

Unit Assignment Design of Junior English Based on the Activity-based Approach to English Learning

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Abstract

The Activity-based Approach to English Learning advocates the integration of language knowledge learning into specific learning activities, which is widely valued in English classroom teaching. However, the application of it in unit assignment design is still insufficient. At present, assignment design focuses more on knowledge consolidation instead of the cultivation of students' pragmatic ability and core competencies. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how to effectively integrate the Activity-based Approach to English Learning into unit assignment design. The purpose of this study is to design a unit assignment case under the guidance of it, combined with the content of Unit 2 in the first volume of Grade 8 published by People's Education Press, in order to provide an optimization idea of assignment design and improve the teaching effect.

Keywords

The Activity-based Approach to English Learning; unit assignment; core competencies; design.

1. Introduction

English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) advocates the overall teaching design based on unit themes, and emphasizes the application of Activity-based Approach to English Learning, aiming at promoting the transformation of students' language knowledge into language ability and building core competencies. However, the practice of English unit assignment design in senior high schools is still insufficient, and it needs to be explored in junior high schools. An excellent English assignment design can not only help students consolidate their language knowledge, but also subtly stimulate their enthusiasm and interest in learning English. Therefore, based on the Activity-based Approach to English Learning, this paper takes Unit 2 in Grade 8, "How often do you exercise?" by People's Education Press, as an example to design unit assignments from three dimensions: learning and comprehension, application and practice, transferring and creating. It aims to improve students' language ability, comprehensively develop their English subject core competencies, so as to promote the innovation and optimization of English assignment design in junior high schools through diversified operation modes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Assignment Design

There have been many achievements in the research on English assignment design in China. Tao (2010) proposed that English assignment design should follow the principles of interest and operability, and classified assignments into knowledge consolidation, interest cultivation, pragmatic competence improvement and cultural awareness cultivation. Yao (2016) believes

that the design of English assignment should follow the principles of objectiveness, cooperation and innovation, combined with listening, speaking, reading and writing. Ji (2022) argues that under the background of “double reduction” policy, the assignment burden of middle school students should be reduced and the effectiveness of assignment should be improved. And she proposed to innovate the English assignment design. Based on the concept of “teaching-learning-evaluation”, Wu (2022) put forward a new design method of English assignment in junior middle school, but it’s only restricted to grammar. To sum up, although the research results in English assignment design are abundant, the studies are still deficient in unit assignment activities design.

2.2. The Activity-based Approach to English Learning

The research about the Activity-based Approach to English Learning has yielded rich results in English classroom teaching. Zhang (2019) has discussed the connotation, characteristics and value of it, and thinks it beneficial to promote the realization of teaching objectives. Ge and others (2020) studied the application of Activity-based Approach to English Learning in reading class, and affirmed the important role of it in teaching practice. Li (2021) contends that there is a lack of practical research, and the activity design should be based on students’ interests, class conditions and unit teaching objectives. Peng (2021) combines it with English homework design, and studied the design case in senior high schools. Yang (2024) has designed classroom expressive tasks based on the Activity-based Approach to English Learning, which guide students to use what they have learned to solve problems in real life and ultimately cultivate their core competencies. In a conclusion, most of them mainly focus on English classroom teaching, while there are few results in English unit assignment design in junior high schools.

3. The Case of Unit Assignment Design

3.1. Preparation Stage

3.1.1. Analysis of Teaching Material

Unit assignment design is an important part of the overall teaching design. Only by keeping consistent with teaching objectives can the expected teaching effect be ensured. Therefore, teachers should insist on starting from the perspective of the whole unit before designing, and combine the unit teaching objectives to determine the assignment objectives. “How often do you exercise?” is selected as a case, and the analysis of teaching material is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Analysis of “How often do you exercise?”

	Theme	“Man and self”
Thematic Analysis	Sub-theme	Healthy lifestyle
	Unit topic	Extracurricular activity
Teaching Content	1. Use of adverbs of frequency	
	2. Words and expressions related to extracurricular life	
Teaching Objectives	1. Use adverbs of frequency to ask and answer questions about the frequency of someone’s activities.	
	2. Master the expressions of extracurricular activities to communicate about daily diet and other living habits.	
	3. Extract information quickly in texts.	
	4. Form a healthy lifestyle and get rid of bad habits.	

3.1.2. Analysis of Learning Situation

In Grade 7, students have accumulated some words and expressions related to this topic, and they are familiar with the general present tense, which has laid a certain foundation for the

study of this unit. Students are interested in talking about their spare-time life and living habits, and they can be guided to actively participate in various language practice activities. The content of this unit also involves many words and related expressions about extracurricular activities and daily eating habits. However, students' understanding of adverbs of frequency needs to be strengthened, and their ability to communicate with what they have learned is not enough, so they need to be consciously assisted to review and apply in assignment design.

3.2. Implementation Stage

3.2.1. Learning and Comprehension Activities

Learning and comprehension activities mainly refer to learning activities involving perception and attention, acquisition and combining, generalization and integration. This kind of activity assignment is generally regarded as the basic part of unit language knowledge around the theme. It's mainly in the form of listening, dialogue training and translation practice, which all students are required to complete.

For perception and attention activities, teachers can choose some health posters with bright colors and contents close to students' lives, such as "Daily Drinking Plan" and "Weekly Sports Day", and highlight adverbs of frequency in large font to guide students to identify and discuss quickly. Or they can play a video which introduces health habits with corresponding adverbs of frequency to arouse students' attention.

For acquisition and combining activities, doing some listening tasks might be a good choice. English teachers may choose some recording materials with moderate speech speed and simple vocabulary to ensure that students can understand and fill in adverbs of frequency accurately. It can reduce the difficulty of filling in the blanks, such as providing options for students to choose. In addition, teachers can encourage students to record one or two health habits every day in short sentences, and try to use adverbs of frequency. It can be set to record at least three times a week to reduce the burden on students. Then they can divide students into several groups to discuss about them and encourage students to use some simple English expressions, instead of pursuing too much grammatical perfection.

For generalization and integration activities, it's suggested to do a classification or a summary. Teachers may provide a clear classification framework, such as diet, exercise, work and rest, and guide students to classify their health habits. And they should try to summarize the characteristics of each kind of habits with adverbs of frequency. They can be allowed to use Chinese auxiliary instructions when necessary and then try to translate those into English expressions. Then they can ask students to make a short healthy lifestyle proposal. The proposal should include specific suggestions on health habits (no more than three items), and describe the frequency of implementation with adverbs of frequency. The proposal can be in the form of pictures and texts to increase interest and readability. Teachers can choose several representative proposals for comments, emphasize the importance of adverbs of frequency in describing health habits, and give suggestions for improvement.

3.2.2. Application and Practice Activities

Application and practice activities mainly refer to the in-depth discourse learning activities involving description and interpretation, analysis and judgment, internalization and application. This kind of activity assignment is generally an intensive training and application practice combining unit language knowledge with theme context, which usually appears in the form of role-playing, text retelling, unit context mind map and so on. Practical activity assignment fully respects students' personality development and requires all students to actively participate.

For description and interpretation activities, it's important to prompt students to produce, whether it is written or spoken. For example, students can write a health diary or an e-mail to

record their health behaviors, such as “I often drink a glass of milk before bed” or “I seldom eat junk food during the week”. The contents of the diary should be clear, focusing on the accurate description by adverbs of frequency. If considering about interests, teachers can ask students to create a health poster. Students choose a health habit to draw a poster, such as brushing their teeth every day, exercising every week and so on. On the poster, it’s required to introduce this habit in one sentence with adverbs of frequency, accompanied by related simple pictures.

For analysis and judgment activities, the innovative design should be reflected. Teachers can provide or ask students to find some English health-related materials. Students need to find out adverbs of frequency among them, explain their meanings in sentences, and try to retell the contents of sentences in their own words. Besides, students can design a questionnaire or an interview containing several questions about health habits, such as “How often do you practice?”, and collect data in the class. Then they need try to summarize the survey or interview results in English.

For internalization and application activities, attention should be paid to students’ practical application ability. For instance, teachers ask them to make a health plan, including diet, exercise, rest and so on. The plan should be concrete and feasible, such as “I will eat three pieces of fruit every day” or “I will go for a walk after dinner three times this week”. Students should write the plan in English and use adverbs of frequency appropriately in the plan. Or students can choose a healthy habit, such as drinking more water, working and sleeping regularly, and prepare a 3–5-minute English speech. In the lecture, students need to use adverbs of frequency to describe the frequency of habit execution, explain its health benefits, and give practical implementation suggestions. After the lecture, students can invite their classmates to ask questions and have a brief exchange.

3.2.3. Transferring and Creating Activities

Transferring and creating activities mainly refer to learning activities that go beyond the text, such as reasoning and argumentation, criticism and evaluation, imagination and creation. This kind of activity assignment is generally regarded as the expansion assignment, involving the transferring and innovation of the combination of unit language knowledge. And it usually appears in the form of writing based on the theme, extracurricular reading, duty report and so on. It mainly aims to provide choices for students who have spare capacity in learning, which is relatively difficult and takes a long time. Sometimes students need to consult a lot of relevant materials or work in teams to complete it.

For reasoning and demonstration activities, it’s necessary to cultivate students’ ability to analyze and solve problems. Taking this unit as an example, teachers can ask students to record their health habits for a week, including diet, exercise and sleep, and use adverbs of frequency to describe the frequency of each habit. Students need to analyze this week’s data and deduce which habits have a positive impact on health and which may need improvement. They can make a simple chart to show the data, and write a short passage to explain why some habits are beneficial or harmful to health by reasoning. Then select a common health problem, such as myopia prevention or obesity control, and ask students to collect some advices on this problem based on the Internet or books. Students need to screen out at least three suggestions, attach a reasonable use of adverbs of frequency to each suggestion, and then write a short composition. For criticism and evaluation activities, it’s important to improve students’ ability of critical thinking and self-evaluation. For example, teachers ask them to collect some health-related advertisements, which can be pictures, videos or words, to ensure that these advertisements include the use of adverbs of frequency. They need to analyze the health information in these advertisements, and critically evaluate the potential impact of advertisements on health habits by writing a short critical comment. Comparative analysis is also a good way to improve their critical thinking. Then they provide two articles about the same health topic but with different

views, both of which should use adverbs of frequency. Students need to read these two articles carefully and compare their main viewpoints, arguments and the use of adverbs of frequency. Then a comparative evaluation article is completed to point out the similarities and differences between the two articles, and finally students are required to evaluate which article's arguments are more reasonable and adverbs of frequency's use is more appropriate.

For imagination and creation activities, the main purpose is to stimulate their creative ability. For example, teachers ask students to imagine a healthy city in the future, which will promote the health of residents through science and technology, environment and social policies. Students need to draw a blueprint for a healthy city in the future, and mark various health-promoting facilities or activities in the map, such as intelligent fitness trails, hanging gardens, automatic eating robots. They can also design an educational game about healthy habit formation. Players need to earn points or upgrade by completing various health tasks, such as drinking water regularly and exercising moderately. It's necessary to pay special attention to the use adverbs of frequency.

3.3. Assignment Evaluation Stage

English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) clearly advocates the educational concept of "teaching-learning-evaluation", emphasizing that "evaluation" is a key link, which not only monitors the whole process of teaching and learning and its effectiveness, but also provides valuable reference and basis for promoting teaching and learning. In order to further optimize teaching practice, the following suggestions are put forward.

Firstly, the clarity of evaluation criteria needs to be strengthened. While designing the assignment evaluation form, teachers must make sure that it should be clear, specific and operable, which is convenient for students and peers to understand and apply accurately.

Secondly, the interactivity of the evaluation process needs to be promoted. Students should be encouraged to actively interact with each other, and form a positive learning atmosphere. At the same time, teachers need to enhance the interactivity and effectiveness of evaluation by organizing group discussions or online communication platforms.

Thirdly, some suggestions about personalized and targeted evaluation should be proposed according to the specific situation of students. This will not only help students realize their own strengths and weaknesses, but also stimulate their learning motivation and promote their all-round development.

Finally, students should be guided to learn self-evaluation and make it an important ability for lifelong learners. Through regular self-reflection, students are able to plan their learning more independently and improve their learning efficiency.

4. Conclusion

Based on the Activity-based Approach to English Learning, teachers should actively create diverse activities, so as to stimulate students' active participation, and promote them to change from passive acceptance to active construction. In view of the differences in students' English proficiency, teachers should design unit assignments subtly to meet various needs in diverse forms. In addition, the evaluation needs to be connected with teaching objectives to ensure the comprehensiveness and pertinence of the evaluation. The three types of assignment designed in this paper are the vivid practice of this concept. This design not only ensures the participation and sense of accomplishment of all students, but also provides room for further development for students who have spare capacity for learning, which is conducive to promoting the overall improvement of students' English core competencies and realizing the individualized development of students in the learning process.

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