Practical Application of Contextual Teaching in Secondary School English Education Guided by Core Competencies

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of cultivating core competencies, secondary English education is undergoing a major transformation from knowledge transmission to the development of abilities and character. Contextual teaching, by creating authentic, meaningful, and highly interactive language scenarios, builds a crucial bridge for achieving the four core competencies: language proficiency, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and learning skills. This paper analyzes the intrinsic connection between core competencies and situational teaching. Drawing on the practical realities of secondary English education, it comprehensively explains the practical methods of situational teaching guided by core competencies. This is achieved through three dimensions: principles of scenario construction, specific classroom implementation models, and multidimensional evaluation of student competency development. The aim is to provide insights for enhancing the educational effectiveness of English instruction.

Keywords: Core competencies; Secondary school English; Contextual teaching; Practical pathways; Educational value

1. Introduction

With the deepening advancement of globalization and informatization, educational objectives have transcended the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills, shifting toward the comprehensive cultivation of key character traits and competencies essential for students' lifelong development and societal progress. The core competencies of English education, encompassing linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and learning abilities, embody this transformative shift. This shift demands that English instruction move beyond mechanical drills and fragmented knowledge acquisition toward enhancing students' comprehensive humanistic literacy within authentic or simulated contexts. Contextual teaching emphasizes embedding learning content within specific, vivid scenarios, enabling students to construct meaning and strengthen abilities through experience, exploration, and interaction; an approach that aligns closely with the standards for cultivating core competencies. Therefore, exploring core competency-oriented contextual teaching practices in secondary English education holds significant theoretical and practical value for advancing English curriculum reform and fulfilling the fundamental mission of fostering virtue and nurturing talent.

2. The intrinsic connection and practical implications of core competencies and contextual teaching

Contextual teaching is not merely a singular pedagogical method, but rather a systematic practice that reshapes instructional content, processes, and environments under the guidance of core competency objectives. It provides a clear operational framework for effectively implementing competency development.

2.1. Contextual teaching for comprehensive language application

In secondary English classrooms, contextual teaching serves as a key approach to achieving language proficiency goals. Teachers should design learning activities centered around real-life or simulated scenarios, such as planning an "International Exchange Week on Campus", drafting an "Environmental Initiative Proposal", or recording an "Online English Podcast", that integrate multiple skills. In these contexts, students must not only apply acquired vocabulary and grammar but also coordinate listening, speaking, reading, viewing, and writing skills to communicate and collaborate effectively. In implementing simulated tasks like "Travel Consultant Designing Itineraries for Foreign Tourists", students must identify needs, research information, deliver oral explanations, and draft concise plans. This process promotes the integration and internalization of language knowledge through application, effectively transitioning from "learning language structures" to "using language to accomplish tasks". It enhances the appropriateness and fluency of language usage.

2.2. Deepening cultural awareness through contextual teaching experiences

Cultivating cultural awareness requires more than mere knowledge transmission; it necessitates authentic experiences facilitated by contextual scenarios. In secondary English instruction, teachers can design immersive scenarios such as "Practicing Chinese and Western Table Manners", "Explaining Traditional Festivals in English", or "Discussing Cultural Values in Films". Students can be organized into groups to prepare an "International Promotion Event for Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects". During this process, they must analyze cultural foundations, compare domestic and international perceptions, and deliver vivid explanations in English. Such hands-on experiences transform students from passive recipients of cultural information into active comparators and reflectors. Through emotional resonance, they deepen their identification with and confidence in Chinese culture while cultivating an open, respectful attitude toward foreign cultures, thereby building foundational cross-cultural communication competencies.

2.3. Contextual teaching stimulates hierarchical development of thinking skills

The enhancement of thinking skills relies on challenging cognitive scenarios. In English instruction, teachers can create task environments featuring contradictions, choices, or creative space aligned with unit themes. For example, during technology-themed studies, organize a debate on "The Pros and Cons of Artificial Intelligence"; for community life learning, plan a "Renovation Proposal Solicitation Project" for aging residential areas. As students defend viewpoints, evaluate information, and formulate arguments, they inevitably engage in a series of cognitive activities: information screening, logical structuring, critical reflection, and even innovative design. This approach deeply integrates language application with thinking training, propelling students from lower-order cognitive tasks like factual memorization and comprehension toward higher-order thinking stages such as analysis, evaluation, and innovation. This genuinely advances their logical, critical, and creative thinking abilities.

3. Classroom implementation models for English contextual teaching guided by core competencies

Translating core competency objectives into daily teaching practice requires concrete, actionable contextual teaching models. The following interconnected models collectively facilitate the progressive enhancement of competencies.

3.1. Creating integrated contexts based on unit themes

Using textbook unit themes as the overarching framework for curriculum integration signifies breaking free from the constraints of individual lessons [1]. It involves designing a large-scale context or project that spans the entire unit learning cycle, possessing inherent logic and real-world relevance. This instructional approach embeds fragmented language knowledge points and skill training within a comprehensive, challenging task. For a unit themed around "Travel", one could design an overarching task: "Plan and produce a cultural tourism guide for international visitors to your city (or region)". This task inherently possesses authenticity and complexity, naturally integrating multiple dimensions such as language learning, cultural exploration, information synthesis, and creative expression.

Guided by this overarching context, the individual lessons within the unit no longer exist in isolation but transform into a coherent sequence of sub-tasks required to accomplish the overall mission. At the outset of the course, students must first advance the "Information Exploration" sub-task. Through literature review, field investigations, or interviews, they systematically gather information about culturally representative local attractions, cuisine, intangible cultural heritage projects, and other relevant subjects [2]. Entering the "Content Creation" phase, each lesson focuses on crafting compelling destination descriptions, designing one- or two-day itineraries tailored to diverse visitor needs, and simulating solutions to practical challenges encountered during travel. The unit concludes with "Product Launch and Promotion", where students apply their knowledge holistically to complete the guide's layout design and prepare a targeted promotional plan for presentation.

This project-driven unit learning model integrates language skill development with cultural understanding, critical thinking, and collaborative inquiry. Throughout the tangible project process, students must proactively apply and synthesize vocabulary and sentence structures for effective communication to achieve outcomes. They require deep cultural insight to curate and interpret materials, and must employ critical and creative thinking to resolve practical challenges during project execution. The entire learning process forms a complete cycle from goal setting, plan implementation, problem-solving, to final presentation. Students transition from passive knowledge recipients to active project builders, systematically enhancing their comprehensive language proficiency and core competencies within meaningful contexts.

3.2. Immersive scenario experiences leveraging diverse resources

Comprehensively utilize information technology, physical props, role-playing, field trips, and other diverse resources to create an immersive learning environment that stimulates students' multisensory engagement. Virtual reality technology can transport students to virtual tours of the British Museum or NASA. Physical props can simulate an "International Trade Fair" in the classroom, where students take on roles as merchants from different countries to negotiate deals. Students can adapt and perform short English plays based on textbook narratives. Alternatively, they can design and execute English questionnaires and interviews on real-world topics like "Optimizing Campus Waste Sorting". These diverse approaches aim to transcend the limitations of traditional texts by creating authentic or simulated scenarios with tangible experiential value, effectively alleviating students' anxiety and psychological barriers during language acquisition.

The key advantage of creating such immersive scenarios lies in significantly enhancing students' sense of belonging, engagement, and motivation. When students use VR headsets to examine the Rosetta Stone "up close", or frantically search for the right English expressions to close a deal in simulated trading scenarios, language learning transforms from an abstract task into an intrinsic need to address immediate, practical problems [3]. In short plays adapted from textbook texts, students must deeply grasp character personalities and plot logic to effectively convey them through appropriate language, expressions, and gestures. This unreserved immersion ensures that both input and output of the target language occur within meaningful, high-engagement interactions, greatly accelerating the internalization and automation of linguistic knowledge.

Within this deeply engaged and interactive learning process, the mode of knowledge acquisition undergoes a fundamental shift. Learning ceases to be a one-way transmission of knowledge from the teacher and instead places

students within diverse contexts. Through continuous engagement with the learning environment, instructional resources, and peers, students actively explore, discuss, and construct meaning. To complete post-virtual tour presentations, achieve targets in simulated transactions, or draw meaningful conclusions from campus surveys, they must integrate diverse skills: information retrieval, critical thinking, collaborative interaction, and linguistic communication. This "learning by doing" approach, achieved through tackling complex, real-world tasks, not only tangibly enhances students' comprehensive language proficiency but also cultivates their intercultural awareness, innovative thinking, and core problem-solving abilities. It achieves an organic integration of deep learning and competency development.

3.3. Inquiry-based tasks focusing on authentic problems

During instructional design, carefully plan authentic or highly simulated problem scenarios closely tied to students' existing life experiences and societal trends. Use these as catalysts for deep inquiry-based learning, focusing on topics directly relevant to students or of broad societal interest, such as "optimizing campus waste sorting systems", "rationally identifying and responding to online rumors on social media", and "analyzing and improving the operation and management of local bike-sharing systems". Analyzing and Improving the Operation and Management of Local Bike-Sharing Systems". These scenarios are key because they are grounded in real-world problems, shifting learning activities away from textbooks and directly toward complex, open-ended challenges in the real world.

In such inquiry-based work, language undergoes a fundamental transformation. It ceases to be merely an object of study or practice, instead becoming an essential tool for conducting research, exchanging ideas, and constructing outcomes. To advance social investigations efficiently, students must master standard expressions for designing questionnaires and conducting interviews. To engage in thematic debates, they must adeptly employ persuasive argumentation frameworks and strategic rhetoric; to craft a rigorous proposal report, they need to grasp the stylistic characteristics and logical structures of analytical writing [4]. In-depth exploration of issues inevitably involves cultural contexts and value systems. For instance, analyzing the spread of online rumors requires consideration of diverse media ecosystems and cultural psychologies; When examining shared systems, one must grasp public management principles and civic responsibilities, compelling students to engage in cross-cultural comparisons and critical thinking when using language.

This learning journey fundamentally constitutes an integrated practice where students coordinate and enhance their core competencies. The complexity and authenticity of problems demand that students transcend mechanical attention to superficial linguistic forms, delving instead into the logical coherence of content, the validity of evidence, and the creativity and feasibility of solutions. They must employ logical thinking to organize information and construct arguments, utilize critical thinking to evaluate the reliability and significance of differing viewpoints, and leverage innovative thinking to propose novel and effective improvement suggestions. Students not only enhance their comprehensive language proficiency through "doing things with language", but also achieve the simultaneous development of information literacy, critical thinking, social engagement awareness, and innovation capabilities through the complete cycle of solving real-world problems. This precisely represents the higher-order learning objectives envisioned by competency-based education.

4. Key focus areas for assessing core competency development in contextual teaching

In core competency-oriented contextual teaching, assessment must align with instructional processes and competency objectives, achieving a shift from outcome-focused to process-focused evaluation and from knowledge-focused to competency-focused assessment.

4.1. Evaluation content focuses on integrated competency display

In secondary English teaching practice, assessment should move beyond examining isolated linguistic knowledge and instead focus on students' demonstration of comprehensive competencies in authentic contextual tasks. In the "Urban Environmental Protection Project" English presentation activity, teachers evaluate not only the accuracy and fluency of

students' language use but also their understanding and comparison of environmental cultures in China and abroad, as well as the efficiency of their research, team division of labor, and collaboration. Developing multi-level, actionable rubrics enables teachers to comprehensively and accurately gauge students' actual progress in holistic competency development, ensuring evaluations effectively serve competency-oriented teaching objectives.

4.2. Assessment methods emphasize process-based observation and documentation

The enhancement of core competencies during secondary education is gradual and implicit. English teachers should integrate assessment into daily teaching activities, evaluating student growth through careful observation and documentation of their process-based performance in contextualized tasks. During cross-cultural inquiry activities, teachers should note students' engagement enthusiasm, idea sharing in group discussions, problem-solving approaches when encountering language challenges, and reflective adjustments made in the task's later stages [5]. Through learning portfolios, classroom observation logs, and periodic reflective journals, teachers can gather diverse process-based evidence to comprehensively and promptly track the development trajectory of students' learning abilities and thinking skills.

4.3. Promoting diverse participation and reflection in evaluation

Within the secondary English assessment framework, it is essential to encourage joint involvement from teachers, students, peers, and even parents. Upon completing an English drama performance project, students can engage in self-reflection using rubrics (e.g., "How did my delivery of lines improve? What was my role in group collaboration? How can I improve next time?") alongside structured peer evaluations. This multi-dimensional assessment not only reveals students' competencies more authentically across different dimensions but also enhances their metacognitive abilities through self- and peer-evaluation. It cultivates critical reflection and constructive interaction skills, thereby advancing their learning capabilities and thinking competencies to achieve "assessment for learning".

5. Summary

Contextualized teaching practices in secondary English education, guided by core competencies, signify a profound transformation in English education, shifting from a purely instrumental focus toward a unified emphasis on both humanistic values and practical skills. By establishing a new pedagogical framework centered on learners, grounded in authentic contexts, and structured around meaning-making and problem-solving, this approach fosters the synergistic development of four core competencies: language proficiency, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and learning abilities. Effective implementation requires educators to deeply grasp the intrinsic relationship between competencies and context, skillfully employ diverse pedagogical approaches, such as integrated, immersive, and inquiry-based learning, while complementing these with an assessment framework focused on competency integration, process-oriented evaluation, and multi-stakeholder participation. Moving forward, continuously deepening theoretical understanding and practical exploration of contextualized teaching will become pivotal to advancing secondary English education toward its educational essence and cultivating new generations for the modern era.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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