

Original Paper

Research on Differentiated Homework Design for Junior High English Listening and Speaking under the “Double Reduction” Policy

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Abstract

Against the background of the “Double Reduction” policy, compulsory education homework is required to reduce burden while improving quality. Current homework design for junior high school English listening and speaking lessons is homogeneous, monotonous and poorly differentiated, failing to meet individual differences. Supported by the Input Hypothesis (i+1) and Multiple Intelligences Theory, this study adopts questionnaire surveys, classroom observations and case analyses with 96 eighth-grade students from two classes as subjects. It constructs a closed-loop path for differentiated homework design: “stratification criteria-task differentiation-implementation procedures-multiple assessment-dynamic adjustment”. A three-level homework case is designed based on Unit 4 of the textbook for Grade 8 Volume 2. Practice proves that this path significantly improves completion rate and satisfaction, and promotes targeted development of listening and speaking abilities. This study fills the research gap of specialized differentiated homework for English listening and speaking courses and provides operational schemes for teachers.

Keywords

“Double Reduction” policy, junior high school English, listening and speaking lessons, differentiated homework design, closed-loop path

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The “Double Reduction” policy specifies precise and efficient homework design for compulsory education, encourages differentiated, flexible and personalized tasks, and guides the optimization of junior high school English homework. As core skills in second language acquisition, English listening

and speaking abilities largely depend on quality homework design. However, prominent problems remain: homework relies mainly on written exercises, lacking oral practice and situational interaction; difficulty is uniform for all students with poor adaptability; differentiation is only conceptual without clear implementation criteria or dynamic adjustment mechanisms. Against this background, applying differentiated design to English listening and speaking homework to improve instruction efficiency while reducing burden has become an urgent research issue.

1.2 Research Significance

Theoretically, this study focuses on listening and speaking courses, fills the gap that most previous research only centers on reading and writing, and improves the theoretical framework of homework design. Practically, this study constructs an operable implementation path and provides textbook-based cases to offer guidance for teachers. Differentiated homework can meet diverse learning needs, enhance students' learning initiative, and promote the progressive development of their listening and speaking abilities.

1.3 Research Objectives and Contents

This study aims to clarify core principles of differentiated homework design for junior high school English listening and speaking courses under the Double Reduction policy, build a scientific and operable design and implementation path, and verify its practical effects. The main contents include: defining core criteria for homework differentiation; establishing a complete implementation process; building a matching multiple assessment system; designing practical cases based on textbook units and analyzing their application effects.

1.4 Research Methods and Innovations

This study adopts three research methods: (1) questionnaire surveys, including student homework questionnaires and teacher interview outlines, covering 96 students and 10 English teachers; (2) classroom observations, conducted continuously for four weeks in two Grade 8 classes; (3) case study, in which differentiated homework cases are designed and verified.

The innovations are: first, specialized research perspective focusing on listening and speaking courses with listening-speaking integrated and practice-oriented tasks; second, a closed-loop system integrating design, implementation, assessment, and dynamic adjustment to improve operability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Differentiated English Homework under the Double Reduction Policy

The “Double Reduction” policy was first issued in the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education (General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, 2021). Its core goal is to reduce excessive homework and off-campus tutoring burdens for students in compulsory education. Homework design should balance burden reduction and quality improvement, control total volume and duration, improve design quality, and encourage stratified, flexible, and personalized tasks. Since the

policy was implemented, domestic scholars have widely recognized the core value of differentiated design for achieving burden reduction and quality improvement in English homework. They proposed that differentiated homework should follow the principles of pertinence, practicality, and openness, and realize differentiated design from the dimensions of students, content, and evaluation. The three-level framework of students, content, and evaluation proposed by Liu Quanyi (2025), the three-dimensional “goal-content-evaluation” method by Yu Jia (2025), the multi-dimensional differentiation strategy by Zhu Canqin (2025), and the personalized homework design idea by Yang Jing and Zheng Qi (2022) have jointly established an overall framework for English differentiated homework design (Liu, 2025; Yu, 2025; Zhu, 2025; Yang & Zheng, 2022). However, existing studies still have problems such as insufficient alignment between theories and the “Double Reduction” policy, weak differentiated evaluation in listening and speaking lessons, and lack of systematic implementation paths.

2.2 Practical Status of Homework in Junior High School English Listening and Speaking Lessons

Junior high school English listening and speaking homework refers to after-class tasks designed around core objectives such as listening comprehension, oral expression, and situational communication. Different from traditional written homework, it features practicality and interactivity, including listening check-in, dialogue imitation and other forms, in line with curriculum standards and avoiding mechanical drills. The multi-modal theory proposed by Yang Xuequn (2023) provides important ideas for innovating homework forms in listening and speaking lessons (Yang, 2023). Zhu Lingyi (2022) emphasized the interest and thinking orientation in homework design (Zhu, 2022). Based on the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition), Zhang Xueyi (2023) clarified the design requirement of “integrating listening and speaking” (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Zhou Qian (2023) introduced homework design experience from British primary and secondary schools, offering international references for the stratified design, duration control, and interdisciplinary integration of listening and speaking homework in China (Zhou, Wang, & Wang, 2023). In this study, listening and speaking homework adheres to the principle of “integrating listening and speaking”. Each level includes closely connected listening input and oral output tasks, forming a complete language practice process that fits the cognitive characteristics of junior high school students.

However, prominent problems remain in current practice: homework is homogeneous with a “one-size-fits-all” difficulty level and lacks differentiated innovative forms, making it difficult to adapt to students of different levels; evaluation methods are rigid without differentiated standards matching stratified homework; existing cases lack unit-based holistic thinking and are not closely connected with textbook content. This situation indicates that optimizing listening and speaking homework must diversify forms with Multiple Intelligences Theory and strengthen the practice process with Constructivist Learning Theory to break the dilemma of single form and insufficient interaction.

2.3 Application Research of Differentiated Homework in L2 Listening and Speaking Teaching

The application of differentiated homework in second language listening and speaking teaching is

supported by theories of second language acquisition and educational psychology. The “i+1” Input Hypothesis, Multiple Intelligences Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory provide a scientific basis for difficulty stratification, diversified forms, and implementation procedures of homework. Gao Yuan (2025) put forward a three-level homework design idea based on the “i+1” principle (Gao, 2025); Song Bofeng (2025) proposed diversified homework forms combined with Multiple Intelligences Theory (Song, 2025); Liu Yuanchun (2024) developed unit-based holistic differentiated homework design based on constructivism (Liu, 2024). These studies integrate second language acquisition theory with junior high school English teaching practice, offering practical ideas for the design of stratified listening and speaking homework.

The stratified design in this study is based on individual differences in students’ listening and speaking abilities, learning attitudes, and interests, carrying out differentiated planning and implementation in homework objectives, content difficulty, form selection, and evaluation standards. It follows the dynamic principle: levels are adjusted every two weeks according to homework completion and classroom performance, divided into basic level, improvement level, and expansion level to adapt to different students’ Zone of Proximal Development.

However, most studies focus on the overall homework design of English, lacking special adaptability to listening and speaking lessons, and fail to design targeted plans combining the “practical and situational” characteristics of listening and speaking lessons. Some studies only put forward the concept of stratification without clear specific criteria, implementation procedures, and dynamic adjustment mechanisms, making theories difficult to implement. The above research gaps show that stratification for listening and speaking lessons must rely on the Zone of Proximal Development and “i+1” Input Hypothesis for difficulty basis, and use Multiple Intelligences Theory to support diversified forms, so as to turn stratification from concept into operation.

Based on the above research context and theoretical support, this study carries out path construction and practical exploration of stratified homework design for listening and speaking lessons on the basis of the four theories: “i+1” Input Hypothesis, Multiple Intelligences Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Zone of Proximal Development.

2.4 Research Gaps and Entry Points of This Study

In summary, existing studies have recognized the value of stratified design in English homework. However, specialized research on junior high school English listening and speaking lessons under the “Double Reduction” policy still has four core gaps: first, insufficient research focus, lacking special stratified homework research targeting “listening-speaking integration” in listening and speaking lessons; second, insufficient operability, lacking systematic discussion on core issues such as stratification criteria, implementation procedures, and dynamic adjustment mechanisms, and insufficient attention to stratified homework design from the perspective of unit-based holistic teaching; third, insufficient integration, lacking in-depth integration of international second language acquisition theories, advanced foreign experience, the “Double Reduction” policy, and the actual situation of junior

high school English teaching in China, failing to achieve quality improvement in listening and speaking ability training under the premise of burden reduction; fourth, imperfect evaluation and feedback system, with weak research on differentiated evaluation and formative feedback of stratified homework, failing to form a complete closed loop of “design-implementation-evaluation-feedback”[14].

Combined with the above research gaps, this study intends to explore the following three core questions:

- (1) What is the current status of junior high school English listening and speaking homework design under the “Double Reduction” policy? What are the core problems related to stratified design?
- (2) How to construct an “design-implementation-evaluation-feedback” operable closed-loop stratified homework design path for junior high school English listening and speaking lessons?
- (3) How to design textbook-based stratified homework cases for junior high school English listening and speaking lessons and build a scientific practical effect verification framework?

Taking the gaps of existing studies as the entry point, guided by the “Double Reduction” policy, this study constructs a stratified path based on the above theories; combines the concept of unit-based holistic teaching, designs stratified homework cases meeting the duration requirements of the “Double Reduction” policy with specific textbook units as carriers; integrates differentiated homework feedback strategies, and uses advanced international experience to improve implementation support; verifies the effectiveness of the path through questionnaire surveys and other methods, providing operable solutions for the optimization of junior high school English listening and speaking homework.

3. Investigation and Problem Analysis of Current Status of Homework Design

3.1 Investigation Design and Implementation

This study adopts a combination of questionnaire survey and interview, selecting two eighth-grade classes (48 students per class, 96 students in total) in a junior high school in urban areas as survey objects. A total of 96 student questionnaires were distributed, with 93 valid questionnaires recovered, and the effective recovery rate was 96.9%; semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 English teachers. At the same time, classroom observations were conducted for 4 consecutive weeks in these two classes, recording the whole process of listening and speaking teaching, homework assignment, implementation and evaluation.

3.2 Current Status and Core Problems

In terms of homework form, written listening exercises accounted for 78.5%, oral imitation accounted for 65.6%, while practical homework such as role-playing and situational dialogue was less than 18.2%. 62.4% of students had passive completion attitudes, with serious homework homogeneity and insufficient practicality. This is consistent with the problems of single homework form, lack of situational interaction and insufficient interest in English listening and speaking lessons pointed out by Yang (2023) and Zhu (2022), which violates the communicative goals of listening and speaking lessons and the quality improvement requirements of the “Double Reduction” policy.

In terms of homework difficulty, 83.9% of students thought homework had no gradient, 41.9% of underachievers thought it was too difficult, and 24.7% of excellent students thought it was too low; 90% of teachers recognized the value of differentiation, but only 20% of teachers simply implemented it, with vague differentiation and common “one-size-fits-all” phenomenon. This is consistent with the research conclusions proposed by Liu (2025) and Yu (2025) regarding the insufficient implementation of differentiated homework and its poor adaptability to different difficulty levels. Long-term implementation of such practice will aggravate the polarization of students’ abilities, which is inconsistent with the requirements of differentiated education policies and the laws of individual differences.

In terms of duration allocation, 92.7% of teachers controlled the total duration within 20 minutes, but listening homework accounted for 75.3% and oral only 24.7%. 71.0% of students had oral practice squeezed by listening time consumption, with serious imbalance between listening and speaking duration. This is contrary to the principle of “integrating listening and speaking” emphasized by Zhang (2023), making it difficult to form a complete language input–output chain.

In terms of evaluation methods, result evaluation corrected by teachers accounted for 87.1%, process evaluation only 12.9% with vague expression, adopting unified standards to evaluate all students, with rigid evaluation, lack of differentiation and process feedback. This is also consistent with the problems of monotonous assessment and inefficient feedback of differentiated homework proposed by Zhou (2023) and Liu (2024), which fails to exert the diagnostic, motivational and guiding functions of evaluation and shows poor compatibility with the requirements of differentiated homework.

4. Differentiated Design Path and Practical Cases

4.1 Core Principles of Differentiated Design

Based on the requirements of the “Double Reduction” policy, the teaching characteristics of junior high school English listening and speaking lessons, and individual differences among students, this study establishes three core principles:

Differentiation Principle: Guided by Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and the “i+1” Input Hypothesis, objectives and difficulty are designed hierarchically according to individual differences to match students’ zones of proximal development and solve the problem of “one-size-fits-all” homework.

Practicality Principle: Based on Multiple Intelligences Theory and the communicative nature of listening and speaking lessons, the design adheres to listening-speaking integration, practicality and situational tasks, with duration strictly controlled within 15 minutes to balance burden reduction and ability development.

Dynamic Principle: Based on constructivism and formative evaluation, an “evaluation–feedback–adjustment” mechanism is established to realize dynamic management of stratification. Student levels are adjusted every two weeks based on evaluation results with targeted feedback to avoid labeling.

4.2 Closed-Loop Differentiated Design Path

Based on the three core principles of differentiation, practicality, and dynamism, this study constructs a closed-loop path: “stratification criteria – task differentiation – implementation procedures – multiple assessment – dynamic adjustment”, ensuring the concept of differentiation is effectively implemented in daily teaching practice.

In terms of stratification criteria, students are divided into three levels (basic, intermediate, advanced) based primarily on their listening-speaking ability, and supplemented by learning attitudes and interests. Each level has clear homework objectives and time limits, with each task strictly controlled within 15 minutes (50% listening, 50% speaking) to meet the “Double Reduction” requirements.

For task differentiation, the design follows the “listening-speaking integration” principle with tiered tasks:

- Basic level: Focus on listening discrimination, sentence pattern imitation and repetition to consolidate foundational language knowledge.
- Intermediate level: Focus on information extraction and situational dialogue creation to enhance interaction and application skills.
- Advanced level: Focus on viewpoint extraction, English Vlog production and themed speeches to develop logical thinking and creativity.

In assessment and adjustment, a multi-dimensional evaluation system is adopted: teacher assessment (60%) + self-assessment (20%) + peer assessment (20%), with differentiated criteria for each level, balancing process and outcome evaluation:

- Basic level: Focus on pronunciation accuracy, basic sentence patterns and number expression; self-assessment on knowledge mastery; peer assessment on pronunciation and sentence use.
- Intermediate level: Focus on complete information extraction, grammatical accuracy and fluency; self-assessment on information integration and logic; peer assessment on interaction and clarity.
- Advanced level: Focus on accurate viewpoints, creative content and interdisciplinary integration; self-assessment on design and logic; peer assessment on creativity and expressiveness.

Dynamic adjustment is conducted every two weeks, based on homework completion (70%) and classroom performance (30%). Upgrading follows the process: “student application – teacher evaluation – confirmation – home-school communication”; downgrading uses: “one-on-one consultation – problem identification – improvement plan – level adjustment”. All adjustments are shared with students and parents to ensure stratification remains dynamic and non-labeling, forming a complete closed loop of “design – implementation – assessment – adjustment”.

4.3 Practical Case of Differentiated Homework for Listening and Speaking Lessons

4.3.1 Case Background

This case takes Unit 4 *The Wonders of Nature* from *PEP English Grade 8 Volume 2* as the teaching carrier and is implemented among 96 students from two eighth-grade classes in a junior high school. The specific design of the differentiated homework is shown in **Table 1**. Students are divided into three

levels according to their listening and speaking abilities:

Basic Level: 16 students per class (33.3%), with weak vocabulary and numerical expression, and limited oral sentence patterns;

Intermediate Level: 22 students per class (45.8%), able to master core vocabulary but insufficient in information integration and oral fluency;

Advanced Level: 10 students per class (20.9%), with solid language foundation, competent in viewpoint extraction and innovative expression.

This unit focuses on the geographical features and conservation significance of natural wonders. The core grammar includes positive, comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives and adverbs, supported by three progressive sentence patterns: basic communication, situational application and viewpoint expression.

The teaching takes listening-speaking integration as the core, integrating interdisciplinary geography knowledge and environmental literacy education. All differentiated homework is strictly controlled within 15 minutes per level, fully meeting the burden reduction and quality improvement requirements of the “Double Reduction” policy.

4.3.2 Specific Design of Differentiated Homework

Table 1. Differentiated Homework Design for Listening and Speaking Lessons of Unit 4 *The Wonders of Nature* (Grade 8 Volume 2, PEP Edition)

Homework Level	Listening Task	Speaking Task	Homework Objectives	Evaluation Focus	Feedback Methods
Basic Level (15 mins)	Listen to the recording of Section A extract of four wonders, complete matching “Natural Wonders—Key Data”	Imitate textbook dialogues, complete 1-minute oral communication and with partners using basic patterns	1.Master core vocabulary and digital expression; 2.Consolidate basic sentence patterns and grammar; 3.Complete basic listening and speaking application	1.Accurate vocabulary pronunciation; 2.Standard digital expression; 3.Correct sentence pattern use	1.Mark errors sentence by sentence; 2.Provide standard recordings for imitation; 3.Distribute sentence pattern auxiliary cards

Intermediate Level (15 mins)	Listen to the 4-person group interview audio of completes Section A 2b, 2-minute extract characteristics of deep-sea animals, exploration achievements and pollution status, and complete key point notes	1.Improve information extraction and integration ability; 2.Use at least 2 grammar flexibly; 3.Strengthen listening-speaking integration and cooperative expression; 4.Improve group cooperation and oral fluency	1.Complete information extraction; 2.Accurate grammar use; 3.Fluent expression and clear logic	1.Written comments on highlights and errors; 2.1–5 scoring peer evaluation; 3.Share excellent briefing examples	
Expansion Level (15 mins)	Watch 3-minute natural wonders news, extract viewpoints of Amazon Rainforest Great Barrier Reef, record in short sentences	Shoot a 2-minute English Vlog: introduce current situation, forward and protection suggestions in express thoughts	1.Improve viewpoint extraction and critical thinking; 2.Strengthen innovative expression; 3.Integrate interdisciplinary and environmental literacy	1.Accurate viewpoints and coherent logic; 2.Creative content; 3.Effective interdisciplinary integration	1.Personalized optimization suggestions; 2.Display excellent works in class; 3.Organize peer evaluation

4.3.3 Verification of Practical Effects and Implementation Reflection

(1) Verification of Practical Effects

Pre-test and post-test data show that students at all levels achieved significant improvements in their listening and speaking test scores after the practice. Specifically, the average score increased by 18.3 points for the basic level, 15.2 points for the intermediate level, and 12.6 points for the advanced level. The basic level students showed the greatest improvement, indicating that differentiated homework effectively addresses the weaknesses of underachieving students, which aligns with Gao (2025) conclusion that differentiated homework can effectively compensate for the academic shortcomings of underperforming students.

Regarding homework completion, the overall on-time submission rate reached 94.8%, and the quality

compliance rate was 91.7%, representing increases of 21.3% and 17.4% respectively compared with before the practice. Students' homework completion attitudes and learning initiative improved significantly. The homework satisfaction survey revealed that 96.8% of students were satisfied with the differentiated homework, with 93.5% considering the difficulty level appropriate to their ability and 89.2% approving of the listening-speaking integrated format. These results are highly consistent with the views of Song (2025) and Zhu (2025) that differentiated homework can effectively enhance student engagement and homework satisfaction.

Additionally, the study found that balanced allocation of time between listening and speaking tasks significantly increased students' willingness to speak, which supports Zhang (2023) conclusion that integrating listening and speaking promotes the holistic development of language competence.

(2) Implementation Reflection

Overall, the differentiated design path, task design, and implementation process achieved the expected results, consistent with similar domestic research. However, three areas require further optimization: The depth of interdisciplinary integration in advanced-level homework could be enhanced, for example by incorporating more geography and science content to foster inquiry.

Students at the basic level have limited self-regulation skills, requiring more teacher modeling and ongoing support. While peer assessment criteria were established, practical implementation suffered from lenient scoring and insufficient guidance, necessitating more detailed rubrics. These challenges align with Liu (2024) and Zhou (2023) reflections on the difficulties of implementing differentiated homework. Future improvements may include building a differentiated homework resource library, refining digital assessment tools, and strengthening home-school collaboration.

5. Future Prospects

Future research can expand the sample scope and research duration, integrate digital tools and intelligent assessment, strengthen interdisciplinary connection, and develop project-based listening and speaking tasks to support the sustainable development of students' core competencies.

6. Conclusion

This study constructs a closed-loop differentiated homework design path for junior high school English listening and speaking courses under the Double Reduction policy, which effectively solves the problems of homogeneity, unclear stratification, and simplex assessment, meets the requirements of burden reduction and quality improvement, significantly promotes students' listening and speaking abilities and learning participation, and provides replicable and operable schemes for frontline teachers.

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