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Research on Strategies for Optimizing Foreign Language Emotional Experience through the Design of Comprehensive Practical Assignments in Junior High School English from the Unit Perspective

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Abstract

The National English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) propose that teachers should design unit assignments and lesson assignments based on students' cognitive characteristics and learning needs at different educational stages. This design should take into account individual differences while aligning with unit teaching objectives, ensuring a balance in the content, difficulty, and quantity of assignments. The aim is to foster positive emotional experiences and enhance students' sense of self-efficacy. However, in practice, assignments primarily focus on knowledge reinforcement and mainly assess students' language proficiency. There is a lack of connection to unit themes, relevant context creation, and real-life application. Moreover, assignments do not adequately assess or cultivate students' learning abilities, critical thinking, or cultural awareness. Therefore, this paper aims to explore strategies for designing comprehensible practical assignments from a unit perspective, aiming to enhance the enjoyment of foreign language learning.

Keywords

Unit Perspective; Foreign Language Anxiety; Foreign Language Enjoyment; Comprehensive Practical Assignments

1. Introduction

In July 2021, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Extracurricular Training Burden for Students in the Compulsory Education Stage," which outlined clear guidelines regarding the total amount, duration, and quality of homework. Homework, as a purposeful, guided,

and organized learning activity, plays an essential role in teaching and serves as a bridge between instruction and assessment. It helps consolidate knowledge, provide feedback, develop skills, and foster character development, all of which have a significant impact on student growth. In this paper, "homework" refers to the tasks and creations students produce as part of their learning process. These assignments not only focus on reviewing and reinforcing the knowledge taught in individual lessons but also aim to cultivate students' core competencies under unit themes, ultimately contributing to their future development.

However, there are several issues with current homework design in middle school English education. First, the content of homework is outdated, relying on mechanical exercises that focus on knowledge and skills, leading to an excessive and inefficient workload that increases students' academic burden. Second, the format of the homework is monotonous, and the lack of engaging tasks negatively impacts students' emotional experience and sense of achievement in learning. Finally, there is a lack of functional design in homework, which is often organized around individual class sessions, resulting in fragmented and disjointed assignments that fail to consolidate the overall content of a unit.These problems arise because teachers often lack awareness of unit integration when designing homework, failing to incorporate assignments into the overall unit instruction. Therefore, designing middle school English homework from a unit-based perspective is crucial for improving the quality of homework design.

Integrated practice assignments refer to tasks in which teachers create rich, context-driven scenarios based on students' age, life experience, and prior knowledge, encouraging students to actively engage in language practice activities and creatively use the language. These assignments connect students to real-life situations and society, enabling them to learn with purpose, apply their knowledge, and innovate. Implementing comprehensible practical assignments helps students consolidate and apply their learning in meaningful contexts, enhancing their language skills, fostering critical thinking, and developing their creativity, imagination, and overall competence.

The design and implementation of comprehensible practical assignments from unit perspective can help teachers assess the achievement of teaching objectives and students' mastery of knowledge and skills. This approach holds significance for several reasons: First, it moves away from traditional, mechanical homework formats such as reading, memorizing, copying, and writing. Second, comprehensible practical assignments are closely aligned with students' real-life experiences, effectively boosting their motivation to complete homework and enhancing their enjoyment of foreign language learning, thus optimizing foreign language emotional experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Unit Perspective

A unit serves as the basic teaching unit that provides the thematic context and facilitates the construction of thematic meaning. Unit teaching encompasses all six essential elements of the curriculum, carrying specific and focused objectives aimed at fostering core competencies in the subject. It represents a relatively complete course cycle designed to promote student growth through English language learning (Mei & Wang, 2018). During students' process of constructing knowledge around thematic meaning, assignments play a crucial role in internalizing language and cultural knowledge, consolidating learning, and outputting results. They not only serve as a tool for formative assessment throughout the unit learning process but also act as a means for students to integrate knowledge and achieve a deeper understanding. Therefore, English teachers should optimize assignment design from a unit perspective. This involves selecting assignments that align with the learning content, types of knowledge, and students' cognitive structures, ensuring they are suitable for both student development and teaching needs.

2.2. Comprehensible Practical Assignments

Practical assignments refer to the optimization of English homework design, aimed at transforming the traditional assignment model that previously hindered students' individual development and potential. This shift enables students to move away from monotonous, repetitive tasks like mechanical copying and disconnected written exercises. The content of English assignments should evolve from a focus on textbooks to an emphasis on application, reflecting personalization, socialization, and real-life relevance (Xia, 2013). The format of assignments should transition from a singular approach to a more diverse one, emphasizing openness, inquiry, and collaboration. Moreover, the completion of assignments should move from individual work towards collaborative efforts, encouraging multi-sensory and multi-perspective engagement.

The design of comprehensible practical assignments should prioritize student development, striving to integrate classroom learning with extracurricular activities, facilitate communication both within and outside the school, and promote interdisciplinary connections. In this way, English assignments can become a bridge for nurturing and enhancing students' abilities, optimizing the learning environment, and fostering critical thinking and creativity. Therefore, teachers should strive to design a variety of practical assignments that allow students to learn through activities, experience through practice, and truly become active explorers of their English learning journey. Furthermore, by linking the content and form of English practical assignments with learning activities in other subjects, students can be equipped with the ability to apply their English knowledge to solve real-world problems (Zhang, 2016).

Comprehensible practical assignments can generally be categorized into three types:

hands-on activities, script-writing and performance tasks, and investigative research projects (Ma, 2018). Firstly, hands-on activities aim to spark students' interest in learning by providing them with flexible and autonomous opportunities to use and practice language. Through engaging in hands-on projects, students not only develop practical life skills but also activate their potential for creativity and the appreciation of beauty.Secondly, given that middle school students often possess strong desires for self-expression and creativity, script-writing and performance tasks serve as excellent platforms for showcasing their English communication and acting talents. These activities allow students to experience the emotional complexities of characters and the dramatic development of storylines through discussion, script-writing, and performance. Lastly, investigative research assignments encourage students to engage with society and better understand the people around them. By applying the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom, students conduct surveys outside of class and analyze the data they collect. This type of assignment nurtures students' ability to acquire, process, and use information effectively. These different types of practical assignments work together to foster students' language learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, all of which are essential for their overall development.

2.3. Foreign Language Emotion

The Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2003) and the Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006) are fundamental frameworks in the study of emotions in foreign language learning. The Broaden-and-Build Theory posits that positive emotions such as enjoyment expand an individual's cognitive and behavioral repertoire, thereby enhancing psychological resilience and building personal resources. In contrast, negative emotions like anxiety narrow an individual's resources (Fredrickson, 2001).

Foreign language enjoyment and anxiety are key topics in the field of foreign language emotions. While foreign language anxiety has been extensively studied, there has been insufficient focus on positive emotions beyond anxiety. Drawing on positive psychology, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) explored both foreign language enjoyment and anxiety together, discovering that these emotions, as independent constructs, can co-occur in second language learning and have distinct predictive effects on learning outcomes (Dong& Liu, 2022). Li Chengchen and Han Ye (2022) explicitly stated that foreign language enjoyment and anxiety are not in a purely oppositional relationship and can coexist without excluding or counteracting each other. Therefore, this study will examine both foreign language enjoyment and anxiety simultaneously.

3. Exploring Strategies for Designing Comprehensible Practical Assignments in Junior High School English from the Unit Perspective

Fang Zhen and Xia Xueming (2014) argue that the purpose of exploring unit assignments lies in integrating fragmented objectives and considering assignment design from the perspective of subject structure. According to the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022) (Ministry of Education, 2022), "Teachers should design unit and lesson assignments based on students' cognitive characteristics and learning needs at different stages. They should take individual differences into account, balance the content, difficulty, and quantity of assignments, and aim to help students form positive emotional experiences while enhancing their sense of self-efficacy."

In the context of junior high school English education, assignments from a unit perspective should be designed as a cohesive set of tasks for each unit, involving planning, designing, implementing, optimizing, and evaluating assignments across different sections of the unit. Unit-based assignment design should focus on the theme of the unit, distilling its core questions, and developing a comprehensive set of assignments aligned with the unit objectives. The design should also incorporate tasks that target the development of students' competencies, tailored to the characteristics of each lesson. This approach aims to fully harness the educational value of assignments.

3.1. Theme Integration and Knowledge Network Construction through Scaffolding

The concept of thematic integration involves aligning unit themes with real-life scenarios to the greatest extent possible. To enhance students' pragmatic competence and expressive abilities, teachers must design output tasks that align with the unit theme and content, optimizing assignment structures. These tasks should enable students to experience and deeply understand the theme's significance while completing their assignments. The output tasks assigned by teachers are often slightly above students' current capabilities and levels. Therefore, within the unit perspective, teachers need to provide appropriate scaffolding to support students. This scaffolding will guide them to effectively integrate the knowledge and content they have learned, ensuring smooth task completion and achievement of the desired learning outcomes.

For instance, in the New English Course for Senior High School (2019 edition) by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, the theme of Unit 6 "Survival" promotes the harmonious coexistence of wildlife and humans. The "Understanding Ideas" section of this unit explores the reasons behind the increasing presence of wild animals in urban areas and reflects on ways to achieve harmony between humans and animals. Teachers can design comprehensible practical assignments, such as having students create posters based on the unit theme to advocate for wildlife protection. To ensure the students successfully complete this assignment, the teacher first constructs a content framework for the text. Using transfer devices,

the teacher visualizes the textual information to help students systematically organize the main ideas of the discourse. This process allows students to clearly understand the key information, structuring the knowledge learned. During group collaboration on the poster, students can use this framework to identify the main content of the poster, internalize and reinforce the language, and filter out useful information. Through effective teamwork, they can successfully complete the poster creation. In this process, students not only gain a sense of achievement by completing assignments, but also enhance their communication and collaboration skills through peer cooperation. This approach helps alleviate anxiety that may arise from the fear of making mistakes in front of peers, thereby boosting students' willingness to communicate. As a result, students are able to experience the joy of learning a foreign language while completing assignments.

3.2. Contextualizing Materials and Guiding Skill Advancement through Practice

It is essential that the materials used for English assignments are derived from real-life situations. By doing so, the scenarios created will feel more authentic and relevant to students' lives. Exploring the significance of a theme should be facilitated through related, particularly real-life, contexts, as this helps deepen students' understanding of the theme. Moreover, unit design should not be detached from real-life contexts and specific tasks (Cui, 2019).

For example, in the New English Course for Senior High School (2019 edition) by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, the theme of "Time for a Change?" provides a valuable opportunity to connect the content to students' lives through the Spring Festival. After completing the unit, teachers can design comprehensible practical assignments, such as having students create surveys to investigate how contemporary people celebrate the Spring Festival. This type of investigative task enhances students' logical analysis abilities and encourages them to apply their learning to real-world contexts. By using materials related to real-life contexts, students are better able to connect the content they are learning with their own experiences. This personalizes the learning material, making students more willing to share their experiences and opinions, rather than feeling anxious and unable to speak on unfamiliar or obscure topics. In this context, students are also able to use English more comfortably, enhancing their emotional experience with foreign language learning.

3.3. Diversified Assessment and the Integration of Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation

The evaluation of assignments should be integrated throughout the teaching process and reflected in various aspects of instructional practice (Ministry of Education, 2018). Traditional assignment evaluation methods are relatively simplistic, with

teachers focusing primarily on the final outcomes, which makes it difficult to grasp the students' learning processes. Furthermore, teacher feedback often comes too late to be truly effective, lacking both timeliness and relevance. Due to constraints such as class time and teaching schedules, it is challenging for teachers to promptly organize, summarize, and categorize the issues in students' assignments. These problems have, to some extent, undermined the effectiveness of assignments. Besides, as an essential component of the teaching process, assignment evaluation requires teachers to emphasize its diversity. It is crucial to understand the formative role of assignment evaluation and adhere to a focus on students' abilities and overall competencies (Ministry of Education, 2022). When evaluating assignments, teachers should consider individual differences among students and adopt multiple evaluation methods, such as face-to-face communication, written feedback, and peer assessments. Evaluation results should be clear and specific, rather than vague. Providing varied feedback helps to shift students' attention away from concerns about success or failure and grades, emphasizing a multi-dimensional evaluation approach (Long, 2021). Based on assignment evaluation results, teachers can offer targeted guidance to motivate students toward continuous improvement, thereby enhancing their sense of learning efficacy and improving their emotional experience in language learning.

In addition to teacher assessments, students' self-assessment and peer assessment should also be incorporated, truly placing students at the center of the evaluation process. Students complete assignments based on the teacher's comments and prompts, and then use a structured evaluation framework to conduct self-assessment and peer assessment. Teachers can guide students during the self- and peer-assessment stages, encouraging them to identify issues and adopt a problem-solving approach in the assignment feedback phase. Peer assessment also provides an opportunity for students to share learning experiences with one another, fostering a sense of achievement and collaboration in their learning journey. Regardless of the assessment method, it is essential that feedback on students' assignments be positive and constructive. Such feedback helps students build confidence in their English learning and encourages them to engage more willingly in the learning process.

4. Conclusion

The design of comprehensible practical assignments from a unit perspective aims at fostering students' lifelong development. While focusing on the cultivation of core competencies, it also helps students to systematically build their language knowledge framework, deepen their understanding of the unit theme, and promote their ability progression, thereby achieving the educational value of assignments. The design of these assignments should start from the students' current level of learning, strengthening the connection between new and prior knowledge. It should

also consider the students' zone of proximal development, promoting the transfer and extension of classroom learning. Furthermore, the design should center around the exploration of the unit's theme, improving both the content and format of assignments.

To better achieve the goals of reducing learning burdens and enhancing learning outcomes, as well as reinforcing the effectiveness of language learning, teachers should further refine assignment design, conduct evaluations, and utilize information technology tools to expand feedback channels. This will help students consolidate their language knowledge in real-world contexts, experience the joy of learning English through activities, learn to collaborate with others, solve problems together, and share personal ideas. Additionally, it will encourage students' willingness to communicate and optimize their emotional experience with foreign language learning.

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