

Situated Learning Pedagogy For Core Competency Cultivation

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Abstract

English Subject Core Competencies are the key abilities and essential qualities that students develop during the English learning process. They hold significant importance for students' lifelong development and social adaptation, and their cultivation has become the core objective of high school English teaching. Teaching contexts, serving as vital bridges connecting knowledge with practice and promoting students' active learning, play an indispensable role in cultivating these core competencies. They provide students with concrete scenarios for language application, cognitive development, and cultural awareness. However, in actual teaching practice, there are numerous shortcomings in the creation of teaching contexts. Issues such as contexts lacking authenticity, misalignment with the goals of core competency cultivation, and being overly superficial make it difficult for them to effectively support the enhancement of students' core competencies. Therefore, under the guidance of the situated learning theory, this study aims to explore the essence of effective instructional contexts guided by core competencies, analyze common problems encountered during their creation, elucidate the role and principles of effective instructional contexts in cultivating core competencies, and investigate their application strategies. The goal is to provide a reference for promoting the development of student core competencies through context-based teaching in high school English instruction.

Keywords

Effective instructional contexts; Core competencies; Application strategies; Role and principles

1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020) clearly stipulates that high school English teaching must aim to cultivate students' core competencies, encompassing language ability, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning capacity (Ministry of Education, 2020). This directive charts the course for teaching reform and challenges traditional

teaching models. In the current context of deepening educational reform, the effective implementation of core competency cultivation has become a critical task for English teachers. Situational teaching, as an effective pedagogical approach, combines language learning with real-life contexts by constructing concrete scenarios related to teaching content. Aligning with the principles of “student-centeredness” and “emphasis on practical application”, it provides a powerful pathway for fostering core competencies.

During previous scholarly explorations of English teaching methodologies, situational teaching has garnered significant attention due to its unique pedagogical strengths. Prior research has extensively covered its application in English teaching. Some scholars have investigated principles for creating effective teaching situations, such as authenticity, communicative value, and diversity. Li Hui and Zhang Lulu (2024) also mentioned principles of acceptability, progression, and life-relevance in their research. Furthermore, scholars have analyzed application strategies for situational teaching in specific areas like vocabulary, speaking, and grammar. Zhang Xinqiu (2024), through questionnaires and experiments involving experimental and control classes, found that situational teaching effectively enhances student learning outcomes, and vocabulary classes based on this approach can increase students’ interest in vocabulary learning. Li Hui and Zhang Lulu (2024) argued that situational teaching is an effective method for constructing speaking scenarios. It focuses on students’ central role in the classroom, uses visual aids to immerse students in situations, and allows them to practice speaking in real-life contexts, thereby addressing difficulties in oral practice and fostering speaking proficiency. Ma Zhe (2022) explored the application of situational teaching in grammar instruction, proposing strategies such as creating multimedia situations for vivid grammar lessons, establishing life-like situations for authentic grammar learning environments, and designing problem-based scenarios to guide students in actively exploring grammatical knowledge application. Bai Xiaoling (2020) advocated that for students to achieve better understanding and application of knowledge, it is essential to create authentic learning situations that stimulate their interest and encourage autonomous participation in English learning.

Synthesizing previous research, while scholars have achieved certain results in the field of English situational teaching, most studies focus on the junior high school level. There is a notable deficiency in research on situational teaching in senior high school English contexts. The increased complexity and depth of high school English knowledge pose greater learning challenges for students, creating unique demands for situational teaching. Previous research has paid less attention to how high school English teaching situations can precisely align with core competency cultivation goals. There is a lack of in-depth exploration on creating effective situations based on high school students’ cognitive levels and learning characteristics, as well as on solving the problem of integrating situations smoothly into high school teaching

procedures. Therefore, this study aims to conduct an in-depth investigation into the application of situational teaching methodology in cultivating students' core competencies within senior high school English instruction. It is hoped that this research will contribute to enriching the theoretical framework of situational teaching in high school English, provide teachers with more targeted and practical pedagogical guidance, promote the improvement of high school English teaching quality, and thus facilitate the effective development of students' core competencies.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Situated learning theory

Situated learning theory (SLT), first presented by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), explains the process and development of learning when individuals have the opportunity to participate in a community of practice. In such a community, new learners reach the level of the expert as they have more opportunities to practice within the context of learning. In this light, learning is unintentional; this unintentional nature of learning is what the authors call Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). In LPP, the learner moves from the periphery of the community to the center as he/she gains expertise and engages and participates actively in the sociocultural practices of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A similar theory is situated cognition, proposed by John Seely Brown, Allan Collins and Paul Duguid (1989). Their proposition goes deeper into the social nature of learning and argues that learning cannot be abstracted from the situations in which it is learned and merely be transferred or applied in school. In the view of both theories, knowledge is situated as the product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is authentically developed and used. The culture of conventional schooling influences what is learned, and decontextualized instruction does not lead to effective learning.

2.2. The definition of “situation”

The concept of “situation” was first proposed by American scholar William I. Thomas. Thomas regarded situation as the core of situational teaching—an artificially created scenario. Situations allow students to engage actively within them and provide an environment for teacher-student interaction (He Zongqi, 2012). Chinese scholar Zhang Jianzhong (1997) also defined situation as: “a social context for communication through language and writing, or an environmental setting that influences all aspects of language learning such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.”

The Hai Dictionary defines “situation” as the social environment in which an individual performs an action. According to this definition, creating an English teaching situation for students can be interpreted as “establishing a learning

background for students based on textbook content and instructional requirements during the English teaching process.”

Building on these foundations, this study defines situation as: a concrete scenario in teaching, designed with consideration for students’ cognitive development abilities and oriented toward their interests, that is introduced or created with specific contextual meaning to enhance classroom participation and motivation, ultimately achieving the goal of improving students’ comprehensive language application abilities.

Most of students’ knowledge originates in the classroom, and the creation of effective teaching situations serves precisely to facilitate classroom instructional activities. Effective teaching situations can emotionally engage students, motivating them to proactively acquire knowledge, actively explore questions, and develop interest in what they learn, thereby significantly improving the efficiency of English classroom teaching.

Effective teaching situations ensure the successful implementation of instructional activities and constitute a fundamental element of classroom teaching. They enable the gradual and natural cultivation of students’ language abilities, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning capacities during teaching activities. Creating effective teaching situations is a fundamental duty of every teacher.

3. Principles for applying effective teaching situations

3.1. Authenticity of teaching situations

Some teachers create fictional teaching situations in order to save time and effort, but these lack authenticity and fail to leverage students’ existing cognitive schemas to stimulate interest. In contemporary English learning, listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing constitute integral components of language proficiency. Teachers are supposed to maximize authenticity by considering the following perspectives: location, context, interlocutors, interpersonal relationships, and communicative purposes, etc. Under the guidance of teachers, students select appropriate linguistic forms for different situations to ensure effective and appropriate communication. Authentic situations should integrate real social environments, root in students’ daily lives and trigger existing cognitive schemas rapidly. Furthermore, they should also be able to mobilize learning motivation and interest, facilitate knowledge and context transfer and enable application of English knowledge to real-world problems.

This approach ensures instruction occurs within thematic contexts, avoiding traditional knowledge transmission and mechanical drills. Consequently, teaching activities become concrete, and instructional efficiency and outcomes improve.

3.2. Communicative nature of teaching situations

Song Delong (2020) pointed that the nature of language is communication, which is

a bidirectional process of meaningful information exchange between speakers/listeners or writers/readers. To imbue learning activities with communicative purpose, teachers must incorporate information gaps, which refers to disparities in knowledge about objects or people. These gaps make communicative activities more genuine and engaging. When students engage in these activities, they are to equipped with the ability to analyze logical relationships using provided information, collaborate with peers to complete tasks. During the process, students need to select appropriate learning strategies and monitor, evaluate, and adjust their learning, with an eye to gaining cultivation in thinking quality and learning ability.

As a consequence, effective teaching situations shift classrooms teaching from teacher-dominated models to dynamic spaces for teacher-student and peer interaction. Teachers should design communicative situational activities to provide collaborative opportunities, requiring students to perceive, experience, practice, and participate cooperatively. The teacher's role evolves from director to organizer and facilitator, fostering egalitarian teacher-student relationships.

3.3. Diversity in teaching situations

Situational creation in English teaching integrates textbook content with real-life applications. Given the multifaceted nature of both real-world English usage and textbook materials, teaching situations must be inherently diverse. Vivid, dynamic, and creatively designed situations spark students' learning interest and naturally facilitate active classroom participation. With advancements in information technology, multimedia teaching has become integral to modern classrooms. Multimedia, synthesizing sound, images, animation, and text into a unified informational medium, enables comprehensive, multi-tiered instructional approaches. This creates open and exploratory learning environments better tailored to students' needs.

Therefore, when designing instructional activities, teachers should leverage modern technology to create diverse teaching situations. Besides, the situation should align with content logic. Since textbooks remain primary teaching resources, situational design must follow knowledge sequencing. Additionally, it needs to serving the teaching objectives. Teachers need to design varied situational content, types, and strategies according to lesson formats and learning goals to effectively support classroom instruction and achievement of objectives.

4. Application strategies of situated learning pedagogy in cultivating senior high school students' English core competencies

4.1. The multidimensional analysis and understanding of students' needs

Accurate student profiling forms the foundation for creating effective teaching situations. Only through deep understanding of learners can situations be designed to match students' cognitive levels, interest preferences, and learning needs. This alignment fosters student resonance with scenarios, prompting active participation in classroom interactions—a prerequisite for cultivating core competencies. When students fully immerse themselves in language application, intellectual engagement, and cultural exploration within situations, enhancements in language abilities, cognitive development, cultural awareness, and learning capacities will occur organically, laying a solid foundation for holistic competency development.

Teachers can employ multifaceted methods to have a better understanding of students' status. They can observe classroom behaviors to record speech frequency and discussion depth, thereby assessing students' linguistic expression and cognitive engagement. They can also analyze assignment performance, particularly error patterns in writing and reading comprehension, to identify students' weaknesses in grammar usage or cultural knowledge. Apart from this, they can conduct one-on-one or group interviews to understand students' learning interests, confusion, and situational expectations. For example, some students prefer technology-themed scenarios while others favor cross-cultural comparisons. Additionally, teachers must recognize students' cognitive characteristics. While senior high students possess logical thinking abilities, they still require growth in intercultural understanding and complex linguistic contexts. The synthesis of these dimensions enables teachers to develop comprehensive student profiles that precisely guide situational design.

Only through thorough profiling can teachers create situations that genuinely interest students, motivating proactive engagement. Within these interactive scenarios, students naturally enhance language proficiency, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning abilities through authentic participation.

4.2. The effective organization of group cooperative learning

The organization of effective group cooperative learning can ensure that every student participates deeply in teaching situations even in classes with a large number of students, while simulating real-life communication scenarios to help students improve their comprehensive abilities through collaboration. In practice, teachers should start with group formation, comprehensively considering students' language proficiency, personality traits, and cultural cognitive levels, and reasonably matching students with different strengths so that each group forms a learning community with complementary abilities, laying a foundation for collaboration in situations.

Such situations based on cooperative learning restore the communication state between people in daily life. In specific situational tasks, students need to clarify their divisions of labor, exchange ideas, and resolve differences through English communication, a process that directly trains their language communication skills. In the process of jointly promoting tasks, students need to understand others'

viewpoints and coordinate different opinions, which develops the inclusiveness and logicity of their thinking and thus improves their thinking quality. When facing tasks involving cultural content, students from different backgrounds share their respective cognitions, which can promote cultural understanding and tolerance and strengthen cultural awareness. Moreover, the experience of achieving goals through collaboration enables students to master team cooperation skills, further cultivating their learning abilities. Teachers need to provide proper guidance in this process to ensure that cooperation always focuses on the development of core competencies, making group cooperative learning truly an effective way to cultivate core competencies in situational teaching.

4.3. The Transformation And Renewal of Teachers’ Teaching Concepts

The transformation of teachers’ teaching concepts is key to effectively implementing contextualized teaching. Current high school education goals have clearly shifted towards a core competency orientation. This requires teachers to abandon the traditional exam-oriented education concept of “emphasizing knowledge transmission over ability cultivation”, recognizing that mechanical drills and test-point explanations alone cannot cultivate talents who meet the demands of the era. Core competency-oriented English teaching emphasizes the holistic development of students’ language abilities, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning capabilities, which is fundamentally different from the exam-driven goal of merely pursuing scores.

This conceptual shift also requires teachers to transform their overall understanding of contextualized teaching. The creation of contexts should not be confined to the lesson introduction but should permeate the entire teaching process, ensuring that contexts before, during, and after class are interconnected and consistent, making the teaching process natural and fluent (Meng Qingtao, 2019).

Teachers need a profound understanding that contextualized teaching is precisely a vital pathway aligned with core competency development goals. Specific and vivid teaching contexts facilitate students to naturally enhance their language proficiency while using English to solve real-world problems, exercise the depth and breadth of their thinking when analyzing and processing contextual information, and strengthen cross-cultural understanding and appreciation when encountering diverse cultural elements. Ultimately, this facilitates the transition from “learning knowledge” to “learning how to learn”. When teachers genuinely embrace the core competency-oriented teaching philosophy, they will proactively integrate contextualized teaching into their daily instructional design. This ensures every teaching phase serves the enhancement of students’ comprehensive competencies, rather than being limited to the mere accumulation of knowledge points, thereby cultivating high-quality talents equipped to meet the developmental needs of the times.

5. Conclusion

The cultivation of core competencies, as the central objective of high school English teaching, relies on the innovation and optimization of teaching methodologies. Contextualized teaching stands as a vital pathway aligned with this goal. Theoretically, situated learning theory and situated cognition theory jointly reveal the intrinsic connection between knowledge and context, providing solid theoretical foundations for contextualized teaching. This framework clarifies the subtle yet profound influence of effective teaching contexts on students' language abilities, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning capabilities.

In practical exploration, while prior research has addressed application principles and specific strategies of contextualized teaching, in-depth studies focusing specifically on the high school level remain insufficient. Creating effective English teaching contexts at this level faces practical challenges including objective constraints, misjudgments of students' learning situations, and the lingering influence of exam-oriented education. Additionally, classroom implementation often suffers from imbalanced lesson introductions and tendencies toward superficiality. These issues stem from the complexity of high school English knowledge, the unique developmental characteristics of students, and multifaceted influences such as teaching resources and educational evaluation systems. To address these issues, this study proposes a systematic set of application strategies—spanning pre-teaching analysis of learning situations, effective organization of group collaboration, transformation of teacher perspectives, construction of critical contexts, and after-class reflection and optimization.

This series of explorations consistently centers on the intrinsic relationship between contextualized teaching and core competency development. Authentic, communicative, diverse, and instructionally relevant contexts provide fertile ground for language application. Meanwhile, context designs rooted in learning situations, emphasizing critical thinking, and undergoing continuous optimization allow all elements of core competencies to organically develop through students' active participation, deep thinking, and engaged practice. Contextualized teaching can thus be seen not merely as an innovative methodology, but as a bridge to achieving core competency goals. It transforms English learning from mechanical accumulation of knowledge to holistic development of abilities, and shifts from closed classroom drills to open real-world practice. Ultimately, it empowers students to grow into a new generation equipped with strong English core competencies.

In future high school English teaching, educators should continually explore and refine the application of contextualized teaching, integrating core competency development into every instructional context. This enables students to enhance their English proficiency, develop thinking quality, strengthen cultural awareness, and cultivate learning abilities within vivid and authentic scenarios, fostering growth into new-era talents with core competencies. Simultaneously, educational authorities and

schools should provide greater support, creating favorable conditions for teachers to implement contextualized teaching, thereby jointly advancing the development of high school English education.

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