

Optimizing Junior High School English Integrated Unit Teaching from the Perspective of Core Competencies

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Abstract: Against the background of curriculum reform oriented toward the cultivation of core competencies, integrated unit teaching has gradually become an important approach to junior high school English instruction. However, in actual teaching practice, problems such as fragmented instructional content, disconnected learning activities, and insufficient implementation of core competencies remain prevalent, which restrict the effectiveness of English curriculum reform. This study, based on practical exploration of integrated unit teaching in junior high school English classrooms, examines optimization approaches from a core competency-oriented perspective. Specifically, it discusses four key dimensions: content integration, objective design, activity organization, and assessment implementation. By analyzing the process of integrated unit teaching design and implementation, the study highlights the importance of deeply interpreting thematic meanings, constructing unit big ideas, designing progressive learning activity chains, and establishing competency-oriented assessment systems. The findings indicate that integrated unit teaching can effectively promote the systematic integration of instructional elements, enhance the coherence and continuity of classroom teaching, and facilitate the holistic development of students' language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. This study provides practical implications for promoting the effective implementation of core competencies in junior high school English education.

Keywords: Core Competencies; Junior High School English; Integrated Unit Teaching; Thematic Meaning; Teaching Optimization.

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards) emphasize that the cultivation of core competencies in English education requires strengthening integrated unit teaching design. Meanwhile, the Curriculum Standards highlight the comprehensive, holistic, and progressive nature of core competency development. Through the English learning activity approach and competency-oriented assessment mechanisms, they promote the effective implementation of core competencies in teaching practices [1]. Teachers are expected to organize and integrate unit content around the unit theme, establish internal connections among texts, and fully explore the educational value of each text, thereby guiding students to achieve knowledge construction and competency development through holistic learning processes [2][3]. Therefore, the development of core competencies should no longer rely on isolated text instruction or fragmented teaching; rather, it needs to be achieved through structured and systematic approaches to instructional organization.

Against this background, integrated unit teaching has gradually become an important pathway for reforming junior high school English education. Guided by the unit theme, integrated unit teaching promotes the holistic construction of knowledge, meaning, and abilities through the integration of multimodal textual resources within the unit. It enables students to achieve coordinated development between language learning and core competencies through sustained exploration of thematic meanings. However, in actual teaching practices, problems such as fragmented texts, disconnected content, and a lack of holistic instructional design still exist, which to some extent constrain the effective implementation of core competencies in English classrooms.

Therefore, exploring systematic approaches to implementing integrated unit teaching is of great significance for facilitating the effective realization of core competencies in English classrooms.

Based on this background, this study focuses on integrated unit teaching in junior high school English and explores optimization approaches for core competency-oriented unit teaching from the perspectives of text integration, conceptual construction, learning objective design, and instructional implementation through practical teaching experiences. Taking Unit 5 "What Were You Doing When the Rainstorm Came?" from the eighth-grade English textbook published by the People's Education Press as an example, this study further elaborates on the optimization approaches for core competency-oriented integrated unit teaching in junior high school English.

2. Optimization Approaches for Core Competency-Oriented Integrated Unit Teaching in Junior High School English

2.1. Conducting In-depth Analysis of Themes and Texts to Extract the Unit's Big Ideas and Establish Educational Objectives

Integrated unit teaching emphasizes the guidance of thematic meanings. By integrating textual resources within a unit, it aims to guide students to construct knowledge systems and develop core competencies through sustained exploration of meanings. However, in actual teaching practices, some teachers still focus mainly on individual text instruction and lack a holistic understanding of the unit as a whole, resulting in fragmented teaching objectives and disconnected learning activities. Therefore, this study systematically examines the

texts within the unit, analyzes their content structures and functional characteristics, and gradually extracts the big ideas and supporting ideas of the unit. These ideas are further transformed into unit teaching objectives and lesson arrangements oriented toward the development of students' core competencies.

2.1.1. Conducting In-depth Analysis of Unit Texts Based on Thematic Meanings

Thematic meanings serve as the logical starting point for integrated unit teaching design and an important carrier for realizing the educational value of the subject. The Curriculum Standards emphasize that teachers should conduct in-depth analysis of texts from multiple perspectives, including themes, content, genre structures, linguistic features, and authors' viewpoints, in order to identify their thematic meanings and educational values.

In integrated unit teaching, teachers should move beyond the limitations of individual text instruction and examine the functions and interconnections of different texts in thematic exploration from the perspective of the entire unit. Meanwhile, instructional content should be integrated based on students' cognitive characteristics and life experiences, allowing

teachers to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in texts and clarify the value orientation of the unit theme. Through holistic interpretation of unit texts, students can deepen their understanding of thematic meanings and develop value identification, thereby laying a foundation for extracting the unit's big ideas and implementing subsequent instructional activities [4].

This unit falls within the thematic category of "Humans and Nature", with "Natural Disasters and Safety Prevention" as its sub-theme. It includes various text types, such as dialogues, interviews, and narrative texts. Centered around the unit theme, these texts form an interconnected whole by presenting authentic situations, personal experiences, and coping strategies related to natural disasters from different perspectives. Together, they construct the thematic meanings of the unit and demonstrate a cognitive progression from perception and understanding to reflection.

Through a holistic analysis of the thematic content, functional roles, and educational values of each text, a foundation can be established for extracting the unit's big ideas. Following the sequence of the unit content presentation, the analysis of the texts in this unit is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Text Analysis of the Unit *Nature's Temper*

Text	Section	Text Type	Text Content	Thematic Meaning
1	Section A (1b-2c)	Dialogue	Sharing experiences related to natural disasters	Understanding the impacts of disasters and enhancing safety
2	Section A (3a-3c)	Dialogue	Comparing different experiences before and after a typhoon	Developing disaster prevention awareness and strengthening coping awareness
3	Grammar Focus	Narrative Text	Describing an experience of seeking safety during a tornado	Deepening language use and supporting thematic expression
4	Section B (1a-1c)	Narrative Text	Describing how a girl successfully warned others of a tsunami	Cultivating scientific spirit and enhancing a sense of responsibility
5	Section B (3a-3c)	Narrative Text	Describing a day affected by severe weather	Understanding the impacts of weather and accumulating life experience
6	Project	Project-based Text	Creating a story about natural disasters	Promoting transfer and innovation and developing collaborative abilities

2.1.2. Identifying Connections among Texts and Extracting the Unit's Big Ideas and Supporting Ideas

Table 2. Extraction of the Unit's Big Idea and Supporting Ideas in *Nature's Temper*

Unit Big Idea	Supporting Ideas	Related Texts
Natural disasters are sudden and inevitable to some extent. Therefore, people should develop risk awareness, apply scientific knowledge to adopt appropriate prevention and response measures, and achieve self-protection, mutual assistance, and social responsibility in disaster situations.	In disaster situations, mastering basic expressions for seeking information about risks and communicating during emergencies is a key communicative ability for information sharing, mutual assistance, and self-rescue.	1,2,3
	Understanding scientific methods of disaster prevention, self-rescue, and emergency response, as well as learning to write disaster-related texts, is essential for developing awareness of respecting nature, responding scientifically to risks, and promoting safety concepts.	4,5
	Through studying disaster cases and completing practical tasks, students can develop risk identification and disaster prevention skills, use language flexibly to understand disasters rationally, and acquire methods of self-rescue.	6

Big ideas provide important guidance for teachers in organizing and integrating curriculum content. After conducting an in-depth analysis of unit texts, teachers need to further identify the internal connections among different texts and extract the unit's big ideas and supporting ideas. Big ideas refer to the core understandings, values, and problem-solving approaches that students gradually develop through thematic

learning. They are characterized by their overarching and transferable nature. Supporting ideas, in contrast, refer to the specific knowledge, perspectives, and experiences embedded in individual texts, which serve as the foundation for constructing big ideas [5].

Multiple texts within a unit usually revolve around the same theme from different perspectives and jointly contribute

to the construction of thematic meanings. Therefore, teachers should examine the unit as an integrated whole, analyze the content-based, logical, and value-based connections among texts, clarify the functional roles of each text in unit learning, and accordingly extract text-level supporting ideas. These supporting ideas can then be integrated into overarching big ideas that guide the entire unit learning process and promote the development of students' core competencies [6][7].

Based on the analysis of texts in this unit, teachers can extract supporting ideas from the core content and educational values embedded in each text. On this basis, the unit's big idea can be generated through integration, forming a cognitive progression from supporting ideas to the overarching big idea. The identification of the big idea and supporting ideas of this unit is presented in Table 2.

By constructing a content framework of "theme-text-supporting ideas-big idea," students can move beyond the limitations of learning from individual texts. Through sustained exploration of thematic meanings, they can develop a structured knowledge system, achieve an organic integration of language learning and value construction, and promote the holistic development of core competencies.

2.1.3. Focusing on Core Competencies to Determine Unit Teaching Objectives

Teaching objectives provide the direction for implementing integrated unit teaching and serve as an important basis for evaluating learning outcomes. After conducting an in-depth analysis of thematic meanings and extracting the unit's big idea, teachers should consider students' developmental needs

and integrate the educational value of the unit with the cultivation of core competencies to formulate scientific and appropriate unit teaching objectives based on curriculum requirements.

Unlike traditional lesson objectives that mainly focus on isolated knowledge points and language skills, integrated unit teaching emphasizes a core competency-oriented approach and constructs an objective system based on four dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. Teachers should not only focus on students' development of linguistic knowledge and language skills but also attach importance to the enhancement of their values, thinking quality, and autonomous learning abilities during thematic exploration. In this way, knowledge acquisition, ability development, and value formation can be organically integrated.

On this basis, teachers should further decompose unit teaching objectives into lesson objectives according to the unit's big idea and students' learning conditions. These lesson objectives should not only reflect the learning focus of different texts but also jointly contribute to the achievement of the overall unit objectives, thereby forming an objective system characterized by "unit objectives guiding lesson objectives and promoting core competency development." By appropriately arranging the learning focuses and competency progression of each lesson, teachers can ensure that instructional content develops from basic to advanced levels and that learning tasks become progressively more challenging, enabling students to gradually achieve unit learning objectives through continuous exploration [8].

Table 3. Design of Lesson Objectives for the Unit *Nature's Temper*

Lesson	Teaching Content	Learning Objectives	Core Competencies
1	Section A(1a–2c)Listening	Students can retell common natural disasters and related expressions, understand the activities people were engaged in under different disaster situations in the listening text, use the past progressive tense to ask about and confirm others' safety conditions, and initially develop risk awareness and awareness of mutual assistance.	Language Ability; Cultural Awareness
2	Section A(3a–3d)Reading	Students can obtain information about people's experiences and responses during a typhoon, use the past progressive tense to retell disaster experiences, analyze the outcomes of different coping behaviors, recognize the importance of preparation before disasters, and enhance their awareness of disaster prevention and reduction.	Thinking Quality; Cultural Awareness; Language Ability
3	Grammar (4a–4d)	Students can internalize the use of the past progressive tense and adverbial clauses of time introduced by when and while, accurately describe background events and the development of events during disasters, and engage in oral and written communication in authentic contexts.	Language Ability; Learning Ability
4	Section B(1a–2d)Reading	Students can analyze the reasons why a girl identified tsunami warning signs and successfully avoided danger, understand the important role of scientific knowledge in disaster warnings, explore the disaster prevention skills individuals should possess, and enhance scientific awareness, risk awareness, and social responsibility.	Thinking Quality; Cultural Awareness
5	Section B (3a–3c) Writing	Students can analyze the organizational structure and chronological sequence of disaster narratives, use time connectives, the past progressive tense, and related expressions to write about experiences of extreme weather, revise and improve their writing based on an assessment rubric, and enhance their written communication skills.	Language Ability; Learning Ability; Thinking Quality
6	Project (4a–4c)	Students can comprehensively apply the language knowledge and disaster prevention knowledge acquired in this unit to collaboratively create chain stories, present their outcomes, and conduct peer evaluation in authentic or simulated contexts, thereby achieving the transfer and application of language knowledge and developing collaboration skills, innovation ability, and social responsibility.	Language Ability; Cultural Awareness; Thinking Quality; Learning Ability

The teaching objectives of this unit are as follows: Centered on the theme of "Natural Disasters and Safety Prevention," students are expected to comprehensively apply language knowledge related to natural disasters and target language structures such as the past progressive tense to understand and describe events before, during, and after

disasters, as well as analyze different coping strategies and their outcomes. Through continuous learning activities involving listening, speaking, reading, writing, and project-based practice, students can enhance their awareness of scientific disaster prevention, proactive risk avoidance, and mutual assistance. Meanwhile, they can apply linguistic

knowledge to authentic contexts and achieve integrated development of language ability, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability.

Based on the above unit teaching objectives, the objectives of the seven lessons in this unit are further specified to achieve the step-by-step implementation and progressive development of the objective system (see Table 3).

2.2. Designing a Progressive Learning Activity Chain to Promote the Integrated Development of Core Competencies

After conducting an in-depth analysis of thematic meanings, extracting the unit's big idea, and determining teaching objectives, teachers need to transform abstract educational goals into specific and operable classroom

learning activities. The English learning activity approach emphasizes that students should achieve the integration of knowledge construction, thinking development, and core competency enhancement through three levels of activities under the guidance of thematic meanings: learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation.

Guided by the overarching question “How can we protect ourselves and others in natural disasters?” and centered on the unit's big idea, this unit further refines learning content into a sequence of lesson-based guiding questions. Through this process, learning activities are systematically organized in authentic contexts, forming a coherent instructional structure characterized by “question-driven learning, activity-based progression, and competency development” [9]. The question chain is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Design of the Unit's Guiding Question Sequence in Nature's Temper

Lesson	Text/ Content	Guiding Question	Learning Activities	Core Competencies
1	Section A (1a–2c)	What happened during the rainstorm?	Learning and Understanding: Listen to and read the dialogue, obtain key information, and gain an initial understanding of natural disaster situations.	Language Ability; Learning Ability
2	Section A (3a–3d)	How did the rainstorm affect people's lives?	Learning and Understanding → Application and Practice: Analyze characters' experiences, explore the impacts of disasters, and exchange different people's feelings and experiences.	Thinking Quality; Cultural Awareness
3	Grammar (4a–4d)	How can we describe a disaster clearly?	Application and Practice: Use the past progressive tense and when/while clauses to describe the process of disasters and engage in situational dialogues and expressions.	Language Ability; Thinking Quality
4	Section B (1a–2d)	What can we learn from people's responses to disasters?	Application and Practice: Read the text, analyze people's responses to disasters, and discuss the importance of scientific disaster prevention and mutual assistance.	Thinking Quality; Cultural Awareness
5	Section B (3a–3c)	How can we share our disaster experiences and safety suggestions?	Transfer and Innovation: Analyze the writing structure, integrate information from texts and personal experiences to write about disaster experiences, and propose safety suggestions.	Language Ability; Thinking Quality; Learning Ability
6	Project (4a–4c)	How can we protect ourselves and help others in natural disasters?	Transfer and Innovation: Design family disaster prevention plans or create disaster prevention materials, present and exchange ideas, and conduct reflection and evaluation.	Language Ability; Cultural Awareness; Learning Ability

Through the design of the guiding question sequence, the instructional content of the unit is reorganized into progressively structured learning tasks. In the process of understanding natural disasters, analyzing people's experiences, expressing personal viewpoints, and solving authentic problems, students gradually deepen their understanding of the thematic meanings of the unit. Meanwhile, learning activities progress from knowledge acquisition toward practical application and transfer and innovation, promoting the coordinated development of students' language ability, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability, and effectively realizing the educational value of English curriculum.

2.3. Constructing a Core Competency-Oriented Assessment System to Promote Students' Continuous Development

Assessment is an essential component of integrated unit

teaching and an important basis for examining students' development of core competencies. Under a core competency-oriented approach, assessment should move beyond traditional approaches that mainly emphasize knowledge memorization and language tests, and instead focus on students' comprehensive performance in thematic exploration, language use, and authentic problem-solving. Teachers should base assessment on the unit's big idea and teaching objectives, integrate assessment throughout the entire teaching process, and construct an assessment system characterized by multidimensional content, diverse participants, and continuous processes to promote the sustained development of students' core competencies.

2.3.1. Emphasizing Multidimensional Assessment Content and Focusing on Core Competency Development

Assessment in integrated unit teaching should be conducted around the four dimensions of core competencies.

It should not only examine students' mastery of linguistic knowledge and language skills but also focus on the development of their values, thinking quality, and learning ability during thematic learning.

In this unit, language ability can be mainly assessed through students' ability to use the past progressive tense to describe natural disasters and related experiences. Cultural awareness focuses on students' understanding and recognition of disaster prevention, safety awareness, and social responsibility. Thinking quality emphasizes students' abilities to analyze disaster causes, evaluate coping strategies, and solve practical problems. Learning ability concerns students' performance in collaborative inquiry, project-based learning, and self-reflection. Through these dimensions, a comprehensive assessment of students' core competency development can be achieved.

2.3.2. Implementing Diverse Assessment Participants to Promote Students' Autonomous Development

Integrated unit teaching advocates the establishment of a collaborative assessment mechanism involving teachers, peers, and students, so as to achieve comprehensive evaluation of both learning processes and outcomes.

As the primary organizer of assessment, teachers should consider both formative and summative performance. While paying attention to the quality of students' task completion, teachers should continuously refine assessment dimensions and highlight the feedback and guidance functions of assessment for students' language ability and overall competency development. In practice, teacher assessment should run throughout the entire teaching process by focusing not only on students' learning performance but also on their competency development, and by providing targeted feedback to continuously optimize students' learning pathways.

For peer assessment, teachers should clarify assessment criteria and procedures before implementation, and guide students to conduct structured feedback during activities such as group discussions, role plays, and project presentations. This helps avoid subjective and arbitrary evaluation and promotes continuous improvement and mutual development in collaborative learning.

For self-assessment, teachers should design practical and differentiated self-assessment tools based on students' developmental characteristics at different educational stages. Students should be guided to reflect on their learning processes according to learning objectives, identify weaknesses, adjust learning strategies, and enhance their autonomous learning abilities and metacognitive regulation skills [10].

For example, in the Project activity of this unit, after completing a family disaster prevention plan or a disaster prevention presentation, students can conduct teacher assessment, peer assessment, and self-reflection based on an assessment rubric. Through multidimensional feedback, students can continuously improve their learning outcomes, enhance their comprehensive language application abilities, and strengthen their learning initiative and sense of responsibility.

2.3.3. Strengthening Process-Based Assessment to Promote Continuous Learning Improvement

Integrated unit teaching emphasizes the continuity of learning; therefore, assessment should run throughout the entire unit learning process. Teachers should integrate diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, and summative

assessment to achieve the consistency of "teaching-learning-assessment."

Table 5. Core Competency-Oriented Assessment Design for the Unit *Nature's Temper*

Assessment Stage	Assessment Methods	Assessment Content	Core Competencies
Diagnostic Assessment (Before Instruction)	Situational questions and questionnaires	Students' existing knowledge of natural disasters, disaster prevention experiences, and language foundations	Language Ability; Learning Ability
Formative Assessment (During Instruction)	Classroom observation, learning tasks, group collaboration, role plays, and learning portfolios	Language expression, problem analysis, collaborative inquiry, and the use of learning strategies	Language Ability; Thinking Quality; Learning Ability
Summative Assessment (After Instruction)	Project presentations, disaster prevention posters, thematic speeches, and proposal writing	Applying language knowledge comprehensively to solve authentic problems and developing risk awareness, safety awareness, and social responsibility	Language Ability; Cultural Awareness; Thinking Quality; Learning Ability

Taking this unit as an example, before the beginning of the unit, teachers can use questionnaires and situational questions to understand students' existing knowledge of natural disasters and safety protection. During the learning process, formative assessment can be conducted through classroom observation, learning tasks, group collaboration, classroom presentations, and learning portfolios, providing timely feedback on students' performance in language use, thinking development, and collaborative inquiry. After the completion of the unit, summative assessment can be carried out through performance-based tasks such as Project presentations, disaster prevention-themed speeches, and proposal writing, comprehensively examining students' understanding of thematic meanings and their development of core competencies. The specific assessment design is presented in Table 5.

Assessment is an essential component of integrated unit teaching and a key basis for examining students' development of core competencies. Under a core competency-oriented approach, unit assessment should move beyond traditional models centered on knowledge memorization and language outcomes. Instead, it should emphasize the integration of learning processes and performance in authentic tasks, thereby constructing an assessment system characterized by multidimensional content, diverse participants, and continuous processes.

Teachers should base assessment on the unit's big idea and learning objectives, integrating assessment throughout the entire teaching process. Through the coordinated implementation of formative and summative assessment, teachers can provide continuous feedback and dynamic

regulation of students' language development and overall competency growth, thereby promoting the effective implementation of the "teaching-learning-assessment" alignment mechanism [11].

3. Conclusion

The practical analysis of integrated unit teaching in junior high school English demonstrates that integrated unit teaching can effectively organize instructional content and learning processes, facilitating a shift from fragmented teaching toward systematic instruction. Under the guidance of core competencies, optimizing the design of unit objectives, learning activities, and assessment practices can enhance the overall coherence and continuity of English teaching.

Meanwhile, integrated unit teaching provides a structured pathway for the implementation of core competencies, enabling students to achieve holistic development of language ability, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability within a unified unit learning process. Overall, integrated unit teaching serves as an important practical approach for promoting the implementation of core competencies in English education.

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