

# Integrated teaching practices of junior high school English units under the theme significance -- taking NSE 8B module 9 friendship as an example

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**Abstract:** A unit serves as the fundamental component carrying the thematic significance. Implementing integrated teaching at the unit level should be guided by thematic significance, supported by discourse, and facilitated through activities. This approach aids students in enhancing language abilities, refining learning skills, fostering cultural awareness, improving cognitive quality, and ultimately promoting the formation of core competencies in English. This article, based on a unit teaching case, presents a framework for integrated unit teaching design: textbook analysis, understanding student needs, content integration, goal setting, and activity design.

**Key words:** thematic significance; junior high school English; integrated unit teaching

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## 1 Introduction

Zhang Jinxiu (2019) pointed out that unit teaching guided by thematic significance integrates unit content around a theme, designs unit objectives centered on thematic significance, utilizes significant problems to design the learning process, and generates evaluation methods based on thematic significance [1]. The following is a detailed description of how to implement integrated teaching of junior high school English units under the guidance of thematic significance, using the New Standard English eighth-grade textbook Module 9 Friendship from Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press as an example, focusing on aspects such as textbook analysis, understanding students' needs, content integration, goal setting, and activity design.

## 2 Identifying the unit theme and analyzing content and student needs

Hu Run and Chen Xinzhong (2020) indicated that exploring the connections between multi-modal discourses and clarifying the unit theme and main thread form the basis of constructing a structured whole [2]. The theme is not equivalent to a topic; teachers need to integrate the meanings conveyed by various contents, identify their connections, and consider the value of the curriculum from an educational perspective. This involves analyzing the value and significance of the unit content for students' growth, and elucidating the thematic significance conveyed throughout the entire unit.

The theme of this unit falls under the subtheme of good interpersonal relationships and social interactions in the realm of people and society, focusing on friendship. The entire unit comprises three parts: Unit 1 consists of two listening dialogues where a middle school student seeks help through phone calls due to conflicts with friends; Unit 2 features a

reading text narrating the story of a transfer student who becomes friends after feeling warmth from a classmate's accidental smile; Unit 3, Language in Use, includes two discourses and comprehensive exercises on object clauses, one presented in a listening form depicting conflicts between a middle school student and a friend, and another presented in a reading form introducing the special bond of pen pals. The language material in the textbook involves specific language knowledge such as discussing, inquiring information, and object clauses introduced by if, whether, who, what, how, why, where, and when.

The theme of good friendship resonates closely with students' daily lives. Particularly, eighth-grade students are in adolescence, experiencing significant emotional fluctuations, and friendships hold an increasingly prominent place in their interpersonal relationships. They have many thoughts and feelings to express regarding this theme. However, the language proficiency of students in the teaching class is insufficient to support detailed communication. Hence, one of the teaching focuses is enriching students' thematic language knowledge and fostering their ability to express themselves on the theme. After learning the previous unit, students are already familiar with object clauses. Therefore, another teaching focus is creating real-life scenarios for students to use this target language concerning "friendship" in their communication. Most students tend to center their attitudes toward "friendship" on self-perception, lacking the ability to engage in multi-perspective thinking. Thus, another teaching focus is guiding students to deeply contemplate and explore how to build and maintain friendships, thus cultivating the right perspective on making friends.

The students in the teaching class already possess a certain level of independent and cooperative learning skills. Therefore, the key to teaching lies in designing a series of integrated, correlated, and practical activities based on the theme, promoting the integrated development of students' core competencies in the process of exploring thematic significance in English.

### 3 Linking unit themes and integrating teaching content

Following the theme logic, the "Good Friendship" theme of this unit is subdivided into three subthemes: Start a Friendship, Solve Problems of Friendship, and Keep a Friendship. Accordingly, the teaching sequence has been reorganized based on content: Moving Unit 2's content to the first lesson, using the story of a transfer student and his friend to guide students in exploring how to establish friendships. Placing Unit 1's content in the second lesson, using two listening contexts to guide students in exploring how to solve problems that arise in friendships; supplementing with an explanatory text on how to keep a good friendship in the third lesson, guiding students in exploring how to maintain friendships. Designing an output activity based on thematic significance in the fourth lesson, requiring students to internalize the thematic significance of this unit through writing about their own lives. Specific lesson allocations can be seen in figure 1.

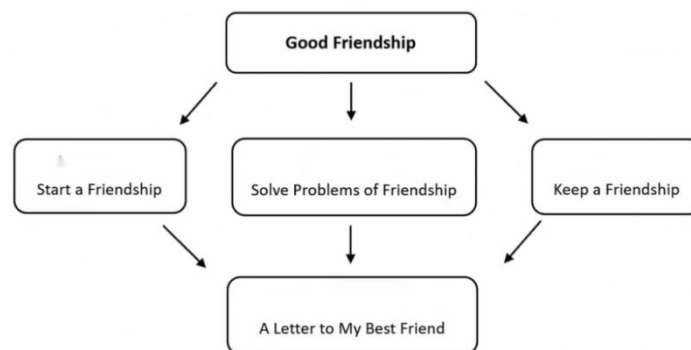


Fig 1. Specific lesson allocations

## **4 Establishing teaching objectives based on the unit theme**

After analyzing and integrating the unit's discourses, teachers need to establish overall objectives for the unit and specific objectives for each lesson based on the content of the discourses [3]. The essence of any learning process involves problem-solving. The overall objectives of this unit and specific teaching objectives for each lesson, as well as the setting of significant questions (big questions), are as follows:

The big questions over four lessons progress from how to make friends to how to handle problems in friendships, then to how to maintain friendships, and finally to what you want to say to your best friend. These questions closely align with students' real lives, progressing from understanding to practical application and then to innovative application, and facilitating a spiral enhancement of students' understanding of thematic significance.

## **5 Designing teaching activities based on the unit theme**

### **5.1 Topic introduction**

The teacher displays photos capturing friendship among students in the class, introducing the unit theme of Friendship and asking: How do you start a friendship? Guiding students in a discussion and listing their answers on the board.

[Design Intent] By integrating students' lives into the introduction of the topic, this activity aims to stimulate students' interest in learning, leveraging their existing knowledge and experiences, and laying the groundwork for subsequent activities.

### **5.2 Reading activity**

The teacher uses five Ws and one H (Who are the main characters? What happens between them? When does the main event take place? Where does it take place? Why?) to guide students in exploring the text's main idea.

By asking "How did Zhangbei feel?", the teacher requires group discussion among students, guiding them in exploring the emotional changes of the main characters.

[Design Intent] Through a question chain and task-based reading, this activity promotes students' exploration of the thematic significance of the text, deepening their understanding of the text.

### **5.3 Group discussion**

Students, in groups of four, discuss the following question: What other ways can we start a friendship? Considering the different levels of students, a scaffold can be provided. Initially guiding them to answer questions like Who are your best friends? How did you make friends with them? After group discussion, a whole-class discussion follows [4].

[Design Intent] The goal is to encourage students to expand their understanding and comprehension of the thematic significance of the text by leveraging their real-life experiences. This activity complements the introductory question "How do you start a friendship?", forming a spiral of inquiry from the beginning to the end, and enhancing students' thinking abilities.

## **6 Conclusion**

Integrated teaching of junior high school English units based on thematic significance aids students in mastering language knowledge, constructing thematic significance, and stimulating active learning. However, in actual teaching, implementing integrated unit teaching demands higher requirements of teachers' teaching philosophy and proficiency. Teachers in the new era can only promote the enhancement of students' core competencies in the subject and truly fulfill the educational function of English by striving to improve their own concepts and knowledge, actively exploring and practicing.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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