

A REFLECTIVE INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LARGE-UNIT TEACHING BASED ON CORE LITERACY

XiaoYu Liu*, JunJun Wu
College of Education, Capital Normal University, Beijing 100048, China.
Corresponding Author: XiaoYu Liu, Email: 1598593819@qq.com

Abstract: China's recent curriculum reform for primary education has placed a strong emphasis on teaching driven by core literacy. To this end, "large-unit teaching" has emerged as an innovative approach to teaching language in secondary school classrooms. Nonetheless, it is challenging to move at a snail's speed when teaching a substantial language unit. Large-unit instruction must be implemented creatively in the classroom, single-unit instruction must be used logically to create a ladder that will help students develop reading comprehension skills, and single-unit instruction must be viewed dialectically. It is blending everyday life, distilling essential ideas, constructing authentic scenarios, and structuring work teams. In order to accomplish the integration of teaching and research, we simultaneously fortify the framework of the school language large-unit teaching discipline, amass outstanding large-unit teaching experience, enhance teachers' control over large-unit teaching, and actively collaborate with colleges and universities.

Keywords: Core literacy; Large-unit instruction; Contextual tasks; College collaboration

1 INTRODUCTION

Large-unit Teaching is a teaching design idea based on the current educational goal of nurturing core literacy in countries worldwide through the continual development of unit teaching and classroom teaching changes. Large-unit teaching differs from the usual single-unit-oriented teaching model in enhancing students' overall abilities. It is dedicated to developing students' core academic literacy through global and systematic thinking, organizing and designing relevant contextual tasks, integrating learning resources, logically linking unit learning content, acquiring knowledge and skills, and developing conceptual understanding through experience and task completion.

2 THE RISE OF LARGE-UNIT TEACHING IN LANGUAGES

To completely understand large-unit teaching, we must first define unit teaching. The "New Education Movement" and the "Progressive Education" movements evolved in Western countries around the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, and the unit teaching approach gained popularity. In this context, Kobrecht introduced the design teaching technique, which emphasizes the creation of transdisciplinary units while focusing on children's mental representations and lifestyles. This pedagogy creates appropriate situations and conditions, stimulates interest, respects personality and the child's autonomy, and encourages active engagement. After introducing this teaching method in China, Chen Heqin and others experimented with it in early childhood. They provided a summary of the "Experiment-Reference-Publication-Review" sequence of actions for implementation. Xia Mianzun and Ye Shaojun edited the Hundred Eight Lessons of Chinese Literature in the 1930s. Each lesson includes four fundamental components: "Literary Words," "Selected Writings," "Grammar," and "Rhetoric." This allowed teachers to become fluent in Chinese while giving them a foundation for unit teaching. Following the establishment of New China, unit teaching was implemented, mainly using textbook units. Throughout more than a half-century, basic education research has reaped the benefits of unit writing and organizing in many textbooks and gained extensive experience in unit teaching, thereby establishing the foundation for large-unit instruction. Currently, China's ministry-edited language teaching materials are still structured in a unit setting, with the unit structure organized in a dual path combining content themes and language literacy and dispersing language knowledge and ability development, as well as thinking and habit formation. In the design of textual guides or practice questions for each unit with a logical structure that ranges from the simple to the complex. Such an architecture and configuration also provide chances and conditions for the growth of large-unit Teaching.

3 PROBLEMS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LARGE-UNIT TEACHING IN LANGUAGES

Large-unit teaching has emerged as a new model that essential education areas are vying to explore in the current historical stage of growing curricular reform. However, when it is put into practice, how things stand and whether or not the desired outcome can be achieved make it a situation that needs to be monitored and understood constantly. For this reason, the author conducts a reflective inquiry on language large-unit teaching and conducts interviews on large-unit Teaching with several language teachers of different school grades in a specific city to understand the problems of large-unit Teaching in the actual teaching situation from the perspective of frontline teachers and to make relevant suggestions to improve language large-unit teaching and promote the realization of core literacy.

3.1 Deviation in Teachers' Concepts and Solidification of Contextual Settings

With the continuous evolution and significant transformations in education, many intricate new terms and concepts have surfaced in the language education sphere. Phrases like "core literacy," "whole book reading," "big concept teaching," "thematic reading," and "interdisciplinary teaching" have become focal points in contemporary educational research and application. These educational principles offer educators valuable insights and innovative avenues for Teaching, expand their pedagogical perspectives, and encourage diverse explorations of teaching methodologies and strategies. However, these new educational ideologies have also contributed to educational practices becoming overly internalized. Educators grapple with a constant influx of fresh terminology and theoretical frameworks, necessitating swift comprehension and application within their constrained teaching schedules, heightening their cognitive load and professional pressures. Moreover, the overlapping and interconnected nature of these teaching concepts, each with distinctive focal points and practical contexts, often confounds educators, leading to misconceptions and partiality in their interpretation and implementation. Consequently, striking a harmonious balance between the swift evolution of educational theory and practice, facilitating educators' precise comprehension and seamless integration of these emerging teaching paradigms, and steering clear of unquestioningly adhering to trends and superficial concepts has emerged as a pivotal challenge in contemporary education reform and advancement. This scenario profoundly impacts teacher A, who is employed at a high school in a specific urban locale.

Nowadays, we educators are concerned that we may be falling behind, not so much in terms of performance but teaching methodologies and principles. While other educational institutions may have progressed significantly with school-based initiatives and other areas, we are still at a basic level regarding comprehensive Teaching and task-oriented learning. However, it is worth mentioning that teaching approaches are constantly evolving. You may only be somewhat familiar with one before it changes, and then you quickly adapt to the next one. These approaches seem similar, but there is still a slight gap. I often cannot be confident that my comprehension is flawless as uncertainties and ambiguities persist (Teacher A of a high school, 15 years of teaching experience).

The continuous introduction of novel teaching theories and the resemblances among these theories have placed stress on the comprehension and implementation of educators at the forefront, resulting in partiality in their interpretation of the evolving teaching theories. For instance, regarding the approach of teaching language in larger units, some educators may misinterpret it as focusing on the amalgamation of various texts, using an article as the focal point to guide the reading of multiple texts to enhance students' skills, which is mistaken for the concept of group text reading. Such misconceptions will likely lead to discrepancies in the subsequent planning and execution of teaching methods.

Large-unit teaching, which is task-oriented and emphasizes contextualization, relies on the learning context to facilitate large-scale learning. Language and text are central, originating from a specific historical context and intertwined with our mother tongue, conveying a tapestry of emotions, thoughts, and meanings that shape the work's framework. Students engaging with such material may need help to grasp the profound messages conveyed by the authors solely through textual cues, often missing the broader context created by the works. To address this challenge, it is crucial to pique students' interest by establishing a familiar context that immerses them in the study, deepening their comprehension and integrating newfound knowledge into their cognitive framework. This approach, as explored by Dai Xiaoe in "Situational Task Activity: An Exploration of Large Unit Teaching Towards Chinese Literacy,"[1] It is critical to fostering genuine learning experiences.

The setting and selection of context play a crucial and challenging role. Some educators establish a simplistic and rigid context that not only diminishes the allure of the language subject but also diminishes students' anticipation and engagement in the language course. Within such a rigid context, students memorize standardized response formats, which are scrutinized as "response templates" in secondary school language examinations. This criticized using "response templates" in secondary school language exams, which hinders the development of students' relevant skills and competencies within a broad teaching framework.

3.2 Difficulty in Implementing Classroom Teaching Due to the Varying Levels of Student Proficiency

As an innovative teaching mode, the core of large-unit Teaching lies in breaking the boundaries and framework of traditional unit teaching, which is no longer confined to the established chapters or units of the textbook but reorganizes and reorganizes the teaching content based on specific teaching themes or core concepts. This change in teaching mode requires educators to have a high degree of curriculum awareness and integration capabilities, to be able to analyze the content of the textbook in depth, to extract the knowledge and skills that have an intrinsic logical connection, and then build a more systematic, coherent and in-depth teaching system around the selected teaching theme. When implementing large-unit Teaching, teachers need to clarify the wholeness and coherence of the teaching objectives and ensure that the chosen theme can run through the whole teaching unit and become a link between different knowledge points and activities. In this regard, Lu Zhiping believes that "language large-unit teaching through the refinement of the relatively appropriate unit theme, and strive to explore the unit humanities theme and the organic links between various elements of language, the unity of several factors, so that the humanities is no longer separated from the language

learning process of a label." [2] For this reason, in the design of the large unit, for the sake of the thematic needs, the selection of the texts in a thematic unit may be a fusion of multiple topics; for example, there are texts selected in prose, argumentative essays, and literature, which, in the In practice, this is a great challenge to teachers' Teaching and students' learning. Ms. B, who has been teaching in a junior high school in a city for eight years, also talked about this point in the interview:

To design a large unit of Teaching, sometimes with the unit theme related to a variety of (genre) articles added, we are designed to enrich the content and even feel a great sense of accomplishment; I think that I set the theme of the particular good, so the Teaching is exciting, but you come to the classroom, you are dumbfounded. Some students think, wow, this class is so interesting. The teacher said the task was challenging, and he quickly entered the state. However, some kids get a big headache when they look at it. They cannot even read a text, and now they have different genres, tasks, difficulty levels, and activities added in. He feels that he cannot keep up, and often, he can only follow the "chorus" of his classmates, but he doesn't gain anything or very little. This significant unit teaching is difficult for children with poor fundamentals (Teacher B of a junior high school, eight years of teaching experience).

Under the guise of a class-teaching system, there exists variability in the foundational language proficiency levels among students within a class, coupled with varying learning aptitudes and reception. Disparities are observable in student performance within the encompassing classroom setting of large-group instruction and in the knowledge and skills they acquire. The theoretical concepts held by educators when formulating large-group instruction curricula need more effective implementation in practical teaching scenarios. Throughout instruction, the objectives of large-group Teaching gradually veer from their original intent, leading to a misalignment between students' classroom responses and performances, creating an overall skewed classroom dynamic. Furthermore, the comprehensive nature of large-group Teaching, entailing the integration of multiple chapters and the incorporation of diverse tasks throughout the learning process, places heightened demands on students' learning capabilities, presenting significant challenges to their linguistic proficiency. This scenario exacerbates the divide in students' language acquisition, as those with a solid foundation in literacy may achieve a "higher level" with integrated large-group instruction. In contrast, students lacking in the language knowledge base may exhibit low engagement levels, struggle to keep pace with classroom advancements, possess a shaky grasp of acquired knowledge, and ultimately experience a decline in learning efficacy over time. Consequently, prolonged exposure to such conditions could intensify student frustration toward language studies and dampen their enthusiasm for learning.

3.3 Lack of Support for School Teaching and Research and Lack of Teacher Experience

Large-unit teaching is not only a brand-new teaching concept and practice mode for teachers but also poses a significant challenge to the school's philosophy and school-based Teaching and research system. Under the traditional teaching mode, schools often arrange and manage the curriculum according to the established teaching material units. At the same time, large-unit Teaching requires schools to break this routine, reorganize the teaching resources more flexibly and innovatively, and design cross-disciplinary and cross-chapter teaching themes, which undoubtedly puts higher requirements on the schools' teaching organization and coordination ability. More importantly, most schools need more experience when they first try to implement large-unit Teaching in their schools. Due to the lack of precedent cases and mature experiences, schools often need help promoting large-unit teaching effectively, providing teachers with the necessary support and guidance, and assessing the effectiveness of their Teaching. This lack of experience increases the risk and uncertainty of school reform. It leads to confusion and frustration among teachers in practicing, thus affecting the smooth implementation and in-depth promotion of large-unit Teaching. Teacher C, who teaches in a junior high school in a city, talked about this:

When the new form of large-unit Teaching was introduced, the teachers in the school needed to learn more about it; after all, it was a new form, and we needed to engage in it more. Whenever we have a relevant teaching and research meeting, we are still very enthusiastic and active in giving our opinions on large-unit Teaching. Moreover, suppose the group wants to do a demonstration lesson on large-unit Teaching. In that case, the teachers will come together to revise the teaching design and give advice to the lecturer during the Teaching and research meeting. The main reason is that they need to gain experience. Some schools in the district are doing well, but they are adapting to their situation, so we may need help to use them. So, the older teachers don't have much experience, and the newer teachers have a lot of ideas, but it is different when they go to the class, and they need to gain experience, too (Teacher C of a junior high school, 17 years of teaching experience).

The advancement of comprehensive teaching methods and the evolution of our comprehensive teaching approach into a distinctive educational attribute necessitate extensive long-term knowledge accumulation and synthesis. Academic institutions need more pertinent teaching expertise. Consequently, subject-specific collaborative teaching and research remain confined to individual experiential boundaries. Many educators need more structured training in executing comprehensive teaching practices. Both educators and institutions are presently navigating through unfamiliar territory and can only enhance their understanding of comprehensive teaching by progressively accumulating relevant pedagogical insights through ongoing training.

4 PATHS TO OPTIMIZING THE REALIZATION OF LARGE-UNIT TEACHING OF LANGUAGES

According to the problems of large-unit Teaching of languages mentioned above, to optimize the teaching effectiveness of large-unit Teaching of languages, the following three aspects can be taken into account:

4.1 Understanding the Learning Situation, Using Single-article Teaching as a Ladder to Progressively Develop Large-unit Teaching

Large-unit teaching is considered a prevailing trend and is proposed as a holistic approach to conventional unit teaching methods, such as standalone lectures. The stance presented by the author is viewed as biased. It is contended that while large-unit teaching may be appropriate for certain educational institutions and all students, it poses a significant challenge for many students with inadequate language fundamentals. While real-life situations and social engagement are crucial, the concept of "indirect learning" holds equal, if not more significant, importance.^[3] The cognitive development of students varies across age groups, with classroom lectures and practical exercises serving as fundamental means of knowledge dissemination. Through detailed explanations provided by educators, students passively absorb information, fostering their expertise and skills—an indispensable aspect of the learning process. Hence, in the realm of language education, deeply ingrained aspects of Chinese language, writing, and cultural literary knowledge highlight the language domain's capacity to exemplify tacit education's effectiveness. While extensive multi-chapter unit teaching can enhance students' overall competencies, it may compromise the in-depth analysis of texts and the appreciation of literary aesthetics. Consequently, the adoption of single-chapter teaching should be advocated as a foundational step, supporting subsequent learning progression.

In the field of education, the integration of individualized instruction and group instruction can be mutually beneficial. Educators can utilize individualized instruction to enhance students' understanding of language and text by engaging in thorough textual analysis to uncover the historical context of the works, the author's background, life experiences, national sentiments, ideals, and beliefs. As Zhu Xi once stated, "Instruction should be meticulous in its details and refined in its execution. Merely indulging in surface-level learning, akin to hastily consuming a lavish feast, is not conducive to learning."^[4] Through individualized instruction, educators nurture students' reading comprehension and problem-solving skills, laying a solid groundwork for them to progress to more comprehensive group instruction. Additionally, teachers provide targeted support to students who may be struggling in language studies, assisting them in mastering effective reading strategies and fostering their ability to engage with and learn from group instruction sessions.

4.2 Extracting Core Concepts and Creating Contextualized Tasks

At the commencement of a significant unit in instructional design, educators must initially clarify that the term "large unit" does not denote "ample capacity" akin to "group reading." It does not pertain to the pace at which students read, nor is it solely about implementing the unit and structure of the textbook in a sequential manner. To enhance students' fundamental language literacy, large-unit teaching aims to entirely eliminate the adverse effects caused by exclusively "double-basic" teaching and the predominance of scientism rooted in unit teaching and to effectively eradicate the teaching inertia arising from the linear arrangement of linguistic knowledge points and the fragmented analysis of linguistic competence points.^[5] Teachers ought to meticulously consider the standards' requisites, use the textbook as a resource but not entirely rely on it, comprehend students' actual needs in the language classroom, fuse objectives into the context where the content embodies the theme, activities reflect the methodology and practical application fosters the development of skills.

Addressing authentic problems, real-life scenarios, interests, and active engagement realizes core language literacy. Teachers should concentrate on extracting core concepts when structuring language instruction in extensive units. For instance, during a novel unit's learning process, educators may define "The novel as a literary genre centered on character portrayal, reflecting societal life through a comprehensive storyline and environmental depiction, encapsulating vast human history, amalgamating literary and ideological value" as the focal point of study. This core concept encompasses fundamental knowledge related to novel comprehension in the language domain, the primary route for students to grasp novels, and the essential significance of mastering novel reading. In former teaching practices, students mainly assumed a "passive receiver" role; in extensive unit teaching, students are situated as "active learners in exploration." Thus, when crafting contextual assignments, educators should align them with students' oral proficiency, cater to their cognitive capacities, consider language learning traits, and closely adhere to the language subject's demands.

4.3 Seek Cooperation from Universities and Realize the Integration of Teaching and Research

As pioneers in advancing educational theory and innovation, teacher-training institutions such as colleges and universities have amassed a wealth of high-quality educational resources by leveraging their deep expertise in educational disciplines and vast academic networks. These resources encompass state-of-the-art research findings in educational theory and encompass the latest developments and advancements in research, as well as cutting-edge

teaching methodologies and technologies. By engaging in continual scientific research and academic collaborations, teacher-training colleges and universities can facilitate the comprehensive integration of educational theory and practical application, ensuring that their research findings are both scientifically sound and hold practical value.

In this particular case, the research findings generated by educational institutions dedicated to teacher training serve not only to enhance comprehension of educational phenomena and principles but also to furnish substantial theoretical backing and methodological direction for educational implementation. Of particular significance to on-the-ground educational endeavors, these findings can be skillfully translated into specific instructional approaches, curriculum formation, or educational evaluation tools to enhance the instructional process, elevate teaching standards, and bolster holistic student advancement. Aside from addressing and sharing the challenges language educators face in executing comprehensive instructional units, there is also an opportunity to solicit support and guidance from a consortium of university professors to enhance frontline teachers' grasp of extensive instructional units. Furthermore, schools have the option to enlist the expertise of professionals and academics to periodically train their educators in comprehensive unit instruction, thereby perpetually enhancing their capacity to conduct extensive unit instruction.

Large-unit instruction in three key areas is crucial: firstly, identifying student needs at the outset, comprehending both the school environment and the student's proficiency level in the target language; secondly, avoiding hasty trends during implementation; and finally, conducting large-unit teaching and research within a task-based framework using contextual backgrounds. Emphasis is placed on task series within contextual settings to enhance students' cognitive skills. Following each teaching stage, reflections on challenges and successes should drive the creation of integrated college-supported teaching scenarios. This involves offering training to educators engaging in large-unit instruction, leveraging university partnerships to address practical issues and share experiences, thus building a repository of best practices and pedagogical insights for future large-unit teaching endeavors.

Currently, the primary language curriculum greatly emphasizes holistic learning, aiming to enhance students' language proficiency within authentic contexts and unifying educational materials to tackle the issue of fragmented instruction in classrooms. It also promotes the professional development of educators and steers language lessons towards a more coherent and efficient path of progress. This methodology represents a progressive transition towards a unified and dynamic language education framework that caters comprehensively to students' diverse needs. Seamlessly blending practical application with theoretical foundations enriches the learning process and fosters a more profound comprehension of language nuances. This curriculum will enhance language teaching to unprecedented efficacy and productivity by providing teachers with the essential tools and strategies to navigate this evolving educational landscape.

Large-unit teaching is a product of the era of core literacy, and this kind of creative teaching points to the necessary character, key abilities, and values that students should possess after learning day by day. It integrates the concepts of curriculum reform with the demands of talent cultivation in the new era. Based on the integration of curriculum content, it takes the learning of big tasks in real situations as the organization of the curriculum, to make students' learning a comprehensive, contextual, and experiential language practice activity. The design of large-unit teaching reflects its own systematic and internal structure of hierarchical order, which is in line with the teaching law of language as well as the learning characteristics of secondary school students. Also, it reflects the status of the learner as the main body of the implementation and evaluation of the curriculum. Only in this way can the drawbacks of fragmentation of subject knowledge points and traditional teaching be changed, and the learning objectives of core literacy be implemented into teaching through teaching design.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- [1] Dai Xiaoe. Situational Task Activity: Exploring extensive unit teaching towards Chinese Literacy. *Basic Education Curriculum*, 2019, 250(10): 7-11.
- [2] Lu Zhiping. The pursuit of extensive Chinese unit teaching. *Chinese Building*, No. 2019, 419(11): 4-7. DOI: 10.16412/j.carol carroll nki.1001-8476.2019.11.003.
- [3] Ren Haixia, Guan Ranrong. The text still needs "article reading" -- Cognition and reflection on "Big concept and big unit teaching". *Chinese Teaching in Middle Schools*, 2021, 502(04): 8-12.
- [4] Zhu Xi. *Zhu Zi's Reading Method*. Zhang Hong, Qi Xi, Ed. Li Xiaoguo, Dong Liping. Tianjin: Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2016, 209.
- [5] Xu Peng. Reflection on Large Unit Teaching in the Context of Core Literacy. *Chinese Teaching in Middle Schools*, 2021, 502(04): 4-8.