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Research on the Practical Path of English Holistic Unit Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools under the Guidance of Core Competencies

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Abstract. Under the new curriculum standards, English teaching in primary and secondary schools is gradually shifting from knowledge transmission to the cultivation of students' core competencies. Classroom teaching pays more attention to the coordinated development of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. However, there are still some problems in English teaching, such as fragmented teaching objectives, insufficient integration of teaching content, unclear levels of classroom activities, and a single evaluation method, which weaken the effective realization of the educational value of the English subject. This paper focuses on holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools under the guidance of core competencies, and discusses its design concept, implementation path, and teaching effectiveness. Based on literature, this paper analyzes the implementation process of holistic unit teaching in English classrooms. It is found that holistic unit teaching can optimize the design of teaching objectives, enhance the systematicity of teaching content, improve the coherence and task orientation of classroom activities, and promote the development of students' core competencies. Based on these findings, this paper offers practical strategies for holistic unit teaching in primary and secondary English, with a view to providing frontline teachers with a useful reference for improving classroom instruction.

Keywords: core competencies, primary and secondary school English, holistic unit teaching, classroom teaching, teaching practice

1. Introduction

As basic education curriculum reform moves forward, primary and secondary English teaching no longer only requires students to memorize vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns. Instead, it focuses more on helping them understand and use language, express opinions, and solve problems in real situations [1]. The new curriculum standards emphasize that English teaching should combine practical use and humanistic value [2], and help students improve their language skills, cultural understanding, thinking ability and learning competence in an all-round way [3].

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From the perspective of current classroom practice, some teachers still promote teaching in accordance with the order of textbook class periods, and their overall grasp of unit themes, discourse meaning, and core competency objectives is still insufficient [4]. Although students can complete the learning of individual knowledge points, there is still room for improvement in their understanding of unit topics, language transfer and application, and comprehensive expression ability. At the same time, some classroom activities are rich in form, but the connection between activities is insufficient. Evaluation methods also pay more attention to results and less attention to the learning process and ability development.

In this context, holistic unit teaching has become an important way to optimize English classrooms. It emphasizes the overall design of teaching objectives, content, activities, tasks, and evaluation under the guidance of unit themes. Under the guidance of core competencies, this paper analyzes integrated unit teaching in primary and secondary English classes, and discusses its existing problems and practical ways of application, hoping to offer practical suggestions for better English teaching.

2. The theoretical basis of holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools under the guidance of core competencies

2.1. The intrinsic link between core competencies and English teaching in primary and secondary schools

The core competencies of the English subject mainly include four aspects: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. Language ability is the basis for students to understand and express meaning, and is embodied in comprehensive language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing [5]. Cultural awareness requires students to learn about Chinese and foreign cultures, respect cultural diversity in language study, and build the awareness of cross-cultural communication [6]. Thinking quality focuses on students' logical and innovative thinking in the process of analysis, comparison, judgment, and expression. Learning ability emphasizes that students can use effective strategies to carry out autonomous learning, cooperative learning, and continuous learning.

The primary and secondary school stage is an important period for the formation of students' language foundation, learning habits, and ways of thinking [7]. English classrooms should not only help students master basic knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns, but also guide students to understand language meaning, express personal views, and solve practical problems in real contexts. If teaching stays focused on mechanical memorization and repetitive drills over time, it cannot help students develop comprehensive language application ability. English teaching under the guidance of core competencies should integrate language learning into thematic contexts and practical tasks to promote the coordinated development of language, culture, thinking, and learning ability [8].

2.2. The concept and characteristics of holistic unit teaching

Holistic unit teaching is a teaching approach where teachers regard textbook units as the core, and design teaching content, activities, lesson schedules and assessment based on the unit's theme and teaching goals [9]. It is different from isolated single-period teaching, and emphasizes the connection between different discourses, knowledge points, and learning tasks from the unit level, so that each class period serves the overall goal of the unit.

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Holistic unit teaching has integrity, relevance, progression, and practicality. Integrity is reflected in the need for teachers to coordinate goals, content, activities, and evaluation; relevance emphasizes that different class periods and discourses should be connected around a common theme; progression requires teaching activities to gradually move from basic understanding to language use and transfer expression; practicality emphasizes guiding students to learn by doing and learning via real or simulated tasks, so as to improve their overall language skills and core competencies.

3. The main problems existing in current English classroom teaching in primary and secondary schools

3.1. Teaching objectives are relatively scattered, and the direction of core competencies is not clear enough

In some primary and secondary school English classes, teachers usually pay attention to basic content such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence patterns, and text understanding when setting teaching objectives, which helps students accumulate language knowledge. However, when judged by core competency standards, some classroom goals overlook cultural understanding, thinking development, and learning strategies, which easily makes teaching remain at the level of knowledge mastery and text understanding. At the same time, although some class-period objectives are relatively clear, they are not closely related to the unit theme, comprehensive tasks, and core competency objectives. As a result, students may complete the learning of individual knowledge points, but find it difficult to form an overall understanding of the unit theme. Therefore, the design of teaching objectives needs to further enhance the orientation toward core competencies on the basis of retaining knowledge objectives.

3.2. Fragmentation of teaching content and lack of awareness of unit integration

Textbook units usually set different sections around a certain theme, and these sections should jointly serve the construction of the thematic meaning of the unit. However, in actual teaching, some teachers often separate the sections. They simply treat listening and speaking lessons as sentence drills, reading lessons as word and sentence explanation, grammar lessons as rule summary, and writing lessons as template training, which makes it difficult for students to see the internal relationship among various learning contents.

Content fragmentation also stems from teachers' rigid use of teaching materials. Some teachers rely too much on the original order of textbooks and lack the reintegration of discourse content, thematic meaning, and students' actual needs. For example, in the same unit, different discourses may present the same theme from different perspectives. If the teacher only explains them one by one, it is difficult for students to form a complete understanding of the theme. On the contrary, if teachers can integrate the text content around the theme and guide students to compare the information, views, and expressions of different discourses, students can understand language meaning at a higher level.

To explore the practical application of integrated unit teaching in primary and secondary English classrooms under the guidance of core competencies, this paper uses teacher questionnaires, student questionnaires, classroom observations, and teacher interviews to conduct an investigation. A total of 30 teacher questionnaires were collected, including 14 from primary school English teachers and 16 from junior high school English teachers. In addition, 120 student questionnaires were collected,

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and the classroom teaching process and implementation difficulties were analyzed in combination with 12 classroom observations and 8 teacher interviews.

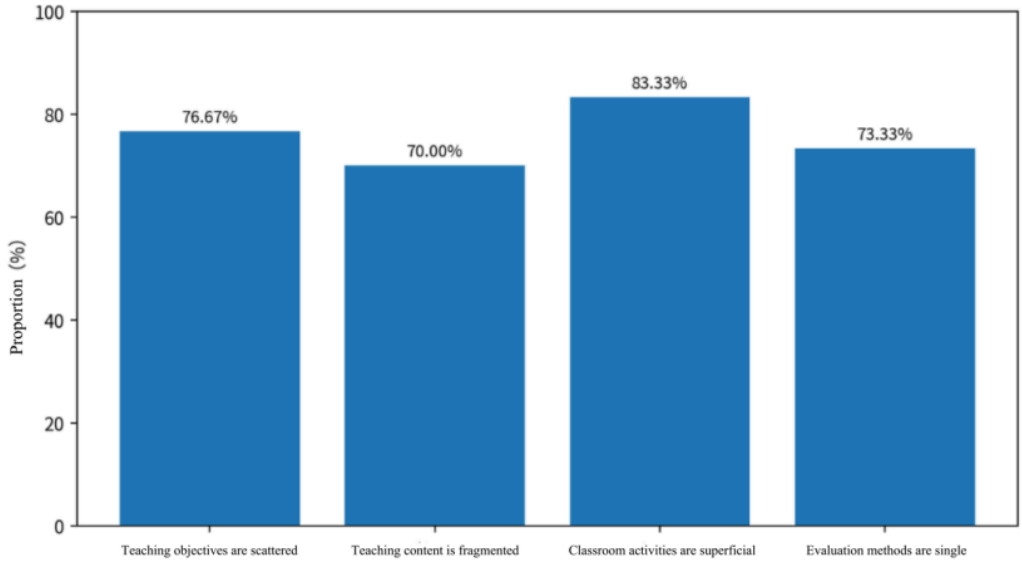


Figure 1. Proportions of current problems in English classroom teaching in primary and secondary schools

As shown in the survey results in Figure 1, holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools has developed a certain practical foundation, but there are still some problems, such as disconnected teaching goals, weak content links, ungraded activities and a single evaluation method. Among the 30 interviewed teachers, 83.33% thought that classroom activities were superficial, 76.67% thought that teaching objectives were scattered, 73.33% thought that evaluation methods were single, and 70.00% thought that teaching content was fragmented. This shows that although some classroom activities are rich in form, the depth and progression of tasks are insufficient. Students mostly remain at the level of language imitation and information retelling, and training in opinion expression, problem analysis, and transfer application still needs to be strengthened.

3.3. Superficial classroom activity design and insufficient depth of student participation

At present, many English classrooms have begun to attach importance to activity design, but some activities still tend to be superficial. Teachers widely use activities like reading aloud, echo reading, blank-filling, role-play and group work. Even with diverse forms, activities with vague goals, simple tasks and low thinking demands only create a lively classroom atmosphere, and cannot drive students to learn deeply. For example, some group discussions only require students to repeat text information, without asking them to analyze reasons, compare views, or express personal opinions; some role-playing is only a mechanical replacement of sentence patterns, lacking real communicative situations and problem-solving tasks.

The lack of depth in student participation is also related to the lack of a progressive relationship between activities. Effective unit teaching activities should start from perception and understanding, and gradually move toward application practice and transfer innovation. However, in some classrooms, there is a lack of logical progression between activities. Teachers often arrange multiple

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isolated activities in order to complete the teaching process. Although students participate in classroom interaction, they do not experience a complete thinking process. These activities cannot encourage students to explore actively, nor help them improve their language and thinking skills.

Table 1. Observation statistics of classroom activity levels

Activity Level	Number of Activities	Proportion	Classroom Performance
Learning and understanding activities	54	55.10%	Vocabulary explanation, text reading, information extraction, sentence pattern practice, etc.
Application and practice activities	31	31.63%	Situational Q&A, role communication, information retelling, group discussion, etc.
Transfer and innovation activities	13	13.27%	Project presentation, thematic expression, survey report, problem-solving tasks, etc.
Total	98	100.00%	—

As can be seen from Table 1, among the observed English classroom activities, learning and understanding activities account for the highest proportion, at 55.10%; the proportion of application and practice activities is 31.63%; and the proportion of transfer and innovation activities is only 13.27%. This shows that classroom activities still mainly focus on language input and basic knowledge drills, leaving students with few chances to use language fully, share opinions and deal with real-world problems. This result echoes the analysis of the problem of "superficial classroom activity design and insufficient depth of student participation" in Chapter 3.

3.4. Single teaching evaluation method and insufficient process evaluation

Evaluation is an important part of teaching, but in primary and secondary school English teaching, the problem of a single evaluation method is still prominent. Most teachers still assess learning outcomes mainly through dictation, homework and unit exams. They seldom take into account students' in-class performance, teamwork, task progress, language expression and learning strategies. This kind of evaluation method easily leads students to understand English learning as exam-oriented training, while ignoring the true meaning of language learning and the improvement of comprehensive ability.

Insufficient process evaluation will also affect teachers' timely adjustment of teaching effects. Holistic unit teaching emphasizes the consistency of teaching objectives, learning activities, and evaluation tasks. If assessment is only carried out after the end of a unit, it is difficult for teachers to promptly find out what troubles students have in theme learning, language use and task completion, and thus fail to offer targeted help right away. Therefore, English teaching under the guidance of core competencies needs to establish a more diversified, continuous, and developmental evaluation mechanism, so that evaluation can truly serve students' learning process and teachers' teaching improvement.

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4. Implementation path of holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools under the guidance of core competencies

4.1. Reconstructing unit teaching objectives around core competencies

To implement integrated unit teaching, teachers need to revise unit goals, while still retaining goals based on knowledge points. Vocabulary, grammar, sentence patterns, and discourse understanding are still important supports for English learning. The key is to deal properly with the relationship between knowledge objectives and core competency objectives, so that knowledge learning can serve language use, theme understanding, and thinking development. When designing objectives, teachers should avoid only listing items such as "mastering words" and "understanding texts," and should further clarify in what situations students can use this language knowledge to complete expression, communication, or inquiry tasks [10].

Specifically, unit objectives can be divided into basic objectives and developmental objectives. Basic objectives emphasize that students can understand core vocabulary, master key sentence patterns, and extract discourse information; developmental objectives emphasize that students can express their views, explain reasons, participate in cooperation, and complete language output around the theme. Goals for individual lessons must align with overall unit goals. They should follow a gradual path from knowledge learning to language application and finally to integrated expression, making core literacy goals clearer, easier to observe and assess.

Table 2. Comparison of students' core competency performance before and after the implementation of holistic unit teaching

Core Competency Dimension	Average Score before Implementation	Average Score after Implementation	Improvement
Language ability	3.12	4.08	0.96
Cultural awareness	2.86	3.78	0.92
Thinking quality	2.73	3.69	0.96
Learning ability	2.91	3.85	0.94

Note: The full score is 5 points.

It can be seen from Table 2 that after the implementation of holistic unit teaching, the average scores of students in the four dimensions of language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability all improved. Among them, scores for language ability rose from 3.12 to 4.08, while those for thinking quality went up from 2.73 to 3.69, indicating that integrated unit teaching, with well-combined themes, task-based activities and progressive lesson design, helps students move away from mere knowledge memorization toward practical language use and thinking cultivation.

4.2. Integrating unit teaching content based on thematic meaning

Holistic unit teaching should take thematic meaning as the core and conduct an overall interpretation and reasonable integration of textbook content [11]. Before class, teachers should sort out the unit theme, text types, language points, cultural elements and teaching goals. They need to plan listening, speaking, reading, grammar and writing lessons based on students' real learning levels, instead of

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going through the textbook page by page. Different sections bear different functions in unit teaching. For example, listening materials can create life situations, reading texts can present thematic information and viewpoints, grammar content can serve expression needs, and writing tasks can be used as comprehensive output. Teachers should connect these contents through theme chains, question chains, and task chains to help students form an overall understanding of the unit theme. Take the unit "Healthy Living" as an example. Teachers may start with pictures and dialogues to arouse students' prior experience. Next, reading materials help them learn about healthy lifestyles, followed by group surveys. In the end, students finish writing health advice. In this way, they learn and apply language in a connected learning context.

4.3. Optimizing classroom activity design from the perspective of learning activities

The design of classroom activities should reflect the progressive process of learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation, so as to avoid superficiality and fragmentation. Learning and understanding activities mainly help students perceive language, obtain information, and understand texts, such as predicting topics, extracting key information, and sorting out article structures. Application and practice activities focus on guiding students to use language in specific situations, such as role communication, information retelling, and group discussion. Transfer and innovation activities emphasize the comprehensive use of language to solve real problems, such as theme presentations, survey reports, and poster production. Teachers should also enhance the authenticity and task-driven nature of activities, so that students can develop the need to express themselves in meaningful situations. For example, in the "Travel Plan" unit, the task of "designing a local one-day tour route for foreign friends" can be designed to guide students to find information, compare routes, explain reasons, and present in English. Through such activity design, students can not only consolidate vocabulary and sentence patterns, but also improve their language expression, cooperative communication, and comprehensive application ability.

Table 3. Changes in evaluation methods before and after the implementation of holistic unit teaching

Evaluation Method	Usage Proportion before Implementation	Usage Proportion after Implementation	Change
Word dictation and paper-and-pencil tests	88.33%	61.67%	The proportion decreased, and evaluation no longer relied entirely on result-based testing.
Classroom performance evaluation	35.00%	78.33%	Significantly increased, with more attention paid to students' classroom participation process.
Student self-evaluation and peer evaluation	18.33%	68.33%	Significantly increased, and students' awareness of reflection was enhanced.

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Table 3. (continued)

Project task evaluation	13.33%	58.33%	Significantly increased, with more attention paid to comprehensive language application ability.
Portfolio evaluation	10.00%	46.67%	Increased to some extent, and the evaluation process became more continuous.

Table 3 shows that integrated unit teaching has made classroom assessment more varied. Traditional word dictation and paper-and-pencil tests were still retained, but their usage proportion declined; process evaluation methods such as classroom performance evaluation, student self-evaluation and peer evaluation, and project task evaluation increased significantly. This shows that holistic unit teaching under the guidance of core competencies not only adjusts teaching objectives and activities, but also turns assessment from simple result checking to all-round, progressive and process-oriented evaluation.

4.4. Improving teaching evaluation centered on student development

Holistic unit teaching under the guidance of core competencies should establish an evaluation system that matches teaching objectives and learning activities [12]. Teachers should look beyond learning outcomes and observe students' progress, participation, collaboration, language use and learning strategies. The evaluation subject should also change from single teacher evaluation to a combination of teacher evaluation, student self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and group evaluation, so that students can understand their own shortcomings in the evaluation and develop awareness of reflection and improvement.

In specific implementation, teachers can design evaluation scales around unit objectives, and use content integrity, language accuracy, expression fluency, opinion clarity, and cooperation participation as evaluation indicators. In primary school, intuitive methods such as star ratings, oral feedback, and portfolios can be used; in junior high school, dimensions such as logical expression and depth of thinking can be appropriately added. Through multiple evaluations, students' language ability and core competencies can be promoted continuously.

5. Optimization suggestions for holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools under the guidance of core competencies

5.1. Strengthening teachers' ability in holistic unit teaching design

Teachers are the key to the implementation of holistic unit teaching. Schools can organize targeted training, group lesson planning, teaching discussions and research activities to help teachers grasp core competencies and relevant teaching rules. When preparing lessons, teachers should not only pay attention to the teaching steps of a single class period, but should start from the whole unit, analyze the relationship among the unit theme, textbook content, student foundation, teaching objectives, activity tasks, and evaluation methods, and form a relatively complete unit teaching plan. At the same time, teachers should also improve their ability to develop teaching materials, appropriately supplement resources such as pictures, videos, picture books, and short texts according

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to the unit theme, and adjust the difficulty of tasks according to students' age characteristics and cognitive levels, so as to avoid the simple application of teaching templates and truly implement holistic unit teaching in classroom practice.

5.2. Improving the authenticity and hierarchy of classroom activities

Classroom activities play a key role in building students' core competencies. When designing activities, teachers should enhance the authenticity of tasks and make classroom content close to students' life experiences and real communication needs. For example, around the theme of "campus life," tasks such as "introducing an ideal campus club" and "formulating a class activity plan" can be designed; focusing on the theme of "environmental protection," activities such as "campus environmental protection survey" and "low-carbon life initiative" can be designed to enable students to use English to express their views in specific situations. At the same time, classroom activities need clear levels, moving from language input to comprehension, practice and creative use. Teachers can promote students' deep thinking through a question chain, such as moving from "What is it?" to "Why does it happen?" and then to "What can we do?" so as to guide students from information acquisition to meaning construction and problem solving [13].

5.3. Promoting the deep integration of information technology and English teaching

Information technology provides new support for holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools. Teachers can use audio and video materials, interactive platforms, online dictionaries, and learning software to create real contexts and enrich students' language input. They can also guide students to use online resources to complete project tasks such as information searching, English poster production, short video recording, and online surveys, so as to enhance the openness and practicality of learning. However, using technology shpuldn't stop at showing slides and pictures. It needs to connect with teaching goals, learning tasks, and evaluation methods. For example, teachers can publish preview tasks through online platforms to collect students' questions, use interactive tools for immediate feedback in the classroom, and track homework completion and language output performance after class. This can not only improve teaching efficiency, but also provide a basis for process evaluation.

5.4. Building a diversified and coordinated evaluation system

To optimize holistic unit teaching, it is necessary to establish a diversified and coordinated evaluation system. Evaluation should be consistent with unit objectives. It should not only pay attention to whether students master vocabulary, sentence patterns, and discourse content, but also focus on whether they can use language, express their views, cooperate with others, and solve problems in real tasks. Teachers can divide unit evaluation into diagnostic evaluation, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation. Diagnostic evaluation finds out what students already know, formative evaluation is used to track the learning process, and summative evaluation judges the effect of unit learning. In terms of evaluation subjects, teacher evaluation, student self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and group evaluation should be combined to help students identify deficiencies in evaluation and improve their learning. For unit project tasks, teachers can design evaluation scales to evaluate content integrity, language accuracy, expression clarity, cooperation participation, and other aspects, so as to make the evaluation criteria clearer and promote students' sustainable development.

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6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the practical path of holistic unit teaching of English in primary and secondary schools under the guidance of core competencies. The research holds that against the backdrop of the new curriculum standards, English teaching should pay more attention to the development of students' language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability while emphasizing basic knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns. Holistic unit teaching can integrate teaching objectives, content, activities, and evaluation under the guidance of unit themes, making classroom teaching more systematic and coherent [14]. With well-set unit goals, themed content, graded activities and diversified assessment, students can learn, use and express ideas with English in real-life scenarios.

At the same time, there are still some shortcomings in this study, such as the limited number of survey samples and classroom cases, and the analysis of the differences between primary and junior high school students is not deep enough. In the future, the research scope can be further expanded, and continuous follow-up research can be carried out in classrooms in different regions and at different school stages, so as to improve the practical guiding value of the research conclusions.

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