

Research on the Design and Teaching Practice of the New Junior High School English Textbook (PEP Edition) in Implementing the Activity-based Approach to English Learning

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Abstract: Based on the Activity-based Approach to English Learning proposed in the *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)*, this paper takes Unit 6 “Rain or Shine” from the PEP (2024 Edition) junior high school English textbook for Grade 7 as a specific case to explore the design characteristics and teaching practice paths of the new textbook in implementing the philosophy of “integrating learning and thinking, emphasizing application and innovation”. The study finds that the new textbook adopts a big unit design approach, guided by the theme of “the impact of weather on human life”, and integrates various language skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing—through a progressive activity chain that moves students from learning and understanding to application and practice, and then to transfer and innovation. In teaching practice, the deep learning path of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating” should be followed: activating cognition through situational introduction, guiding in-depth inquiry with question chains, driving language practice with authentic tasks, promoting innovative expression through open-ended activities, and empowering deep learning with continuous assessment throughout the process. The research demonstrates that textbook design and teaching practice based on the Activity-based Approach to English Learning can effectively cultivate students’ language competence and thinking quality, providing a practical reference for the reform of junior high school English teaching.

Keywords: Activity-based Approach to English Learning; Junior High School English; Teaching Practice; Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating.

1. Introduction

The *Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)* establishes the Activity-based Approach to English Learning as the core guiding philosophy for classroom instruction, explicitly proposing the deep learning orientation of “integrating learning and thinking, emphasizing application and innovation” [1]. This approach promotes the transformation of junior high school English teaching from traditional knowledge-memorization instruction to competence-oriented education. The PEP (2024 Edition) junior high school English textbook deeply aligns with the requirements of the new curriculum standards, comprehensively optimizing the unit compilation system. It abandons the fragmented, knowledge-isolated arrangement of the old edition and adopts a big unit compilation paradigm featuring theme guidance, discourse support, skill integration, and progressive activities, providing a systematic and structured teaching carrier for the regular implementation of the Activity-based Approach to English Learning.

Among them, Unit 6 “Rain or Shine” for Grade 7, Volume 2, centers on “Weather and Life”, focusing on “the impact of weather on human activities, emotions, and lifestyles”. The theme is close to students’ daily lives, the contexts are authentic and vivid, and the activity levels are clearly structured, making it a typical unit for practicing the Activity-based Approach to English Learning. Conducting teaching research based on this unit can intuitively present the design advantages and educational logic of the new PEP textbook. Therefore, this paper takes this unit as an example to analyze

the design characteristics of the new textbook that align with the Activity-based Approach to English Learning, construct a complete classroom teaching paradigm following the deep learning path of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating”.

2. The Core Connotation and Educational Value of the Activity-based Approach to English Learning

The Activity-based Approach to English Learning is the core lever for implementing the key competencies of English as a subject in the new curriculum standards and the fundamental concept guiding textbook compilation, teaching design, and classroom implementation. Its core connotation centers on exploring unit theme meaning, using progressive classroom activities as carriers to guide students in integrating language knowledge, cultural knowledge, and learning strategies within authentic and coherent thematic contexts (Cheng, 2022) [2]. Through three levels of activities—learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation—it achieves the coordinated development of language competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability (Cheng, 2022) [2].

The philosophy of “integrating learning and thinking, emphasizing application and innovation” advocated by the new curriculum standards is highly aligned with the Activity-based Approach to English Learning, forming a complete deep learning cycle of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating” (Wang, Qian & Wu, 2021) [3]. Among these, “Learning” constitutes basic input, focusing on theme perception and language accumulation; “Thinking”

represents cognitive deepening, achieving text deconstruction and cognitive construction through inquiry-based questioning; “Applying” signifies practical implementation, achieving the application of knowledge through authentic situational tasks; and “Creating” represents the elevation of competence, achieving knowledge transfer and innovative expression through open-ended tasks. This teaching paradigm breaks through the limitations of traditional English classrooms characterized by mechanical memorization and drill-based exercises, highlights students’ central role, emphasizes the practicality, contextuality, and innovativeness of language learning, and aligns with the educational goals of junior high school English in the new era (Mei & Wang, 2022) [4].

3. Design Features of the New PEP Textbook Aligned with the Activity-based Approach to English Learning

The PEP junior high school English textbook adheres to the big unit integrated design philosophy. Unit 6 “Rain or Shine” fully implements the requirements of the Activity-based Approach to English Learning in its compilation, with theme leadership, discourse support, and activity chains integrating multiple skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing, presenting distinctive characteristics of holism, coherence, practicality, and innovativeness.

(1) Big Unit Theme Leadership Highlighting Holistic Teaching

This unit closely centers on the core topic of “weather”, grounded in the thematic contexts of “human and nature” and “human and life”, establishing the overall unit theme meaning of “identifying weather types, describing weather characteristics, and exploring the impact of weather on life and emotions” (Mei & Wang, 2022) [4]. All texts, dialogues, exercises, and extension activities throughout the unit revolve around this theme, forming a coherent and complete thematic inquiry chain—from weather context cognition in the unit introduction, to weather description in the listening and speaking section, to the exploration of weather and life in the reading section, and finally to thematic output in the writing section. The textbook no longer presents vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammatical knowledge in isolation but integrates language knowledge into a unified thematic context, allowing students to acquire language and construct cognition through holistic thematic inquiry, fully aligning with the core requirement of theme leadership in the Activity-based Approach (Wang, Qian & Wu, 2021) [3].

(2) Integrated Multi-Skills Development Highlighting Coherence in Compilation

This unit thoroughly breaks the model of isolated single-skill training, achieving organic integration and progressive gradation of multiple skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing. Section A, the foundational section, focuses on listening and speaking, centering on the input and simple application of weather vocabulary and core sentence patterns, helping students establish a basic language framework. Section B, the core section, focuses on reading, inquiry, and writing, guiding students to deeply explore the impact of weather on life, activities, and emotions through complete texts, achieving the internalization of language knowledge and the deepening of thinking. The comprehensive section of the unit integrates various skills, designing a sequenced task chain that moves students from single-skill language input to comprehensive language output.

The entire set of activities progresses from simple to complex and advances step by step, fully aligning with students’ cognitive development pattern of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating”.

(3) Complete Progressive Activity Chain Highlighting the Concept of Application and Innovation

This unit in the new PEP textbook constructs a clear activity chain of “learning and understanding—application and practice—transfer and innovation”, fully implementing the philosophy of “integrating learning and thinking, emphasizing application and innovation”. The foundational section sets comprehension activities such as picture observation, listening matching, and dialogue repetition to consolidate students’ cognitive foundation. The core section sets thinking activities such as text organization, inquiry-based questioning, and opinion discussion to achieve the integration of learning and thinking. The comprehensive section sets practical activities such as situational dialogues, thematic descriptions, and information summarization to realize the application of knowledge. The extension section sets open-ended tasks such as life inquiry, creative expression, and contextual adaptation to encourage students to produce personalized innovative output based on real life, effectively solving the problem of disconnection between learning and application (Wang, Qian & Wu, 2021) [3].

4. Classroom Teaching Practice Paths under the Activity-based Approach to English Learning

Leveraging the advantages of the big unit design of this textbook, classroom teaching strictly follows the deep learning path of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating”, complemented by comprehensive and diversified assessment throughout the process, constructing a classroom teaching paradigm with clear levels, authentic contexts, and implemented competencies.

(1) “Learning” as the Foundation: Situational Introduction to Activate Cognitive Experience

“Learning” is the starting point of deep learning, with the core objective of activating students’ life experiences and completing theme perception and basic language accumulation. Given the weather theme of this unit, teachers rely on the textbook unit introduction pictures and situational materials, combined with real-time weather short videos and daily weather scene images, to create life-oriented contexts. Students are guided to observe different weather appearances and freely discuss sunny, rainy, windy, and snowy scenes encountered in daily life, naturally introducing core vocabulary such as sunny, rainy, windy, cloudy and basic sentence patterns for describing weather.

Through contextual experiences, students perceive thematic content by connecting with their own life experiences, initially accumulate basic unit language, and bridge the gap between life experience and text learning. This phase promotes learning through context and stimulates thinking through learning, effectively sparking students’ interest in inquiry and laying a solid cognitive and linguistic foundation for subsequent text exploration, critical thinking, and language practice.

(2) “Thinking” as the Core: Question Chains Driving In-depth Text Inquiry

“Thinking” is the core phase for implementing the integration of learning and thinking and cultivating higher-

order thinking. After students have initially mastered weather vocabulary and basic sentence patterns, teachers rely on the core reading texts of this unit to design graded, progressive question chains, guiding students to move beyond surface-level information retrieval and engage in in-depth text inquiry and critical thinking.

Basic-level questions focus on text information organization: What different weather conditions are mentioned in the passage? What activities do people do on different days? These help students sort out the basic structure of the text and extract key information. Intermediate-level questions focus on analysis and generalization: How does different weather affect people's daily activities? These guide students to integrate textual content and identify the relationship between weather and life. Higher-order thinking questions focus on value inquiry: How does weather influence your mood and study? What should we do to adapt to different weather? Through group cooperative discussion and teacher-student interactive inquiry, students are prompted to think deeply and exchange viewpoints, cultivating logical thinking and critical thinking skills through the integration of learning and thinking, and deepening their understanding of the unit theme meaning.

(3) “Applying” as the Key: Authentic Tasks Driving Language Practice

“Applying” represents the core value of language learning and the key to solving the problem of disconnection between learning and application. Building upon text inquiry and thinking internalization, teachers rely on the comprehensive section of the textbook to create authentic communicative tasks close to students' lives, driving students to flexibly apply the language knowledge they have learned in immersive language practice.

A life-oriented practical task is designed around the unit theme: a “Weather Report and Life Sharing” group activity. Students work in pairs to describe weather characteristics using core sentence patterns from the unit based on the current or recent weather conditions, introduce suitable activities and life precautions under different weather conditions, and share their own life situations under various weather conditions. This task goes beyond mechanical sentence pattern imitation, grounding itself in real-life contexts, allowing students to flexibly use language knowledge in interactive communication, experience the practical value of language, and achieve the goal of “learning through application and applying through learning”.

(4) “Creating” as the Elevation: Open-ended Tasks Promoting Innovative Expression

“Creating” are the higher-order goal of deep learning and the core path for competence elevation. Building upon foundational learning, deep thinking, and practical application, teachers go beyond the inherent textual contexts of the textbook to design open-ended, project-based innovative tasks, promoting students' knowledge transfer and personalized innovative expression.

Two innovative tasks are designed for this unit theme. The first is a creative writing task, “My Favorite Weather”, guiding students to describe their preferred weather based on personal preferences, explain their reasons, and introduce corresponding life arrangements, achieving personalized written innovative output. The second is a group inquiry task, “Weather and Life”, in which groups collaboratively collect information on the impact of different seasons and weather conditions on life, sports, and learning, produce simple

English weather life tips, and complete classroom presentations and sharing. Such open-ended tasks have no fixed standard answers, fully respecting students' personalized thinking and creative expression, fully implementing the new curriculum standard concept of “emphasizing application and innovation”, and enhancing students' comprehensive language application and innovative thinking abilities.

(5) “Assessing” as the Supplement: Continuous Assessment Empowering Deep Learning

Teaching assessment runs through the entire teaching process of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating” and serves as important support for ensuring the implementation of the Activity-based Approach. Teachers rely on the assessment section of the new PEP textbook to construct a multi-dimensional, comprehensive formative assessment system, integrating teacher assessment, student self-assessment, and peer assessment. Comprehensive assessment is conducted focusing on dimensions such as student contextual participation, depth of inquiry-based questioning, accuracy of oral communication, and quality of innovative task completion. Through real-time feedback, students are helped to identify knowledge gaps and optimize language expression, while also assisting teachers in dynamically adjusting teaching activities, forming a complete teaching loop and continuously empowering students' deep learning and competence enhancement.

(6) Teaching Reflections and Optimization Strategies

In actual teaching practice, the following issues deserve attention and continuous improvement.

First, some students face difficulties in language organization during open-ended tasks. In the “Weather and Life” group inquiry task, students with weaker foundations encountered considerable challenges in information collection, English expression, and logical organization. To address this, teachers need to provide structured learning scaffolds, such as designing information recording tables to help students organize their ideas, providing sentence pattern reference banks to lower the threshold of expression, and adopting tiered task design with differentiated output requirements for students at different levels, ensuring that every student can grow within their zone of proximal development.

Second, some students experience expression anxiety during oral communication tasks. In the “Weather Report and Life Sharing” session, some students were reluctant to speak due to concerns about inaccurate pronunciation and grammatical errors. Teachers should increase demonstration and practice sessions before the activity, helping students build confidence through teacher demonstration, excellent peer modeling, and group rehearsal, creating a safe and supportive language practice environment.

Third, the time allocation across the “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating” phases requires dynamic adjustment. In practice, the situational introduction and text inquiry phases tend to exceed the allotted time, squeezing the subsequent practice and innovation phases. Teachers should make flexible choices based on students' actual conditions, assigning some basic activities as preview tasks while ensuring the quality of core inquiry, thereby reserving sufficient time for higher-order classroom activities.

5. Conclusion

The PEP (2024 Edition) junior high school English

textbook, guided by the Activity-based Approach to English Learning as its core framework, has achieved the organic integration of language skills and progressive gradation of classroom activities through big unit thematic design. The thematic unit represented by Unit 6 “Rain or Shine”, with its authentic life contexts and complete activity chains, provides a high-quality carrier for the implementation of competence-oriented classrooms. Teaching practice demonstrates that adhering to the deep learning path of “Learning–Thinking–Applying–Creating”—activating cognition through situational introduction, driving inquiry through question chains, promoting practice through authentic tasks, fostering innovation through open-ended activities, and empowering learning through continuous assessment—can effectively cultivate students’ comprehensive language application competence and higher-order thinking quality. Teachers should continuously attend to students’ individual differences and learning difficulties in practice, optimizing the teaching process through scaffold building, tiered design, and time management, thereby promoting the transformation of junior high school English classrooms from knowledge-based instruction to competence-oriented education.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the teachers and students who participated in the teaching practice for their cooperation and valuable feedback.

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