

# Conceptual Approaches to Integrated Unit Teaching in High School English

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## Abstract

Cultivating virtue is the fundamental task of education, and the subject core competence is the concentrated embodiment of the educational value. The unit integrated teaching is an important carrier for cultivating the subject core, and big idea is the key lever for implementing the subject core competence. Carrying out integrated teaching based on big idea can foster the achievement of the fundamental task of cultivating morality and promoting the implementation of subject core competencies. However, at present, teachers have some problems on unit integrated teaching based on big idea such as vague connotation and unclear value of big ideas in unit integrated teaching. Teachers have no way to start when exploring the path of unit integrated teaching based on big ideas. Thus, after exploring the connotation and essence of big ideas, the connotation of unit integrated teaching from the perspective of big ideas, and the role value of big ideas in unit integrated teaching, this thesis aims to explore the implementation path of unit integrated teaching of senior high school English based on big ideas by taking Unit 1 of the first compulsory volume of English as an example.

## Keywords

**Big Idea; Unit Integrated Teaching; High School English.**

## 1. Introduction

*The English Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools* (hereinafter referred to as *The New Curriculum Standards*) propose that integrated unit teaching serves as the logical starting point for analyzing textbook content [7]. Implementing integrated unit teaching facilitates the achievement of high school English curriculum objectives, organically integrates the three-dimensional goals (knowledge and skills, process and methods, emotional attitudes and values), and effectively promotes the holistic development of students' core competencies, including language proficiency, cultural awareness, cognitive skills, and learning capacity [7]. This indicates that integrated unit teaching is a crucial approach to realizing the goals of high school English education and enhancing students' core competencies in English.

Big ideas, as highly generalized concepts, are characterized by centrality, endurance, and transferability, serving as key anchors for cultivating core disciplinary competencies. Therefore, exploring integrated English unit teaching based on big ideas is an essential pathway to implementing core competencies and fulfilling the moral and educational mission of English education. However, current research on big ideas in China remains in its infancy, with particularly limited studies examining the design and implementation of integrated English unit teaching from a big ideas perspective. Moreover, existing practices reveal several issues, including ambiguous understandings of big ideas and integrated unit teaching, insufficient reflection of big ideas in unit teaching objectives, and a neglect of assessing big ideas in unit instruction. Thus, exploring feasible approaches to implementing integrated high school English unit teaching from the perspective of big ideas holds significant practical value.

This paper aims to clarify the core concepts of big ideas and integrated unit teaching, analyze the role of big ideas in unit instruction, and explore implementation pathways for high school English unit teaching based on big ideas, thereby offering insights to address current challenges in its application.

## 2. Big Ideas

*The New Curriculum Standards* emphasize that high school English courses should "center on disciplinary big ideas to structure course content and use themes as a guide to contextualize learning, thereby facilitating the cultivation of core competencies" [7]. This marks the first official introduction of the term big ideas in China. While "big ideas" and "big concepts" are nearly synonymous, [8] argues that "big ideas" represent a higher-order construct, offering greater developmental flexibility and better alignment with Chinese linguistic conventions. Thus, "big ideas" is the preferred term to avoid confusion with foundational concepts.

As a pivotal tool for implementing core competencies, big ideas help students grasp the essence and structure of disciplinary knowledge, integrating fragmented information into meaningful wholes, thereby deepening their understanding and mastery. Therefore, analyzing the meaning and uncovering the essence of big ideas is a crucial step in exploring integrated unit teaching based on big ideas.

### 2.1. The Meaning of Big Ideas

Big ideas are overarching concepts synthesized from discrete notions, carrying profound implications. The term "big" does not denote an abstractly broad category but rather refers to powerful theories and principles that occupy a central position in disciplines and pedagogy [5]. In general, the meaning of big ideas can be interpreted from three perspectives: disciplinary essence, curriculum content, and process and methodology.

From the disciplinary essence perspective, big ideas reflect the core of a discipline, pointing to deeper and more fundamental content beyond surface-level knowledge. They serve as conceptual anchors that integrate key disciplinary concepts, enabling students to explore the heart of the subject [8]. In other words, big ideas are not merely linguistic knowledge but structured cognition, problem-solving approaches, and value systems that students develop through learning. By engaging with texts and uncovering big ideas, students gain a firmer grasp of the discipline's core knowledge.

From the curriculum content perspective, big ideas act as the conceptual framework of a course, forming its backbone with strong inclusivity, generalizability, and explanatory power [8]. They consolidate fragmented knowledge, connect isolated disciplinary elements, and distill core concepts, thereby constructing the discipline's framework and revealing intrinsic relationships among ideas. This allows students to better comprehend the curriculum's structure and integrate, transfer, and apply knowledge.

From the process and methodology perspective, big ideas serve as guiding principles for teaching, forming the foundation of instructional design and organization [9]. Teachers extract big ideas from instructional content, integrating materials from a higher-order perspective and planning lessons holistically to ensure coherence across teaching and assessment activities. For students, the process of constructing big ideas helps them connect fragmented knowledge, build logical frameworks, enhance cognitive skills, and advance core competencies.

In summary, big ideas refer to the core concepts that students abstract from disciplinary knowledge during learning. These concepts synthesize fragmented information, point to the essence of the discipline, provide problem-solving frameworks, and reflect students' values. Additionally, they are transferable—students can apply classroom-acquired big ideas to new

contexts, solving diverse real-world problems. Consequently, big ideas have enduring influence, shaping students' value judgments and behaviors throughout their lives.

## 2.2. The Essence of Big Ideas

Delving into the essence of big ideas holds significant importance as it facilitates students' understanding of the core and nature of English as a discipline, promotes knowledge integration and transfer, enhances problem-solving abilities, and fosters innovative thinking and creative understanding. Regarding the essential attributes of big ideas, big ideas are centrality, endurance, networked structure, and transferability [6]. From the perspective of English as a discipline, Jiang N. and Li G. characterize the essence of big ideas in English as: a "connective and integrative" linguistic knowledge structure, a "learning through use" language learning philosophy, and a "culturally edifying" language learning value [4].

Specifically, from the perspective of knowledge formation and the process of linguistic knowledge construction, big ideas facilitate the integration of disciplinary knowledge, bridge language, thinking and culture, connect different knowledge elements, and establish linguistic knowledge structures [1]. Therefore, big ideas in English represent a "connective and integrative" linguistic knowledge structure. Big ideas emphasize mastering the fundamental structure of the discipline and transferring acquired knowledge to new contexts to solve practical problems. This aligns with the "learning through use" principle emphasized in English core competencies, advocating the unity of knowledge and action through application, where rational understanding and moral development progress in parallel. Thus, big ideas in English embody a "learning through use" language learning philosophy. As highly condensed representations of language, and considering language as a carrier of culture containing rich cultural connotations, big ideas possess significant educational value. They help students absorb diverse cultural essences, develop cross-cultural awareness, and cultivate cultural literacy [3]. Therefore, big ideas in English also carry a "culturally edifying" language learning value.

For English as a discipline, big ideas possess dual attributes: they share universal characteristics common to all disciplines while also exhibiting unique features as a language subject. Based on the dual perspectives of disciplinary essence and educational objectives, big ideas in English can be categorized into language big ideas that focus on disciplinary fundamentals and thematic big ideas that emphasize interdisciplinary characteristics[9]. Language big ideas refer to the knowledge structures, methodological strategies, and learning concepts that students perceive and comprehend regarding how language understands and expresses meaning during the process of learning and using language, starting from linguistic knowledge and skills [4]. Thematic big ideas fall within the three thematic domains of self, society, and nature. They guide students to construct new understandings of subjects, develop problem-solving approaches, and form appropriate values based on themes.

To better understand the essence of big ideas and their manifestation in instructional design, we must examine the concept of small ideas. The relationship between big and small ideas is macro-micro. Big ideas represent the essential, meaningful, and transferable core concepts of a discipline that embody its fundamental perspectives and thinking modes, serving as the basic framework connecting knowledge points[2]. Small ideas, on the other hand, are specific concepts or knowledge points within the discipline that constitute the basic units of big ideas. An inclusive relationship exists between them: big ideas encompass multiple small ideas, while small ideas represent concrete manifestations of big ideas. In English teaching, the core theme of an entire unit is called the unit big idea. Each unit contains different texts, and each text embodies a core concept known as the text small idea. For example, in Unit 2 "Exploring English" from the FLTRP Senior High English textbook (Compulsory Book 1), the unit big idea

is "adopting creative approaches to learning English," with text small ideas including "embracing the diversity of English" and "understanding the evolution of English over time."

In teaching practice, teachers need to organically integrate big and small ideas by guiding students to master and understand small ideas, thereby gradually developing deep comprehension and transferable capabilities of big ideas. Simultaneously, students must continually connect big and small ideas through practice and application to form a complete knowledge system and cognitive framework.

In conclusion, big ideas encompass both language big ideas and thematic big ideas. Their essence lies in being the core ideas, concepts or theories within a disciplinary field that can unify and integrate disciplinary knowledge [10]. These concepts typically possess high levels of generalizability and abstraction, capable of organically integrating core concepts, principles and methodologies within the knowledge system to form the fundamental theoretical framework and cognitive structure of the discipline. The relationship between big and small ideas is interconnected and mutually influential. The integration of big and small ideas can cultivate students' thinking abilities and problem-solving skills.

### **3. Integrated English Unit Teaching from the Perspective of Big Ideas**

Big ideas aim to integrate disciplinary content and construct disciplinary frameworks, striving for cohesive and interconnected teaching—an objective that aligns seamlessly with the concept of integrated unit teaching. Big ideas and integrated unit teaching complement each other, jointly facilitating the implementation of core competencies. Therefore, understanding the meaning of integrated English unit teaching from the perspective of big ideas, as well as the role of big ideas in such teaching, helps teachers explore effective implementation pathways for big ideas-based unit instruction.

#### **3.1. The Meaning of Integrated English Unit Teaching from the Perspective of Big Ideas**

Integrated unit teaching originates from holistic pedagogy. At its core, it involves analyzing unit content, setting instructional objectives, and designing teaching processes and assessments from a comprehensive perspective to achieve synergistic effects [13]. Specifically, integrated English unit teaching from the perspective of big ideas refers to a teaching model that, based on the principle of integration, starts from the unit as a whole, thoroughly analyzes relevant teaching resources, and fully considers students' individuality, diversity, and dynamic needs. Centered on the unit's major theme, it comprehensively integrates and reorganizes teaching content through multi-dimensional and in-depth analysis of the unit theme, distilling both thematic and language big ideas to guide students in constructing the unit's overarching big ideas.

According to the unit's overall teaching objectives, this approach designs cohesive teaching and assessment activities, constructing a teaching unit led by the major theme and interconnected by various text topics [8]. Such thematic teaching creates a holistic language learning environment for students, enhancing their language application skills while progressively deepening and structuring their understanding of the unit theme and big ideas. Ultimately, this achieves an effect where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts

The concept of integrated unit teaching provides an organizational framework for cultivating core competencies while propelling curriculum reform toward educational goals. Big ideas serve as the key leverage for implementing disciplinary core competencies, while integrated unit teaching acts as the essential vehicle for carrying these competencies. Through integrated unit teaching, we can refine and internalize big ideas, helping students gradually develop disciplinary core competencies.

The formation of core competencies is a long-term process that requires teachers' macro-level planning. Using the unit - an organizational structure between curriculum and individual lessons - as the basic unit, teachers can better design instruction from a holistic perspective, thereby overcoming the limitations of single-text teaching. Integrated unit teaching organizes content around specific themes at the unit level, emphasizing systematic and structured knowledge acquisition. Under a unified theme, multiple texts explore the topic from different perspectives and depths, aligning with the incremental nature of core competency development. Therefore, integrated unit teaching can effectively promote the cultivation and advancement of disciplinary core competencies.

### **3.2. The Role of Big Ideas in Integrated English Unit Teaching**

Big ideas represent profound and transferable core disciplinary concepts that can synthesize the essence, meaning, content, and instructional processes of a curriculum. Characterized by centrality, networked structure, abstraction, endurance, and transferability[8], big ideas serve to unify and integrate the content of holistic unit teaching.

Through exploring big ideas, we can uncover the fundamental nature of the discipline, identify core curricular elements, and consolidate fragmented small ideas [5]. Big ideas are intrinsically connected to integrated unit teaching, permeating its entire process. They guide the implementation of high school English curriculum objectives, the organization of course content, the design of instructional activities, and the execution of assessment practices.

#### **3.2.1. Big Ideas as the Guiding Framework for Integrated Unit Teaching Objectives**

As core disciplinary concepts and conceptual anchors, big ideas serve as the foundation for establishing integrated unit teaching objectives. They enable teachers to grasp the essence of moral education and focus on the construction of thematic meaning[11]. Big ideas provide educators with a framework for understanding both the thematic significance of units and the development of core competencies, facilitating in-depth analysis of the relationships between sub-themes within a unit and their value in helping students construct big ideas under the overarching theme.

The curriculum standards explicitly require teachers to guide students in developing cultural awareness, cognitive skills, and learning abilities while acquiring and applying linguistic knowledge, based on both language-related and thematic big ideas. Teachers should regard the exploration of thematic meaning as the central teaching task, striving to achieve disciplinary-based character education [3].

As higher-order concepts, big ideas provide the fundamental framework for integrated unit teaching objectives. They help both teachers and students clarify the overall unit objectives, under whose guidance lesson-specific targets are designed to progressively accomplish core teaching tasks. Therefore, big ideas play a vital role in outlining and guiding the establishment of integrated unit teaching objectives.

#### **3.2.2. Big Ideas Refining Integrated Unit Teaching Content**

Current English teaching materials encompass diverse content, making the selection and refinement of unit content particularly crucial for teachers. Integrated unit teaching content should be organized around big ideas as the central thread, using them to integrate teaching materials and clarify key instructional priorities. The networked nature of big ideas serves as a bridge connecting disciplinary knowledge, transforming various teaching materials into an organic whole.

From the perspective of big ideas, teachers can deeply explore the meaning of teaching content through themes, texts, discourse events, and knowledge. When selecting and refining unit content, big ideas guide teachers to reflect: "Which elements of the unit content are most

essential? What additional materials should be introduced? How should content be organized to best facilitate the acquisition of big ideas?" [6].

Moreover, the formative logic of big ideas-"conditions → outcomes" -provides a rationale for content selection [11]. Teachers can use this logic to analyze teaching materials, establish intrinsic connections between different content elements, and sequence instruction appropriately. Thus, big ideas offer a sound basis for selecting and refining integrated unit teaching content.

### **3.2.3. Big Ideas Orchestrating the Integrated Unit Teaching Process**

The integrated unit teaching process must be conducted under the guidance of big ideas. In English, big ideas exhibit strong hierarchical properties, enabling them to transform fragmented knowledge and skills into interconnected, deep learning[12].

Furthermore, big ideas orient the teaching process toward developing students' core English competencies[10] facilitating the transition from knowledge acquisition to competency cultivation. In big ideas-based integrated unit teaching, students engage in holistic learning experiences, integrating their life experiences, emotions, and thinking into the process, thereby deepening their understanding of the discipline's essence.

As the core organizing principle, big ideas inform teachers' instructional design. Their connective features help teachers grasp the unit structure holistically, link learning content, and integrate diverse teaching modalities, ensuring the teaching process revolves around central English learning objectives[6]. Consequently, big ideas serve as the pivot for designing the integrated unit teaching process, playing an indispensable orchestrating role.

### **3.2.4. Big Ideas Evaluating Integrated Unit Teaching Effectiveness**

Big ideas, as embodiments of a discipline's core content and methodological principles, serve as critical benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of integrated unit instruction. By adopting this higher-order perspective, teachers can systematically organize fragmented knowledge points into coherent, interconnected networks, incorporating them into a structured knowledge framework that forms a comprehensive unit knowledge system. This system in turn guides the holistic planning of teaching and assessment activities. When unit instruction remains firmly anchored to big ideas, emphasizes key concepts, and maintains thematic coherence, it significantly enhances the achievement of unit objectives and overall teaching efficacy. Consequently, big ideas provide explicit evaluation criteria that focus on three key dimensions during unit assessment: the degree to which big ideas are manifested and implemented, whether instructional priorities are adequately emphasized, and whether the unit achieves its intended teaching objectives as an integrated whole.

[14]further specifies that big ideas-based unit assessment should particularly examine: students' mastery of core unit concepts and disciplinary principles, their ability to transfer acquired knowledge to novel contexts for solving real-world problems, and the development of their core disciplinary competencies. In summary, big ideas function as a robust mechanism for examining the effectiveness of integrated unit teaching, offering well-defined evaluation indicators that encompass both instructional coherence and student competency development.

## **4. Conclusion**

High school English integrated unit teaching based on big ideas emphasizes structured, integrated, and transferable instruction. In this approach, big ideas serve to unify teaching objectives, integrate instructional content, guide the teaching process, and evaluate teaching effectiveness. Under the framework of big ideas, high school English teaching aims to lead students to explore thematic meanings in texts, uncover the essence of the discipline, establish logical connections among unit texts, integrate fragmented knowledge, develop problem-

solving strategies, and ultimately transfer these approaches to new contexts to address novel challenges.

Consequently, big ideas-based integrated unit teaching in high school English effectively promotes the cultivation of core competencies and facilitates the realization of disciplinary educational goals. When designing such instruction, teachers should thoroughly analyze all texts within the unit to identify their thematic significance, extract text-specific small ideas, and synthesize unit-level big ideas. On this foundation, they can then formulate achievable teaching objectives, implement instructional activities based on the English learning activity approach, and conduct competency-oriented multidimensional assessments.

In the context of the new curriculum reform and the comprehensive implementation of core competencies, conducting big ideas-based integrated unit teaching in high school English carries profound significance and value. This approach merits further implementation and exploration as it represents an important direction for advancing English subject education and achieving its educational objectives.

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