

Exploring the integration pathways of thematic education in junior high school English teaching

Baocheng Qin^{1*}, *Luyao Jiang*¹

¹School of Foreign Languages, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 331271965@qq.com

Abstract. Against the backdrop of the in-depth implementation of the new curriculum standards and quality-oriented education, the practical requirements of fostering students through subject teaching have become increasingly explicit. This paper explores practical pathways for integrating thematic education into junior high school English instruction, focusing on addressing existing challenges such as the vague understanding of key concepts, the underdevelopment of thematic teaching frameworks, and the insufficient exploration of students' emotional attitudes. By innovating methods of incorporating thematic education into English teaching, the goal is to achieve a dual enhancement of curriculum reform and educational value.

Keywords: junior high school English teaching, thematic significance, thematic education

1. Introduction

The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) establishes a new curriculum content structure guided by themes and puts forward the educational principles of cultivating students' moral integrity, enlightening wisdom, and enhancing knowledge. Under this thematic guidance, English education and teaching are organized around three major categories: the relationship between individuals and themselves, individuals and society, and individuals and nature. In alignment with contemporary educational goals, and to promote the all-round development of morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and labor-educated students in the new era, schools are required to integrate major thematic education into their curricula. Teachers are also encouraged to incorporate the guiding principles from General Secretary Xi Jinping's discourses on education into subject teaching, thereby activating the cultural and educational functions of thematic education.

As a core subject in basic education, English teaching embodies elements such as cross-cultural communication awareness, an international perspective, patriotism, and cultural confidence, which give the subject unique significance in advancing current thematic education initiatives. English teachers need to explore how to fully tap into the subject's deeper educational value, overcome existing difficulties in integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching, and build deeply integrated thematic learning activities within the English curriculum. This paper, drawing on teaching examples from the People's Education Press (PEP) junior high school English textbooks, investigates practical pathways for integrating thematic education into junior high school English instruction.

2. An interpretation of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching

In the field of education, there are intricate connections among "themes," "thematic significance," and "thematic education." According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary, the term "theme" encompasses three primary meanings: first, the central idea expressed in literary and artistic works, which undoubtedly represents the essence of a work's ideological content; second, the key points in forms of communication such as conversations, documents, and meetings; and third, the main title [1]. In light of the current curriculum standards, "theme" is closely related to discourse. Accurately defining it as the central idea and core concept conveyed by a text is a fitting approach. Within the context of English teaching, the primary task for students when reading a text is to comprehend its deeper meaning, which in turn promotes personal transformation in areas such as experiential accumulation and cognitive development. This process of thinking and growth is essentially an exploration and interpretation of the thematic significance of the discourse. Therefore, thematic significance, at its core, involves deep reflection on the content being studied and a value-based assessment of it.

Thematic education centers on a specific theme, with the objectives of classroom teaching, the content covered, and the activities organized all being planned around it. According to the new curriculum standards implemented at the compulsory education stage, English courses are composed of six major elements. Among them, the theme element covers three primary categories, further divided into ten thematic groups. Each thematic group is subdivided into numerous subthemes. The new curriculum standards emphasize that, in the design and delivery of English course content, teachers should integrate diverse themes such as moral conduct, literary appreciation, cultivation of artistic and athletic literacy, historical knowledge, social and cultural insights, and understanding of the natural environment. Teachers are encouraged to explore strategies and pathways for deeply integrating thematic education with subject content.

The junior high school stage is a critical period for the formation of adolescents' values. During this time, teachers must provide guidance to help young students "fasten the first button" on their journey of life. Integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching carries significant meaning. On one hand, it enhances students' identification with Chinese culture and helps them gradually develop correct worldviews and values. On the other hand, it broadens their horizons, equipping them with the ability to meet the needs of future societal development. In this way, students can simultaneously enhance their core English competencies while receiving thematic education.

In exploring how to integrate thematic education into junior high school English teaching, this study focuses on the following areas: the exploration of thematic significance, interdisciplinary integration, the cultivation of core competencies, the shaping of emotional attitudes and values, and practical application.

3. Characteristics and challenges of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching

3.1. Characteristics of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching

In the English curriculum system, the exploration of thematic meaning has already become a key task in both teaching and learning. The English curriculum during the compulsory education stage encompasses six essential elements: theme, text, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. Among them, theme plays a leading and guiding role, driving the coordinated interaction of the other elements and jointly constructing a comprehensive framework for English curriculum content. Given the interconnection and distinct characteristics of each element, the integration of thematic education into junior high school English teaching presents the following three notable characteristics:

3.1.1. From knowledge education to ideological development

At present, the ideology of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics has been deeply embedded in key areas of China's education and teaching. Against this broader backdrop, the integration of thematic education into the process of junior high school English instruction requires both the selection of teaching materials and the design and presentation of teaching methods to embody a clear and profound ideological orientation. Essentially, English is far more than a simple tool for daily communication; it carries significant cultural values and embodies rich, diverse humanistic and social cultural connotations. Integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching is not equivalent to offering general education courses, nor is it about mechanically compelling students to repeat monotonous learning behaviors. Instead, it is rooted in the profound meanings and ideological depth contained in carefully selected teaching materials. It closely aligns with China's current national conditions and major contemporary issues, fully reflecting the dynamic spirit of the times. This integration helps students transcend individual cognitive limitations and the confines of the classroom, building a bridge for deep dialogue and close connection with the external world [2]. Therefore, integrating thematic education into practical teaching essentially activates the educational potential of English courses, helping students firmly establish correct worldviews, outlooks on life, values, and national perspectives. This lays a solid ideological foundation for nurturing students' commitment to their country and ensures the realization of the educational goal of cultivating a new generation equipped with ideals, capabilities, and a strong sense of responsibility.

3.1.2. From lesson content to holistic unit design

The integration of thematic education into junior high school English teaching features cross-disciplinary knowledge integration and holistic unit planning. Holistic unit teaching centers on specific unit themes, integrating textbook resources, exploring the core values of the text, and establishing an organic connection between different content elements. Guided by thematic meaning, the teaching process includes an initial engagement with the text to perceive the theme, in-depth understanding of the theme through comprehensive text analysis, and the application of the theme beyond the text to new contexts [3]. From a curriculum design perspective, holistic unit teaching holds significant value. It enables students to develop cognitive abilities alongside language learning, fosters positive emotional attitudes, enhances language skills, and deeply explores ideological and political elements within texts. Through holistic unit teaching and an in-depth exploration of thematic meaning, teachers can achieve educational objectives within English courses, ensuring that teaching content and activities remain in tune with contemporary developments.

For example, elements of thematic education addressing major contemporary topics such as life and health, ecological civilization, and work ethics are creatively integrated into English instruction. Courses guided by thematic meaning exhibit greater coherence and practicality, helping students build systematic knowledge frameworks, stimulating their potential for deep learning, fostering critical thinking skills, and ultimately promoting a shift in English teaching from single-focused language skill training to comprehensive competence development.

3.1.3. From instrumental function to value significance

The new curriculum standards for compulsory education emphasize the organic unity of the instrumental and humanistic functions of English courses, which are characterized by foundational, practical, and integrative features. In terms of its “instrumental function,” English teaching in daily communication and learning scenarios enables students to accumulate language experience through active engagement in reading and participation in language practice activities, thereby effectively strengthening their language abilities and learning strategies. As for its “value significance,” integrating thematic education into English instruction advocates for the integration of learning and reflection. It encourages students to acquire knowledge through experience, apply what they have learned in practice, and innovate during the process of knowledge transfer. This not only promotes the development of students’ language comprehension and expression skills but also deepens their understanding of Chinese culture and enhances their appreciation of excellent cultural traditions. At the same time, it guides students to engage in analysis, comprehension, comparison, and critical thinking, enabling them to make accurate value judgments. This process fosters an awareness and habit of lifelong learning, leading to an all-around enhancement of their core competencies. The progression from superficial instrumental function to profound value significance clearly demonstrates the advancement of English teaching from mere knowledge acquisition and skill development towards a deeper integration of cultural understanding and ideological cultivation.

3.2. Challenges in integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching

In today’s highly developed information age, where media forms are increasingly diverse, multiculturalism has given rise to pluralistic values. The uncertainty of the future presents unprecedented challenges to thematic education. At present, thematic education has transcended the traditional model of knowledge dissemination, moving towards the integration of multidisciplinary themes that connect history and modern times, while maintaining a forward-looking perspective. However, many schools, teachers, and classrooms have yet to undergo the corresponding transformation, reform, and optimization.

3.2.1. Vague understanding of key concepts

Themes and thematic meaning are crucial concepts in English teaching. However, the connotations of these concepts often confuse teachers, leading to misunderstandings about thematic education, fragmented comprehension of its core ideas, and superficial approaches to its implementation.

3.2.1.1. Conceptual confusion

Some teachers lack a clear definition of thematic education, often confusing “topic” with “theme.” A topic refers to the primary objective content addressed in a text, whereas a theme conveys the text’s intention, imbued with subjective judgment, value orientation, and a clear educational purpose. Equating the two can result in thematic teaching that lacks focus and timeliness, ultimately failing to achieve its educational objectives. Current junior high school English textbooks predominantly focus on themes such as “the relationship between people and themselves” and “the relationship between people and society,” while neglecting themes related to “the relationship between people and nature.”

3.2.1.2. Fragmented understanding

At present, some teachers have a narrow interpretation of the concept of education through subject teaching, reducing it solely to ideological and political education. In addition, many teachers have an unclear understanding of the basic scope of thematic education and lack in-depth reflection and exploration of its educational entry points. As a result, the thematic significance guiding junior high school English unit instruction remains weak. Issues such as vague teaching objectives, poor coherence between sections of teaching units, and monotonous assignment design hinder the improvement of teaching outcomes within the core curriculum.

3.2.1.3. Superficial thinking

The Ministry of Education has emphasized that the ideological content and principles of major thematic education are derived from General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important discourses and the spirit of central government documents. Strengthening major

thematic education fundamentally requires nurturing students with Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. This approach aims to guide students in establishing the "Four Confidences," fostering patriotism, and encouraging them to integrate their love for the country, ambition to strengthen it, and dedication to serving it into the journey of national development and rejuvenation [4]. However, when designing related thematic education, teachers often find these concepts and theories too abstract to align with students' current cognitive levels and life experiences. As a result, in order to avoid making the themes overly profound, they frequently separate language instruction from moral education.

3.2.2. Incomplete implementation of thematic teaching

3.2.2.1. Weak foundations

Teachers are slow to update their teaching philosophies, which, as the primary drivers of instruction, greatly affect the integration of thematic education into the curriculum. Currently, most English teachers focus heavily on teaching grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, while neglecting key educational themes such as craftsmanship in the "people and self" domain, cross-cultural communication in the "people and society" domain, and environmental awareness in the "people and nature" domain. This reflects a tendency to prioritize "knowledge transmission" over "character development." Furthermore, school curriculum planning and student learning conditions are less than ideal. Teachers are often allocated insufficient class time to explore text themes, and students lack time to internalize thematic education, even though its success depends on long-term immersion to foster character development and enhance literacy.

3.2.2.2. Single teaching approach

In the context of exam-oriented education, assessments are the primary measure of academic achievement, causing teachers to struggle between prioritizing "educating students" and "improving scores" [5]. Although teachers recognize the value of thematic education in fostering student development, they rarely integrate it into their daily instruction. There is poor integration with other subjects, and available resources often fail to align with the curriculum's themes. As a result, although many teachers mention thematic meaning in their lesson plans, in practice, they only engage in superficial text interpretation without uncovering deeper significance. This leads to a scarcity of quality examples, limited student interest, and minimal facilitation of knowledge transfer, making accurate teaching assessments difficult.

3.2.2.3. Disconnection between teaching and learning

There are common pitfalls in integrating thematic education into junior high school English instruction. One issue is simplistic lecturing. Although the new compulsory education curriculum standards require teachers to explore the educational value of unit themes based on three thematic clusters, some teachers merely list the cultural qualities and thinking skills that students should develop, relying on rote instruction to achieve their goals. Another issue is the disconnection from students' real-life experiences. When expanding on themes, some teachers fail to consider students' cognitive abilities and life contexts. They may extract themes without reference to the text, arbitrarily add or remove content, and design activities that lack coherence and integration. Such practices violate cognitive and learning principles, undermining teaching effectiveness. Additionally, some teachers fail to clarify direction and objectives. Without exploring thematic resources before class or understanding students' cognitive levels, their in-class presentations are inadequate, and their post-class activities are limited to generic themes, making it difficult to achieve the intended educational outcomes.

3.2.3. Insufficient development of emotional and attitudinal aspects

Thematic meaning abstracts and summarizes the theme's connotations, extensions, and overall knowledge structure, carrying the ideological, cultural, emotional, attitudinal, and value-oriented messages associated with a particular theme. Emotion and attitude are key components of core English literacy [6]. However, due to simplistic teaching methods and the lofty nature of themes, teachers often fail to connect with students' real lives, developmental backgrounds, and social practices, making it difficult to evoke emotional resonance. Some teachers, when interpreting the thematic elements of unit content, ignore the educational value of materials such as images, charts, videos, dialogues, and rhetorical devices. As a result, they fail to extract and convey the emotional and attitudinal values embedded in the materials, ultimately leading to a disconnect between educational objectives and subject learning goals.

4. Implementation pathways for integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching

4.1. Ensuring the direction of thematic education, interpreting textual meaning, and exploring core values

In the practice of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching, the presentation of content demonstrates diversity. Some thematic education content is explicit and direct, allowing students to easily grasp the core ideas; others are more implicit and indirect, requiring deeper exploration and interpretation. Compared with content that is readily apparent, these implicit and indirect components place greater emphasis on students' moral education, focusing on cultivating and practicing the core socialist values. They aim to nurture students' emotions, attitudes, and values at a profound level, fostering their development from within. As textbooks serve as the ideological "stronghold" on the educational front, they play an irreplaceable role. For example, the junior high school English textbooks published by People's Education Press contain a wealth of thematic education "resources." Teachers, as the "helmsmen" of classroom activities, can leverage the key entry point of teaching content to thoroughly explore thematic elements, effectively advancing the implementation of thematic education.

First, in-depth study of textbooks forms the foundation. Teachers need to conduct comprehensive research and detailed analysis of textbooks. When selecting teaching materials and determining teaching themes, they should focus on the ideological depth of the content. This ensures that the chosen materials not only align with the teaching syllabus but also lay a solid foundation for integrating thematic education, enabling students to absorb both knowledge and ideological enlightenment simultaneously. Second, the extraction of thematic elements is key. Teachers should thoroughly explore the important thematic educational elements hidden within each unit, giving equal importance to language learning and cultural understanding as the two pillars of teaching. Language is a tool for communication, while culture is its soul; they complement each other. Only by doing so can students master language skills while deepening their understanding of diverse cultures, broadening their international perspectives, and enhancing their overall competence. Third, a problem-based approach stimulates reflection. By skillfully employing questioning strategies, teachers can activate students' thinking, guiding them beyond the surface of language to explore its underlying cultural significance. In this progressive interactive process, thematic education seamlessly integrates into every detail of English teaching—like the nourishing spring rain—quiet yet effective, fostering students' inner growth. In fact, as long as English teachers fully comprehend the inherent logic of English instruction, diligently uncover the thematic educational factors within the texts, and closely align their teaching design with the core values of education promoted in society today, they can achieve an ideal educational realm where learning subtly influences students in profound ways.

Taking the People's Education Press English textbooks as an example, the author has summarized representative themes and corresponding teaching suggestions from selected units, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Representative themes and teaching suggestions

Unit	Thematic Category	Theme Group	Sub-theme Content	Teaching Suggestions
Grade 8 (Volume 2) Unit 7 What's the highest mountain in the world?	Humans and Nature	Natural Ecology and Environmental Protection	The geographical locations of major countries, ecological characteristics and natural landscapes of different regions, love and reverence for nature, harmonious coexistence with nature	Using the example of the giant panda mentioned in this chapter, guide students to understand the living conditions of giant pandas, raise awareness of endangered species, learn about the current situation of other endangered animals, and foster a sense of responsibility for wildlife conservation.

Table 1. Continued

Grade 9 (Volume 1) Unit 5 Things in China	Humans and Society	History, Society, and Culture	Identity and cultural confidence, human inventions and innovations	Center activities around the unit's language communication tasks by discussing products made in China, and progressively carrying out listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. While learning about Chinese products and traditional artworks, students can enhance their sense of national pride and develop confidence in the country's future. Through dialogues and narratives on topics such as time management and descriptions of daily activities, cultivate students' time management skills, self- planning ability, and integrated language application. Encourage the formation of good study and life habits to foster students' independence.
Grade 7 (Volume 1) Unit 6 A Day in the Life	Humans and Self	Conduct and Practice	Self-awareness, self- management, and self- improvement	

4.2. Innovating classroom instruction, exploring diverse pathways, and achieving deep learning

In the process of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching, teachers should systematically plan the entire unit's textual content based on the teaching theme, ensuring a close and coherent connection between thematic ideas and language knowledge. On one hand, it is essential to delve deeply into the logical construction of the theme and accurately set the teaching objectives for each unit to guarantee a clear instructional direction. On the other hand, teachers should comprehensively integrate teaching resources and meticulously design classroom activities that include evaluation components. These activities should present an orderly and progressive logical structure that guides students toward a deeper understanding of the unit's theme, ultimately helping them establish a correct worldview, outlook on life, and system of values. Particularly, teachers should flexibly adopt a variety of instructional activities that organically combine autonomous learning, cooperative learning, blended learning, and inquiry-based learning. This approach enhances students' exploratory experiences and stimulates their desire for knowledge.

For example, in the teaching of Section B of Unit 5 "Do You Have a Soccer Ball?" from the seventh-grade first semester textbook, the integration of thematic education into English instruction can be clearly demonstrated. Teachers accurately select sports as the thematic entry point and conduct in-depth exploration of its significance. At the initial stage of instruction, the focus is on knowledge dissemination, guiding students to learn about the rich diversity of sports both domestically and internationally. Particular emphasis is placed on deepening students' understanding of the differences and rules between American football and soccer. At the same time, students are encouraged to review the origins of football in China and the remarkable achievements it once attained in Asia. This encourages students to express their understanding of Chinese sports culture, thereby strengthening their cultural confidence. Next, the indomitable spirit of the Chinese women's volleyball team is introduced through the timely inclusion of inspirational match highlights. This allows students to genuinely experience their tenacity and fighting spirit. Subsequently, students are guided to relate the theme to their own experiences, discussing examples of individuals or events in modern society that embody the pursuit of dreams and perseverance. Throughout this process, the explicit theme highlights athletes' competitive spirit on the field, while the implicit theme embodies Chinese patriotism and national pride. This vividly demonstrates the effective integration of thematic education into English teaching practices.

4.3. Emphasizing the integration and commonality of thematic education to achieve internalized learning

At present, interdisciplinary teaching in junior high school English classes has become a highly promising trend. Interdisciplinary instruction helps students organically connect English with knowledge from other subjects and apply systematic thinking for comprehensive consideration. The integration and commonality of various thematic education components in junior high school English can also achieve this goal. In curriculum design, teachers should actively explore the cross-disciplinary characteristics of different subjects and strengthen the integration and connection between English and other disciplines, such as art, philosophy, and history. When thematic education is incorporated into junior high school English instruction in the form of task groups, it demonstrates unique contextuality, practicality, and comprehensiveness. This promotes students' belief recognition, information construction, habit formation, and cognitive transformation under the influence of thematic education. Ultimately, students achieve internalized learning and the development of core competencies.

4.4. Designing feasible evaluation schemes aligned with the needs of the new generation

Assessment is not only a key component of English instruction but also an indispensable part of incorporating thematic education into junior high school English teaching design. Promoting competency-oriented English teaching requires designing feasible evaluation schemes that meet the needs of the new generation. Teachers should consciously monitor students' performance during the learning process, based on the unit's thematic context, thematic significance, and instructional objectives, to achieve the goals of promoting teaching and learning through evaluation [7]. In addition to formative evaluations that assess the realization of thematic education values during the learning process, summative evaluations must ultimately return to the goal of fostering students' personal development. The effectiveness of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching lies in whether it helps students establish lofty ideals, develop critical thinking skills, and enhance their overall competence, ultimately growing into aspiring and responsible members of the new generation. Therefore, it is necessary to refine evaluation standards and construct comprehensive evaluation systems. First, educational administrative departments, educational research institutions, and teachers should respectively formulate evaluation schemes at different levels. Second, teaching, learning, and evaluation should be integrated, with ongoing adjustments and optimizations. Finally, the fundamental focus should always return to cultivating students' core competencies in English.

5. Conclusion

An exploration of integrating thematic education into junior high school English teaching reveals that English is not merely a subject for language acquisition, nor should junior high school English instruction be confined to basic text learning and rudimentary ideological education. Guided by thematic significance, English teaching at the junior high school level breaks through traditional models by integrating unit themes and uncovering the deeper value of texts, thereby promoting deep learning. At present, the integration of thematic education and junior high school English teaching still faces numerous challenges. Some teachers maintain outdated pedagogical concepts and lack a profound understanding of the essence of thematic education. Their teaching tends to focus solely on knowledge transmission while neglecting the educational function of shaping students' character. Additionally, teaching methods often lack innovation, making it difficult to effectively integrate thematic education with English instruction and to spark students' interest. Problems such as inadequate integration of teaching resources and unscientific evaluation systems are also prominent. Therefore, continuous effort and a commitment to excellence are required of educators. It is essential to actively update teaching concepts and implement thematic education throughout the entire English teaching process. Moreover, efforts should be made to strengthen the integration of resources and explore high-quality materials. A scientific evaluation system should be established, with indicators tailored to students' characteristics. Only through these measures can effective pathways be found to achieve the structural and systematic integration of teaching content and meaning, ultimately fostering the development of students' core competencies.

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