical Strategies for Large-Unit English Teaching Design Oriented by Core Competencies

Combined with the realities of English teaching, five interconnected strategies are proposed for large-unit design: restructuring holistic unit objectives, integrating unit teaching contents, designing progressive inquiry activities, constructing holistic unit assessment and optimizing unit assignments. These strategies are not isolated operational steps, but an organic system governed by competency objectives, supported by teaching activities and guaranteed by assessment feedback. They run through the full teaching chain of "objectives - contents - activities - assessment - assignments" to realize integrated coordination of all unit teaching elements.

3.1. Restructure Holistic Unit Objectives to Precisely Align with Four-Dimensional Core Competencies

Holistic unit objectives serve as the logical starting point of large-unit English teaching design and the critical transition hub translating core competencies from curriculum documents to classroom practice. Large-unit teaching requires teachers to take thematic meaning as the guide and convert the four-dimensional framework of English core competencies into hierarchical, observable and evaluable unit objective systems.

First and foremost, extracting unit big concepts is the primary step to anchor competency-oriented design. A big concept refers to core disciplinary ideas reflecting the essence of subjects, transferable conceptual understandings that form the backbone of a discipline with broad applicability[14]. Teachers need to conduct thorough text analysis of all passages in a unit to extract overarching thematic big concepts that transcend superficial topics and deliver insightful, transferable essential understandings. Educators ought to summarize and refine big disciplinary ideas and help students resolve real-life problems through them[15]. Such big concepts act as the central thread for objective design, ensuring all objectives revolve around thematic meaning exploration and avoiding disconnection between objectives, themes and competency cultivation.

On this basis, teachers should break down and standardize the writing of four-dimensional competency objectives. Objective statements adopt a four-element framework: subject of behavior + behavioral performance + contextual condition + expected outcome[16], with hierarchical targets set respectively for linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. Basic-level objectives focus on linguistic memorization such as vocabulary recognition, sentence pattern application and extraction of textual information. Intermediate-level objectives center on

comprehensive application including sorting textual logic and comparative analysis of cross-cultural phenomena. Advanced-level targets prioritize high-order competencies such as critical expression, innovative thematic output and independent inquiry-based learning. The three tiers form a cognitive gradient from low to high, allowing students of varying proficiency levels to identify appropriate developmental goals.

Moreover, class-hour objectives are formulated through backward alignment. Backward design guides teachers to reflect on expected learning outcomes centered on core competencies and embodies student-centered educational philosophy[17]. Following backward design logic, teachers first define overall unit objectives before deducing phased targets for each lesson, ensuring every class fosters all four core competencies incrementally. Cumulative progress across lessons ultimately fulfills the unit's holistic competency goals, forming a closed-loop objective system featuring top-down decomposition (whole - parts - details) and bottom-up progression (details - parts - whole).

3.2. Integrate Unit Teaching Contents to Construct Thematized Knowledge Systems

Content integration constitutes the core link translating large-unit teaching theories into classroom practice. Its core principle is to establish intrinsic logical connections between teaching resources centered on unit themes and grounded in text analysis, building knowledge systems that support thematic meaning inquiry. Teachers should advance this systematic work from three dimensions: horizontal integration, vertical progression and integration of internal and external resources.

First, horizontal integration. Centered on the unit's big concept, teachers shall systematically sort out and define the functional positioning of all textbook sections (including theme pages, core reading passages, language practice modules, video materials, etc.), thoroughly grasp the relationship between the whole and its components, and explore the connections among all texts within the unit [18]. On this basis, scattered teaching resources are reorganized into five functionally coordinated task clusters following the cognitive logic of "thematic input - information integration - comparative critical thinking - innovative output", including the text information sorting cluster focusing on extracting and integrating surface information from multiple texts, the linguistic knowledge internalization cluster focusing on the application of core vocabulary and grammatical structures in thematic contexts, the cross-cultural comparative inquiry cluster focusing on comparison and reflection upon Chinese and foreign cultural phenomena, the oral communication cluster focusing on oral interaction under thematic scenarios, and the written creative output cluster focusing on integrated written expression for exploring thematic meanings. These five task clusters complement and advance one another functionally, enabling the integrated co-development of linguistic knowledge, language skills and cultural content within a unified system.

Second, vertical progression. The organization of unit teaching contents shall comply with the cognitive law from simplicity to complexity, concreteness to abstractness, and input to output[19]. Teachers may divide the entire unit content into three progressive modules. The basic construction phase centers on memorizing core vocabulary and sorting information from single texts, helping students set

an "anchor point" for thematic cognition. The skill integration phase focuses on comparative reading of multiple texts, information synthesis and listening-speaking training, guiding students to deepen their thematic understanding through comparison and integration. The innovative development phase highlights independent expansion of learning resources and thematic project creation, motivating students to externalize their core competencies through transfer and innovation. The three modules form an upward cognitive path from lower-order to higher-order thinking, and the content difficulty and class-hour proportion of each phase shall be dynamically adjusted according to students' classroom learning data to accommodate the learning needs of students at different proficiency levels.

Third, integration of internal and external resources. Textbook passages serve as core but not exclusive teaching materials[20]. Teachers may selectively incorporate supplementary resources aligned with unit themes, such as short videos, English essays and bilingual documentaries, to compensate for the lack of timeliness and real-life relevance in textbooks. Supplementary resources must satisfy two criteria: they should be highly relevant to unit themes to deepen or expand underdeveloped dimensions of thematic meaning in textbooks; their linguistic difficulty should fall within students' zone of proximal development[21] to prevent loss of inquiry motivation caused by excessive language barriers. Integrating in-class textbooks and out-of-class resources enriches materials for thematic exploration and builds a bridge for students to practice language from classroom to real life.

3.3. Design Progressive Inquiry Activities to Promote In-Depth Learning and Competency Development

Learning activities serve as effective carriers for competency cultivation[22]. Large-unit teaching prioritizes task-driven learning over knowledge lecturing and inquiry processes over passive information reception, enabling students to comprehensively apply language, develop thinking and shape values while completing thematic tasks. The General High School English Curriculum Standards defines the cultivation path for core competencies: "Senior high school English curriculum advocates the English Learning Activity Perspective oriented toward the development of subject core competencies".

In line with the English Learning Activity Perspective, the design of integrated activities follows a three-level progressive sequence: "perception and comprehension - application and practice - transfer and innovation"[1]. Perception-and-comprehension activities focus on consolidating foundational knowledge. Through basic tasks such as skimming texts, sorting out detailed information and accumulating vocabulary, students gain an awareness of the theme, sort out textual logic, and accomplish the initial input and internalization of knowledge. Application-and-practice activities center on capacity improvement. Practical tasks including dialogue creation and short essay writing are designed within the thematic context of the unit, guiding students to apply acquired linguistic knowledge to solve contextual problems and boost their comprehensive language proficiency. Transfer-and-innovation activities target the advancement of core competencies. High-order tasks such as critical inquiry, thematic debates and project creation encourage students to conduct in-depth reflection combining

real-life experience and current social issues, cultivating their critical thinking and innovative capacities. Running through the entire unit teaching process, these three types of activities form a complete learning chain from knowledge input to internalization and output, facilitating the all-round cultivation of the four-dimensional core competencies[23].

Three principles shall be followed in designing progressive activities. First, the principle of authentic context. Competencies refer to human capabilities to interact with the environment[24]. Activities should create problem scenarios close to the real world, allowing students to apply what they have learned by solving authentic problems instead of memorizing mechanically through decontextualized drills. Second, the principle of cognitive challenge. Activity design shall stimulate students' higher-order thinking, requiring them to deploy cognitive skills including analysis, comparison, inference, evaluation and creation, rather than merely extract literal information. Third, the principle of holistic language use. Learning through practice contributes more to fostering students' core competencies[25]. Activities shall provide opportunities for integrated language use, enabling the organic integration of listening, speaking, reading, viewing and writing skills in task completion.

3.4. Construct Holistic Unit Assessment to Implement Multi-Dimensional Competency-Oriented Evaluation

Assessment reform acts as an institutional guarantee for the implementation of large-unit teaching. Competency-oriented assessment prioritizes comprehensive performance of core competencies over isolated memorization of knowledge points, adopts contextual performance tasks instead of decontextualized objective test items, and integrates diverse assessment methods throughout the whole learning process.

Firstly, differentiated assessment rubrics adapt to individual student differences. Teachers establish three evaluation benchmarks aligned with unit competency objectives: basic mastery, comprehensive advancement and innovative challenge. The basic tier adopts pass-fail standards to assess vocabulary memorization and surface text comprehension; the intermediate tier uses graded standards to evaluate integrated communication and cross-cultural analysis; the advanced tier relies on presentation standards focusing on innovative thinking and independent inquiry. Differentiated teaching supports personalized growth, satisfies diverse learning needs and comprehensively measures the achievement of teaching objectives[26]. Students can also timely adjust learning strategies to absorb knowledge more efficiently, realizing mutual coordination and promotion between teaching and learning and maintaining optimal learning states[27].

Secondly, integrated application of diverse assessment approaches. Teachers combine quantitative and qualitative evaluation, integrate teacher assessment, student self-assessment and peer assessment, and conduct process evaluation by continuously documenting students' learning trajectories[28]. Summative assessment is implemented upon unit completion through thematic presentations and integrated writing, while value-added assessment compares student performance before and after the unit. The integration of multiple assessment dimensions transforms evaluation from "judging learning outcomes" to "promoting learning development" and collects comprehensive evidence of students' growth in all four core competencies.

Thirdly, digital tools enable precise assessment. The intervention of artificial intelligence realizes holographic collection of assessment evidence[29]. Teachers can leverage digital platforms including online oral English evaluation systems, intelligent writing correction tools and classroom learning logs to capture students' linguistic weaknesses and thinking gaps in real time. Learning status diagnoses based on assessment data allow dynamic adjustment of unit contents, activity difficulty and class-hour allocation, forming a closed-loop optimization of "assessment - teaching - learning". Assessment no longer serves as a post-hoc judgment after teaching but functions as a navigation system guiding instruction throughout the whole process.

3.5. Optimize Unit Assignment Design to Connect Competency Cultivation Inside and Outside Class

After-class assignments extend classroom teaching and serve as vital carriers for competency cultivation. Moving beyond traditional mechanical drills and repetitive copying, competency-oriented large-unit assignments are designed around holistic unit themes and competency objectives to build a hierarchical, contextualized, life-oriented and competency-focused assignment system that breaks down barriers between in-class and out-of-class education.

First, the gradient design of differentiated assignments. Assignment design should respect students' individual differences and provide differentiated options for learning. Basic consolidation assignments, mainly in the form of vocabulary and sentence dictation as well as text reading and retelling, aim to consolidate students' foundational linguistic knowledge. Comprehensive expansion assignments, consisting of English essay reading, cross-cultural material viewing and online group discussions, focus on the training of students' comprehensive language application competence. Creative practical assignments represented by thematic English posters, short video scripts and mini English research reports are designed to cultivate students' higher-order thinking and cultural expression abilities. When assignments match students' current learning needs, students are willing to devote more effort to learning tasks [30], which not only shows respect for individual differences, but also effectively stimulates students' internal learning motivation.

Second, design of thematized assignment clusters. All after-class assignments are developed around unit big concepts to form logically connected assignment chains rather than disconnected isolated drills. Pre-class preview assignments lay groundwork for unit themes and activate prior knowledge and life experience; in-class supporting assignments consolidate real-time learning outcomes and deepen thinking from classroom activities; long-cycle after-class project assignments extend thematic inquiry, encouraging students to transfer classroom knowledge to authentic out-of-class contexts. Based on real contexts constructed by unit themes, teachers can design open-ended exploratory and investigative life tasks that create opportunities for students to identify, analyze and solve problems, thereby effectively improving their knowledge transfer and application abilities [31].

4. Conclusion

Based on General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2025) and oriented toward

the implementation of English subject core competencies, this study systematically explores the theoretical connotation and practical pathways of English large-unit teaching design. It clarifies that the essence of large-unit teaching lies in the reconstruction of learning units guided by thematic meaning inquiry, which replaces the disciplinary knowledge logic with students' learning logic. Its four core features, namely holism, progression, contextualization and comprehensiveness, provide appropriate curriculum conditions for the integrated development of students' core competencies.

At the practical level, this paper constructs an integrated operational framework covering objectives, contents, activities, assessment and assignments. Specifically, unit big concepts govern the targeted formulation of four-dimensional competency objectives, thematic task clusters restructure the internal logic of teaching contents, the English Learning Activity Perspective guides the hierarchical design of progressive inquiry activities, diversified and differentiated assessment realizes the dynamic closed loop of assessment, teaching and learning, and competency-oriented unit assignment chains break the educational barriers between in-class and out-of-class learning. This framework enjoys strong classroom adaptability and practical operability.

This study provides systematic theoretical references and a replicable practical paradigm for frontline English teachers to conduct competency-oriented large-unit teaching design. Future research can further explore the variant application of large-unit teaching across different learning stages and thematic units, and adopt empirical studies to examine its long-term effects on the development of core competencies, so as to promote the continuous implementation of the in-depth educational value of "fostering people through language" in English education.

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