

Teaching of English Reading Based on Large Unit Teaching Mode in High School

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Abstract. As a popular teaching concept in recent years, Large Unit Teaching (LUT) has its own advantages in solving the problems existing in the teaching of English reading compared with other methods. The purpose of this study is to address the aforementioned issues with the use of LUT. The study suggested that vertical and horizontal integration of teaching content in LUT satisfies the needs of different levels of students who are restricted by the one-fits-all teaching materials. The processing of reading materials in LUT is guided by a core at the macro level, which avoids the scattered distribution of knowledge points and reduces the cognitive burden of students. In addition, with students as the subject, LUT pays attention to the connection between teaching content and students' life, arousing students' interest in learning as well as encouraging students to apply what they have learned. The corresponding suggestion are offered to better implement LUT in classroom practice.

Keywords: Teaching of English Reading, Large Unit Teaching, Senior High School.

1. Introduction

The latest version of English curriculum for senior high school introduced in 2017 emphasizes the cultivation of discipline core competence, which assists students in acquiring the essential quality and ability for lifelong development and adapting to the society. The adaptation of the new curriculum puts more emphasis on the significance of the English subject in shaping the moral values that will affect students' future lives. At the same time, English classes orientated to the core competence of English subject (i.e., knowledge ability, learning ability, cultural awareness and thinking quality) are advocated. These revolutions call for changes in the traditional English class that focuses solely on the literal analysis of reading materials.

However, the current teaching of English reading in Chinese high schools may deviate from this trend to some extent. Firstly, the one-size-fit-all teaching materials, the foremost reference for teaching, ignore the needs of real-classroom teaching of English reading. Neikova points out that despite the diverse options of reading materials the existing textbooks offer, the way they are presented and the accompanying reading exercises are one-size-fits-all [1]. Taking into account the average level of English teaching in different regions of China, the widely used English textbook for senior high school edited by People's Education Press is considered too easy to meet the requirements of high-level student, so that they may not be well-prepared for the next level of study. Secondly, teachers' inappropriate teaching method that overly stresses grammar and vocabulary hinders students' holistic understanding of the language use. The lack of the guidance of main idea or something at the macro level, Chinese students may likely to encounter misunderstandings due to the cultural obstacles between two countries. Lastly, teaching cannot stimulate learners' motivation in English reading courses. For the internal limitation of textbook that it fails to catch the present trend of the society immediately, it is hard to resonate with students and motivate them [2]. The readability of the reading text itself is ignored in order to meet the requirements of the syllabus. Students are disconnected from authentic language use and unable to relate language learning to real life.

Faced with the above challenges, the existing researches advocate to cultivate students' ability of deep reading with the help of linguistic, content and formal schema and mind mapping [3-7]. However, the problem is that these two methods are still at the stage of analyzing a single text, and do not take into account the appropriateness of the reading material itself, nor do they relate language

learning to life. Others suggest extensive reading to develop students' interest and ability in English reading, and many researches do prove its effects [8-12]. Extensive reading for students with less interest and ability in English reading requires certain guidance in the selection of materials as well as the specific planning, and supervision, while it is impractical to occupy a large amount of extensive reading time in class. In this way, students are expected to do extensive reading without guidance and supervision. According to the mode of major variables affecting the motivation to read in a foreign language proposed by Day and Bamford, materials and attitudes are considered as the primary factors [13]. How can teachers expect students with low motivation in English reading to benefit a lot from guidance-free and supervision-free extensive reading?

Cui Yunkuo, a scholar from East China Normal University, proposed the concept of Large Unit Teaching (LUT) and received increasing attention in field of English teaching [14]. LUT refers to a structured whole which consists of teaching objectives, class hour, context, knowledge points, and other components of a class that integrated by certain needs and standards [14]. Large unit teaching is based on the development of "unit", which first put forward by Herbart who sees the learning of children as a development process with many stages. Big Ideas are getting more and more attention in designing a class of unit teaching mode [15]. Thereupon, the unit teaching centered on a big idea has gradually penetrated into the basic education at home and abroad. Considering that the latest version of senior high school English curriculum (2017 edition) emphasizes the cultivation of subject core literacy, teachers are required to change their teaching from focusing on a single knowledge point to a large unit design.

In view of the current teaching of English reading in high school in China, the paper aims to deal with the existing problems mentioned above with the help of "large unit" teaching, and offers corresponding teaching suggestions. Solutions will also be given to make up the shortcoming of "big unit" teaching in real-classroom practice.

2. LUT

2.1. Vertical and horizontal integration of teaching content

LUT is featured by integrating teaching content vertically and horizontally around a certain core, so as to offer students a relatively comprehensive and mutually-related learning that does not restricted by the one-fit-all textbooks [16-17]. It refers to a large concept, task, or theme around which the content under the same categories can be gathered together [14]. Students can learn with a clear thread with the access to the collection of learning materials around the same large unit from different grades and disciplines. Specifically, the cross-grade integration increases students' learning efficiency by removing the repeated knowledge points and concentrating the content, and the interdisciplinary integration enriches teaching content and makes full use of teaching resources [17].

Teachers benefit from LUT as well. According to Cui, teachers are expected to think like subject specialists to manage a large scale of teaching content, so that they can better understand the essence of education [14]. Charles and Carmel indicate that effective teaching should clarify the concepts and skills of each grade, and especially how they relate to each other [18].

Bruner, an American well-known educational psychologist for structuralism, states that "designing curricula in a way that reflects the basic structure of a field of knowledge requires the most fundamental understanding of the field." [19] He believes that the mastery of the basic structure requires the fundamental concepts and principles, the internal relation between discipline knowledge, and students' appropriate learning attitude as well as proper method. The values of the acquisition of basic structures for teaching lie on three aspects: firstly, to better remember knowledge with the help of a clear frame; secondly, to develop students' ability of knowledge transfer so that they are able to deal with more issues with a similar basic structure; lastly, to minimize the gap between elementary and advanced level of knowledge so that students can be well-prepared for the study of next level. The implementation of LUT contributes to the construction of an intact frame of knowledge through arranging the teaching content under the same core together. At the same time, LUT subconsciously

guides students to learn comprehensively and deeply, and this learning method benefits their life-long learning.

2.2. Handling reading materials with a guiding core at the macro level

LUT encourages teachers and students to form a macro view of reading materials that functions as a guiding core of the whole, rather than over focusing on details [14]. When students are given large numbers of words and phrases that teachers extract from the reading materials, they may find it challenging to absorb all of them at once. In the LUT, however, the reading text in which these expressions reside is grouped into one large unit and guided by a unified core. Students can memorize these expressions by building relationships with the large unit. More straightforwardly, if teachers associate the word "greenhouse" with the large unit "environmental protection", students are more likely to relate the meaning of the word to "climate change", rather than interpreting it as "a house-colored green" literally. So as to lighten their memory burden and familiarize students with the context in which the phrase is used. One of the main characteristics of gestalt psychology is integrity which highlights the superiority of the whole over each individual component [20]. Since people tend to view an object as a whole, rather than as separate parts, teachers should present the teaching content as a coherent whole, in other words, there should have a guiding core at a macro level for the teaching. LUT follows the psychological characteristics of the integrity of human cognition, and advocates the integration of teaching content according to the curriculum standard, textbooks and learning conditions, instead of dividing teaching into scattered knowledge points. Under the guidance of large units, it is easier for students to classify what they have learned. Every time they click on the file of one large unit in their mind, a number of related sub-files appear. Going back to the example above, when students think of the large unit "environmental protection", they can think of the word "greenhouse" and the context in which it is used (climate change).

2.3. Close connection between teaching content and students' life

LUT focuses on connecting students' life with teaching content, so as to stimulate students' learning motivation and cultivate their ability to deal with real-life problems. Dai Xiaoe emphasizes that students are the subjects of LUT, and thus learning should be rooted in helping students interact with the world they live in and then adjust them to the future society [21]. Students are expected to transform from isolated learners to participants of social practice. In LUT, students learn with intrinsic and active motivation which is stimulated by the link between their daily life and teaching materials [22]. Hutchison and Waters believe that authentic teaching materials stimulate students' learning motivation, also, Shidiq and Yamtinah claim that education should be integrated with students' daily life and develop the skills they need [23-24]. Hibbert et al. argue that people are more likely to understand if they see how things relate to what they know [25]. From the perspective of constructivism, Vgotsky points out that learning is essentially a social activity in which students acquire new knowledge on the basis of their previous experiences [26]. According to the above, LUT encourages students to learn and solve problems in an authentic environment.

3. Critique of LUT

In the LUT model, each class is not an isolated individual, but interrelated with each other. In this case, its advantage over other approaches can only be seen in the long run, and its effectiveness is hard to be quantified. Take the mind map mentioned at the beginning as an example. It is usually used to extract the main ideas from a long passage to help students clarify their thoughts. Therefore, it is based on a single text which can be learned in one or two lessons. The adoption of linguistic, content and formal schema aims to analyze the content, logical construction and writing technique of a certain reading material. Students can have a clearer understanding of reading materials with the help of the above two approaches. In addition, these two methods generally work very quickly after a mind map or schema of a text is generated, usually within just one or two lessons. Although extensive reading

takes more time than the first two methods, students can gradually see the progress in their reading ability by accumulating vocabulary and expression through extensive reading. However, under the concept of "learning determines class hours" [14], it often takes several classes to complete a large unit. Besides, LUT helps students establish connections between knowledge, making learning a well-organized system, while this kind of internal logic is usually controlled by human subjectivity and difficult to present with quantitative results.

Overall, the disadvantages of LUT do not overshadow its advantages. English learning is a long-term process of accumulation. In normal teaching, students' learning outcomes are usually measured in a month or even longer period, and students' English reading ability is definitely not be shown by quantitative numbers alone (e.g., how many words they can recognize).

4. Implication

LUT seeks the alignment between components under the guiding core. As Cui says, LUT requires teachers to think as subject specialists [14]. Specifically, the complete implementation of LUT expects teachers to make clearer 6 parts: the arrangement of class hour spent on a certain large unit; teaching objectives; assessment system for evaluating whether the teaching objectives are achieved; teaching procedures in which students are taught with well-organized content; homework and testing system for checking whether students have mastered knowledge; effective way of after-class reflection that helps students to manage their own learning. The alignment under the guiding core cannot be overemphasized though it is a tough task. For example, many primary and secondary school teachers lack the ability to design appropriate assessment, which is a critical part of connecting teaching objectives and teaching procedures [14]. The training they receive pays more attention to how to teach, while ignores assessment. The first reading passage of unit 1, book 1 of senior high school English curriculum edited by PEP (2019 edition) can be grouped into the large unit of human and self, discussing the freshmen challenge. The overall emotion objective under the large unit is to develop a positive attitude towards challenges. Although this goal should be addressed throughout the class, it is better to further highlight it at the end of the class. Therefore, in the post-reading part, teachers may ask students whether they have come across similar challenge in daily life and how they deal with it. If teachers shift their attention to the students' proper expression of challenges, they deviate from the requirement of alignment under the guiding core. In that way, students may think they are only taught how to express difficulties and this probably fosters their negative feelings. In view of the emotion objective, teacher should evaluate students' responses on whether they can face challenges with positive attitudes, so as to permeate an optimistic attitude towards life. Alignment between classes is equally important. It is more about the consistency between different reading materials. The first reading passage in unit 2 is about the relationship between human and society, talking about the development, importance and functions of the Chinese writing system. If unit 2 is grouped into the same large unit as unit 1, then students may be confused about what indeed human and self is about.

Undoubtedly, as teachers are expected to put more efforts on the alignment between each component of teaching under the guidance of the large unit, the workload increases accordingly. The corresponding solution is collective lesson preparation. English teachers form the same teaching-research group can discuss the general design together to check the alignment within each component as well as to cope with difficulties. Senge advocates a learning-orientated rather than a control-driven study organization, so as to prepare students for an interdependent and changing society [27]. His idea was later introduced into the field of education and recognized as learning community, from which professional learning community evolved. A certain number of teachers from the same subject field are often regarded as a professional learning community to improve teaching practice. Hord and his research team believe that learning communities composed of school teachers and administrators exploring subject areas and applying their research findings to teaching practice is conducive to promoting teaching as well as students' learning [28]. DuFour understands learning in professional

communities as a continuous process in which teachers carry out cooperative inquiry to help students improve their learning achievements [29]. In short, the significance of professional learning community is to promote the sharing and creation of knowledge, thus overcoming the challenge caused by complexity of cognition subjects.

5. Conclusion

As a popular teaching idea recently, the mode of LUT can deal with the problems existing in current teaching of English reading. Its vertical and horizontal integration of teaching content meets the needs of different levels of students who are restricted in one-fits-all textbooks. LUT with a guiding core at the macro level in handling reading materials avoids the scattered distribution of knowledge points and reduces the cognitive burden of students. Furthermore, LUT regards students as its subject and focuses on establishing links between teaching content and students' lives in order to stimulate students' learning interest as well as encourage them to apply what they have learned. To be honest, there is still room for further development of LUT. Compared with other methods applied to tackling the current problems in the teaching of English reading, its teaching cycle is longer and its effectiveness is difficult to be quantified. However, the demerits of LUT do not matter too much in view of its merits. Finally, the corresponding suggestions are put forward to implement the mode of LUT in order to make it better serve the classroom practice.

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