

Original Paper

Study on the Design of Writing Activities for the Integrative Review of High School English Units Based on the “Large Unit” Mode

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Abstract

The “large unit, overall context and major task” teaching mode marks the transformation of English teaching. Under the new situation of cultural conflicts, integration and innovation, the establishment of English learning task groups with English core competence as the guideline and students’ English practice as the focus is an innovative teaching mode to meet the demands of the times, namely “influencing people through culture and cultivating people via learning”. Applying the teaching mode of “large unit, overall context and major task” to the writing teaching can enrich the text contents and imbue teaching with poetic charm. Taking “Cultural Relics: Topic Writing Based on Modular Review” in the reading section in Unit 1 of Oxford High School English Book 2 as an example, this paper introduces how the teacher presents the topic writing method through the examples in the textbook, which takes the textbook as the foundation, focuses on the contents of the whole unit, and transcends the text by secondary processing, and finally generates the materials required in teaching. This method aims to encourage students to learn from words to sentences and then to paragraphs by way of gradation and progress with tiered difficulty. Text processing based on profound understanding strengthens students’ impression and memory, displaying a new teaching perspective for the writing.

Keywords

writing teaching, class activities, “large unit” mode

1. Research Background and Problem

1) Writing, as one of the important ways of language output, is a requisite communicative language ability for students. *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (hereinafter referred to as Curriculum Standards) sets forth high requirements for students’ writing ability. However, the writing

teaching has always been a weak link in English teaching. It is a common phenomenon that “students feel anxious about writing tasks and teachers get headaches from checking students’ compositions”. Front-line teachers have been making unremitting exploration and practice in regard to this problem, and researches have shown that there are various deviations in the actual writing teaching, including correcting students’ compositions in general terms, summarizing the writing problems and writing patterns without regard to pertinence, ignoring students’ knowledge base, and instructing students with rote learning of model essays. Replacing teaching basic sentence patterns and structures in line with students’ actual knowledge base with memorizing model essays is not a way to “comprehend by analogy”, but ends up with complaints from teachers and students instead. From the perspective of cognitive theory, writing output can encourage students to engage in deep processing of language and to learn in a more active and responsible way. As Wang Chuming puts forward in his teaching reform of “Promoting Learning by Writing”, “the fundamental way to improve learning efficiency is to emphasize the use of English and train students to use English.” In the writing process, students “must proactively retrieve the English knowledge they have learned, deliberate on the use of grammar rules, ponder the collocation of words, and assess the accuracy and appropriateness of words and sentences”.

2) The current high school English review attaches great importance to the cultivation of students’ writing ability, but the non-negligible problems in writing teaching include: (1) The split review of topics and language makes the language knowledge system acquired by students in the review not closely related to the subsequent writing topic, unlikely providing necessary language support for the topic; (2) The biased review focusing on language while neglecting the topic has failed to effectively extract the knowledge, or to effectively supplement and appropriately expand the extracurricular materials, falling short of “stemming from textbook and transcending textbook”. (3) Although the split review of vocabulary, phrases, sentence patterns and grammar can present the specific usage of grammar based on sentence examples and consolidate the use of grammar based on sentence practice, the provided single narrow context is not closely related in terms of topic, rarely forming a complete lexical system and sentence pattern system in the semantic field, thus impeding the quick extraction of relevant language and sentence patterns in completing topic writing.

3) In fact, each unit of Yilin-edition High School English Textbooks in Jiangsu province provides comprehensive language exercises centered on a main topic. Therefore, when we carry out the review of high school English units, it is feasible to design the thread of topic writing and link the review of key vocabulary, phrases, sentence patterns and other basic knowledge of each unit with each other to organically integrate the training of language skills, the understanding of emotions and values, the experience of cultural awareness and the cultivation of learning ability in high school English teaching with English core competence as the focus. This method enables students to fully perceive, understand and apply the language used in related topics, enrich the content of the topic, enjoy the charm of culture, and explore the in-depth meaning of the topic, so as to comprehensively improve students’ writing and thinking ability, which is of positive and practical significance for the review of high school English

units.

4) Large Unit Teaching requires a full understanding of the level of current textbooks, a deeper understanding about the English subject, more thinking and discussion, and more reading of curriculum standards and teaching reference books, for the purpose of improving teachers' position and cultivating their core professional competence. It also requires teachers to take the learning theme and contents of each unit as a whole, understand the learning requirements of each unit as a whole, instruct students to participate in extracurricular practice and accumulate learning materials, and stimulate students' interest in learning and thirst for knowledge. Among them, stimulating interest is the basic point of guided reading. The overall perception of the learning theme and contents of each unit is the key point. Besides, the instruction of extracurricular practice and accumulation of learning materials is the growth point. English teaching in the new era should start from the whole text and guide students to read the text as a whole, and finally return the whole text in order to train students' overall comprehension ability. Integrative teaching of units based on core competence is not only an effective way to implement the cultivation of core subject competence, but also a reform and improvement of students' learning methods. Large Unit Teaching requires more learning, watching, reading, thinking and practicing, as well as rapid implementation of Large Unit Teaching mode.

2. The Principles of High School English Writing Practice Based on “Large Unit, Overall Context and Major Task”

2.1 Writing Topic: The Thread Runs through the Whole Writing Practice

As for the integrated review of units based on topic writing, teachers can design an explicit thread and an implicit thread. The explicit thread generally refers to explicit language knowledge and skills acquired in language training. The implicit thread refers to the writing topic of the unit. The teaching materials quoted, the teaching situation set up and the teaching activities designed in classroom teaching are all based on the unit topic which is taken as the thread. The review mode of senior high school English with the topic as the thread can meet the examination requirements in the new education situation. Teaching topics that are reasonably designed can link the review of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns with each other and focus on the most important and difficult points, which will improve the review efficiency, while developing students' logical thinking, judgment, discrimination ability and creativity. Topic-based review mode is in line with the requirements of the English subject in college entrance examination, which embodies the following characteristics:

2.1.1 Previous Study of Oxford English Textbooks Allows for Topic-Based Review

Guided by topic-based learning, this series of textbooks covers a wide range of topics. Each unit provides a topic, including common living customs, lifestyle, sports stars, amateur life, music and dance, culture and art, nature and environmental protection, society and social life, minorities, and so on. The topic design of the textbooks creates a good topic model and English learning atmosphere for students. By summarizing and renovating the existing topic-based modes, teachers can “fill the old pot

with new wine”, thereby extending, broadening and deepening the connotation of the topics, by taking advantage of students’ thirst for knowledge. Teachers and students become deeply involved in the lesson through topics when reviewing, which will noticeably increase the attractiveness of the lesson and improve the efficiency of English review.

2.1.2 The Review Mode Can Lead Students to Develop Good Habits of English Reading, Listening, Speaking and Using

The topics contain various contents, and different topic materials can make students comprehend different styles and themes, so that they can acquire more knowledge about discourse. If students are trained to quickly retrieve the connotation of relevant topics and grasp the theme within limited time, the obstacles related to English cultural background and styles in reading will be reduced and students will be able to accurately grasp the subject and theme of an article with less effort. In addition, under topic-based mode, students’ understanding of input materials is enhanced, their command of knowledge points is consolidated, and their ability to acquire and output language knowledge is continuously improved.

2.1.3 It Is Conducive to Students’ Further Reading about the Topics

A related topic can be expanded from the aspects of vocabulary, text structure, language application, writing ideas etc. The process of construction, analysis and imitation inspires students’ English thinking and allows them to experience the unique charm of English language. At the same time, topic-based mode is exerting influence on students’ English writing ability gradually. When students accumulated some familiar topics and have a certain understanding of the expressions in the topics, their comprehensive language application ability will be improved accordingly. Therefore, students can choose appropriate writing techniques and methods in English writing.

2.2 Core Competence: Integrated into and Reinforced by Topic-Based Mode

The core competence of English subject is composed of four dimensions: linguistic ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. In terms of the characteristics of English subject competence, it is illustrated in the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* that “according to the characteristics of high school students’ cognitive ability development and the needs of their academic development, high school English curriculum should emphasize on improving students’ ability to obtain and process information, analyze and solve problems using English, and pay special attention to improving students’ ability to think and speak in English, on the basis of further developing their comprehensive language ability”. The overall reform trend of English subject in college entrance examination has become significant. In the future, English examination in college entrance examination will emphasize more on the contextual meaning in English language use, pay attention to students’ comprehension ability of English paragraphs, and attach importance to students’ ability to obtain English information. High school English review courses are fundamentally different from the teaching of new knowledge. High school students have basically completed the learning of basic English knowledge, have a comprehensive understanding of English knowledge system, and have

certain English application ability and problem-solving experience. Therefore, high school English review is a process of re-learning and re-consolidating knowledge, with the aim of enhancing students' comprehension of English sentences, precise meaning of English vocabulary, and the structure of English grammar. The English review process in senior high school must break through the traditional teaching methods and introduce a teaching mode that adapts to the requirements of college entrance examination. It is supposed to adapt to the pace of examination reform and reflect the requirements of college entrance examination in the review process through comprehensive strengthening exercises, since training in advance is better than cramming before examination.

To implement the integrated unit review mode of "topic writing based on modular review", teachers should always pay close attention to the cultivation of students' core competence of English subject, and design teaching tasks in accordance with the objectives of four kinds of core competence.

(1) Language proficiency

Teachers need to create a real topic situation in accordance with relevant topics, guide students to gradually complete language communication activities in various forms, and expand the carrier of language application, so as to improve students' language application ability.

(2) Development of thinking

In the "situation" provided by the topic, students can exchange ideas using English, which improves students' English thinking ability. Teachers need to pay special attention to the cultivation of students' "critical" thinking ability.

(3) Cultural awareness

This dimension emphasizes paying attention to cultivating students' humanistic emotions and attitudes, designing questions and tasks with thinking value and enlightening significance, exploring and analyzing emotional resources in textbooks, and cultivating students' noble character and moral quality.

(4) Learning ability

When designing the questions in one context, teachers should gradually integrate the presentation of word-formation strategy, contextual learning strategy, semantic field classification strategy and writing strategy into the teaching process, while consciously and purposefully helping students find their own learning strategies and constantly adjust their learning methods to form independent learning ability.

3. Writing Teaching Practice of the Integrative Review of Units of High School English Based on the "Large Unit" Mode

The theme of the lesson given by the author is *Cultural Relics: Topic Writing Based on Modular Review*. In this lesson, the author presents a new writing method which focuses on taking the textbook as the foundation, transcending the text by secondary processing, and finally generating materials required in teaching. Since text processing is based on profound understanding, it can strengthen students' impression and memory.

3.1 Contextualizing the Text to Arouse Students' Interest in Learning

Activity 1: During the break, the teacher shows pictures related to the unit on the PowerPoint on an automatic loop, accompanied by soothing music. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher raises 4 questions for students to think about and answer:

What caused damage to the Acropolis?

What did people do to restore it?

What damaged the Imperial Tombs?

How did people preserve them?

Two minutes later, the teacher and students make a summary and check the answers together:

What caused damage to the Acropolis?

- 1) natural forces 2) earthquake 3) acid rain 4) air pollution
- 5) theft 6) traffic 7) travellers

2. What did people do to restore it?

- 1) appoint a committee
- 2) undertake important work to educate the public
- 3) carry on steady cleaning programmes
- 4) restore it through repair work

3. What damaged the Imperial Tombs?

- 1) centuries of rain 2) war 3) fire 4) theft

4. How did people preserve them?

- 1) strengthen regulation 2) stress their importance and value
- 3) raise money 4) register them as UNESCO World Heritage sites

3.2 Transit from Words to Sentences

The teacher summarizes the key words of the passage, presents them in a mind map, and gives the following instructions:

Work with your partner to make sentences using the words and phrases. Try to vary the sentence patterns. The reasons why damages are caused to cultural relics and measures taken to protect them.



Figure 1. Reasons and Measures

At this point, the teacher's teaching design begins to take shape, which aims to encourage students to move from words to sentences and then to paragraphs by means of gradation and progress with tiered difficulty.

3.3 Upgrade from Sentences to Passage

Next, the teaching process is divided into two steps:

Step 1: Allow students to speak freely during discussion, and fill in the blanks according to the passage. Cultural relics and sites of historical interest are a vehicle that carries the cultural memories of a particular group of people and a place. However, with time passing by, they are being destroyed severely. The damage is partly caused by 1. natural forces like earthquakes and acid rain. The most severe damages result from 2. human activities. In other words, it is 3. theft, war, and thousands of travellers' visiting that mainly cause great damage to them. Facing the grave situation in terms of preserving the cultural relics, the government therefore 4. strengthens regulation.

The government also 5. undertakes important work to educate the public. It leads people to realize the importance and value of protecting the cultural relics. What's more, special funds have been set up to 6. raise money to protect and preserve the cultural relics. Only with comprehensive measures and by our joint efforts can we eventually solve the damage problems.

Step 2: Read the two paragraphs carefully. Then figure out the function of the italic words and underline the sentence patterns.

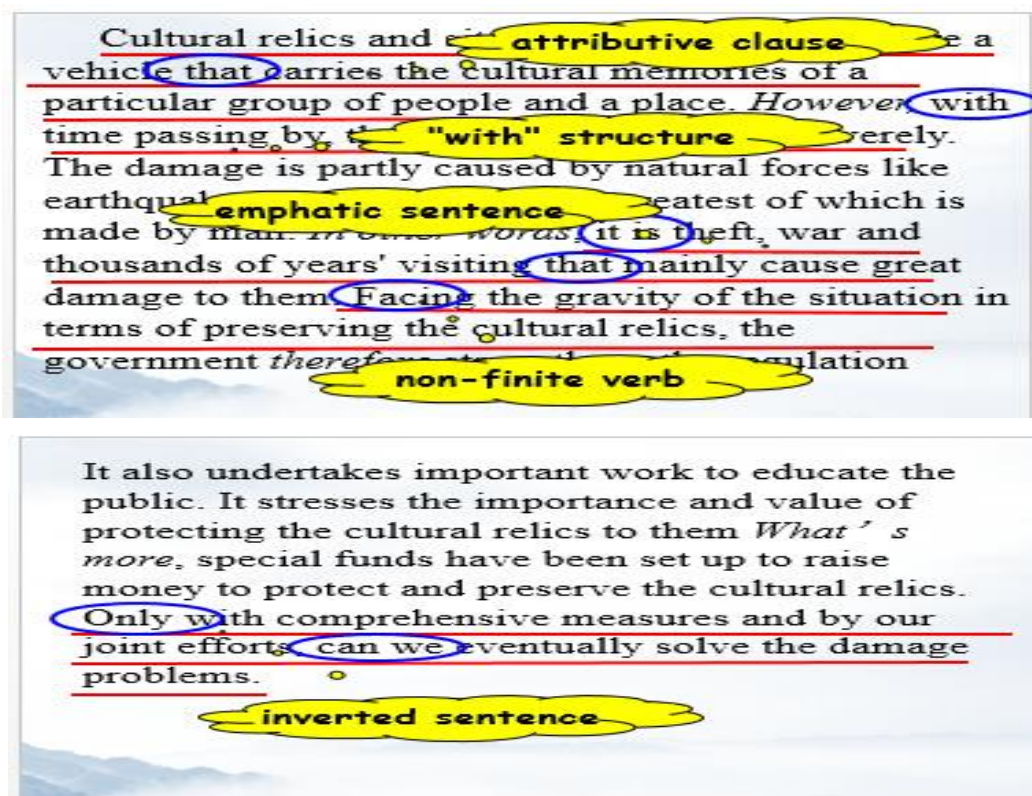


Figure 2. The Sentence Patterns of the Underlined Sentences

3.4 *Effective and Timely Practice*

After the collective discussion and induction, the teacher should first clarify the functions of some related words, and then deepen students' understanding about the five sentence patterns:

Attributive clause, "with"- structure, emphatic sentence, non-finite verbs, and inverted sentence. Then the teacher arranges exercises for timely reinforcement and consolidation.

(1) The Great Wall is one of the greatest wonders of the world.

It was listed as a World Heritage by UNESCO in 1987. (Attributive Clause)

The Great Wall is one of the greatest wonders of the world, which was listed as a World Heritage by UNESCO in 1987.

The Great Wall is one of the greatest wonders of the world, which was listed as a World Heritage by UNESCO in 1987.

(2) About 80% of the Great Wall needs repairing.

We know restoring the Great Wall is a long-term process. ("with" structure)

With about 80% of the Great Wall needing repairing, we know restoring it is a long-term process.

(3) It was not until the development threatens the survival of cultural relics that we realized we should take action. (emphatic sentence)

(4) Being registered as UNESCO World Heritage sites leads to increased tourism.

This results in more potential damage to these fragile sites. (non-finite verb)

Being registered as UNESCO World Heritage sites leads to increased tourism, resulting in more potential damage to these fragile sites.

(5) Cultural relics are not only a symbol of the Chinese nation, but also a precious treasure for the generations to come. (inverted sentence)

Not only are cultural relics a symbol of the Chinese nation, but also a precious treasure for the generations to come.

3.5 *Natural Occurrence of Writing Process*

Based on the above induction, discussion, practice and summary, the writing process will occur naturally.

You are supposed to write a composition about 100 words containing the following points.

(1) Why should we protect the Great Wall?

(2) How has the Great Wall been destroyed?

(3) What can we do to stop the destruction and restore it?

Compared with Philadelphia, the Great Wall was destroyed in different ways, but it was protected for similar reasons and with similar measures. At the appropriate time, the teacher introduces a listening exercise, asking students to listen, read and then fill in the reasons for the destruction of the Great Wall.

The reasons for the destruction of the Great Wall are:

(1) The bricks on the Wall were carried off to build houses, sheepfolds and pigsties.

(2) Some were taken away to build roads.

- (3) Rubbish was spread over the battlements.
- (4) Those who destroyed and are destroying the Wall are not clear about its cultural meaning.
- (5) Some local governments have torn down parts of the Great Wall, paving the way for new construction projects.
- (6) Business people have restored other sections of the wall only for tourism use .
- Then, the teacher presents the specific requirements of writing:
- (1) Contents: Importance (1 point), Reason (3 points), Measures (2 points).
- (2) Vocabulary
- (3) Sentence patterns. The assessment standards are clear:

Assessment	
Structure	a topic sentence or transitional sentence
Language	linking words
	use the sentence patterns that we have mentioned (2)
	use the relevant vocabulary (5)
	few mistakes
Hand-writing	clean, beautiful




Figure 3. The Standards of the Assessment

The highly formative lesson in which the students are well prepared for writing tasks through step-by-step consolidation enables them to write with good expressions.

4. A New Perspective of Writing Teaching

In previous tests, text-based writing tasks are very common. For example, the topic of a writing task in a weekly English practice was “low-carbon economy”, which happened to coincide with the topic of Unit 2 of M5 which is covered by the college entrance examination *The economy or the environment—must we choose?* The original material for the writing task is given below:

Table 1. The Analysis of the Reading Material

The necessity of implementing low-carbon economy in our country	People only pay much attention to economic development, but they think little of environmental protection.
	With increasing cars and factories, a large amount of carbon dioxide is emitted, resulting in serious air pollution.

	If this situation continues, natural resources will be depleted, and the environment will be damaged.
Your suggestions	Plant more trees to increase forest coverage; Develop renewable resources; Recycle the waste.
Your opinions	(At least 2 points)

There are many sentence patterns and expressions in M5U2 that can be used, for example:

It is our duty to try to cut back on production and reduce the amount of things we make and buy. (L21)

A healthy environment and development should be possible at the same time. (L35)

Those factories which pollute the environment ought to pay higher taxes for what they have done. (L50)

In addition, the writing material for the mid-term English exam in one school year in one city is as follows:

With the development of economy, people are becoming more concerned about their image. Everyone wants to be more beautiful, including beautiful famous film stars. People take different measures to lose weight. Some people go to the gym regularly, some go on diets or only eat vegetables, and some even take diet pills or have plastic surgery which is harmful to their health. However, I think...

We can easily find some relevant expressions in the reading part *Dying to be Thin* in M1U3 titled *Looking Good, Feeling Good*. lose weight, want to a slim figure, be ashamed of my body, be popular among, take weight-loss pills, damage your health, be embarrassed about our weight, look great as you are, go on a diet...

5. Enlightenments and Thoughts

If teachers can summarize and sort out the texts in daily teaching, students will have a deep impression on these contents on the basis of in-depth comprehension. As a consequence, they can write with considerable thoughts in mind and express wonderful opinions in compositions, and they are able to write good sentences and use good sentence patterns without much effort.

Driven by thoughts, this paper is almost completed. The famous words by Spencer come into the mind of the author: "The purpose of education is to train children to be happy people, by happy means and methods. It acts like this: if you pour bitter juice into a tiny reed stalk from one end, what flows out from the other end will not be sweet liquid." Tao Xingzhi, a famous Chinese educator, presents a similar idea: "Life educators advocate setting birds free back into the wild, allowing them to fly and sing freely in the wide sky and vast forest." In a lively extracurricular extensive reading lesson like this, teachers will have a profound sense that students are learning in a happy, active, efficient and high-quality way. The embodiment of the students' spirits and the display of the teachers' wonderful

pedagogical thinking make us more convinced that such a lesson can provide a new perspective for English writing teaching for senior high schools.

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