

Comment on “Unit Projects” in New Horizon College English Textbooks for the Reading and Writing Course

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of the merits of unit projects in New Horizon College English textbooks for the reading and writing course. After analyzing the merits, the paper continues to analyze students' possible misunderstandings about unit projects and some students' misconducts. Through the analysis, teachers can get a better understanding of “unit projects” in New Horizon College English textbooks for the reading and writing course and thus make better use of them in their teaching.

Keywords

Unit projects, merits, misunderstandings, misconducts.

1. Introduction

As the reform for college English courses forges ahead, college English textbooks for students have also undergone tremendous changes. One of the striking features of newly published college English books for the reading and writing course is that they tend to put emphasis on cultivating and enhancing college students' comprehensive abilities. Unit projects at the end of each unit in New Horizon College English reading and writing books compiled by Mr. Zheng Shutang serve as very good examples as they show their innate merits which enable students to develop and thrive both linguistically and academically in an all-round manner. The present paper tries to explore the merits of “unit projects” offered in students' textbooks New Horizon College English books for the reading and writing course. Meanwhile, it also points out the possible misunderstandings about “unit projects” on the part of students and some students' potential wrong doings when preparing their projects and provides corresponding corrections and suggestions from the perspective of teachers.

2. Body

2.1. Merits of Unit Projects Concerning the Cultivation of Students' Comprehensive Abilities

A project is usually a piece of giant work to be undertaken or attempted, so it is supposed to involve the joint efforts of a group of people. To well accomplish a “unit project”, students have to work collectively, which unconsciously establishes and develops their cooperating and coordinating skills. By working together, students inevitably help and complement each other. They may end up learning from each other and benefiting from the whole process of doing their unit projects. Teachers may require students to clarify their own respective contributions to the completion of the unit project and grade them according to their own specification about their contributions. Through these requirements, students learn to self-evaluate their own performances and contributions.

A unit project is more than just a test, analysis of a passage and the like. In essence, a unit project is a big task that can be subdivided into several smaller tasks. To be further, a unit project is not language-based. Rather, it is a combination of task-based and content-based learning. The

procedures of doing a typical unit project show its merits in its cultivation of students' comprehensive abilities apart from the enhancement of their language abilities.

Students may begin with collecting the raw materials they need either from the library or mostly online. After they have the raw materials handy, they have to read from the beginning to the end. Also, they have to give up irrelevant information and retain the pieces that are useful and relevant to their presentation. They must have a thorough understanding of the materials for further exploitation. They have to compress all the information into key messages that are fit for being shown on the slides of the PowerPoint they are to make later. When elaborating on the raw materials, students have to make sure that they can pronounce every word with accuracy. More importantly, they are supposed to change the raw materials which are often characterized by their formality of written language to acceptable colloquial language so that when they give presentation on stage, their audience can refer to the formal written words on the screen as visual aids and communicate with the presenters who inform and explain in oral language. Undoubtedly, by collecting, studying and modifying the raw materials, students enhance their language abilities and the abilities to summarize and paraphrasing.

After handling the raw materials, students proceed to make PowerPoint. PowerPoint making is a very important technical ability that may be required in students' future career. For example, a boss may ask one of his employees to introduce the company's products to potential customers. The employee enjoys a better chance of winning the potential customers by giving the introduction with the aid of PowerPoint which contains not only visual aids of typed key words but also motion pictures or even video clips about the products.

Some of the unit projects require students to conduct surveys, so students have to make their own questionnaires and interview their classmates, schoolmates or even outsiders from the society. For example, the unit project in unit 3 asks students to conduct a survey on effects of the Internet on college students.[1] By making questionnaires in English, they learn not only the language in a particular field but also the designing of proper questions in order to achieve their purposes. The designing of questions for the questionnaires and analyzing of data cultivate students' creative and critical thinking and their abilities to calculate using various tables, charts, diagrams and graphs. And by handing out questionnaires and interviewing others, they learn how to communicate with people and get the information they need for their survey. For this part, teachers may offer students some model expressions concerning surveys so that students can use the language directly.

With all the full preparations done and after rehearsing for several times, students finally go onto the stage and show their unit projects by giving English presentation with the help of PowerPoint. They try to show the best of themselves in terms of their comprehensive abilities which include linguistic and technical competence, the abilities to deliver a speech, the abilities to communicate with the audience etc. The presentation on stage is a final check of the students' previous efforts made in the material collecting and studying stage, PowerPoint making stage and rehearsal stage. Teachers may video the students' performance while they are giving presentation. By reviewing the video clips, teachers can find out the mistakes students have made in their presentation and thus give corresponding guidance and suggestions. Giving presentation in front of a large audience proves to be a most effective means of enhancing and checking students' various abilities. What is more important is that unit projects as a whole provide super opportunities for teachers and students to communicate with each other after class so that students can well achieve the goal of giving perfect English presentation.

2.2. Students' Possible Misunderstandings about "Unit Projects" and Their Misconducts and Teachers' Responses

There are also some "defects" in the "unit projects" despite their multiple advantages, as the unit projects easily lend themselves to abuse occasionally. First all of, some students fail to

contribute their parts to the unit projects. As unit projects are usually done in groups, some students may muddle through by relying on the other members within the group without even being present for discussions or for other group activities. To solve this problem, apart from asking students to report and clarify their specific contributions, teachers may choose a leader for each group and ask the leader to report his or her group members' daily performances on a regular basis. Secondly, some students tend to take unit projects as merely PowerPoint making. In their eyes, PowerPoint making is the most important part and they tend to ignore the other parts. What is worse, some students just copy lines from online resources, post them on the slides and read straight off the screen. In this case, teachers should give specific requirements about the detailed procedures of making qualified PowerPoint and giving qualified English presentation. Thirdly, college students, especially freshmen, often create visual barriers or distractions in their PowerPoint. Some students incorrectly capitalize words, use inappropriate size font, adopt images that are irrelevant to the ideas conveyed through the messages and use colors from the same color system for text and background.[2] The most disastrous mistake students tend to make is that they tend to type all the words on one screen and read the page word by word when giving the presentation.[3] Therefore, by letting students making PowerPoint, they expose their own problems to teachers in the making process, and by guiding students to correct the mistakes, teachers help students to make progress technically. Fourthly, some students do not have much experience on stage, which is shown in their lack of confidence and inappropriate gestures adopted while giving presentation on stage in front of their classmates. Teachers may advise students to rehearse before they go on stage. Also, they should teach students some basic skills concerning delivering a short speech. For example, teachers may teach students to use content skills such as asking questions, using a personal story, using contrast to arouse the audience's attention and interest. They may also teach students some conventional skills such as dressing formally for the occasion, maintaining good eye contact with the audience, speaking clearly and slowly etc. Lastly, some students may pretend to have conducted surveys, but in fact they make up the statistics, which shows students' casual attitudes towards academic research. In this case, teachers must take the students' wrong doings seriously and educate them in due time. Teachers should teach students to be honest with the statistics for their surveys and let them realize that data fabrication is corruption so that they can adopt the right attitudes towards academic research in their future studies and adopt the right attitudes towards work in their future career.

3. Conclusion

The paper explores the merits of "unit projects" in New Horizon College English textbooks for the reading and writing course. It then discusses students' possible misunderstandings about "unit projects" and some students' misconducts and offers teachers' ideal responses. Unit projects are usually group work which cultivates students' cooperating and coordinating skills and enables them to learn from each other. The merits of unit projects are best shown in their procedures which involve the cultivation of students' multiple abilities. To be specific, material collecting and studying cultivate students' language abilities through various means; PowerPoint making cultivates students' technical competence; surveys and interviews cultivates students' creative thinking, designing and communicative abilities; Delivering the speech on stage checks and cultivates students' abilities in an all-round manner. Meanwhile, some students may have some misunderstandings about unit projects and tend to abuse them. Teachers can offer clarification about these misunderstandings and educate students in due time. All in all, unit projects are very good forms of study that allow students to cultivate their comprehensive abilities. As the exploration of unit projects progresses, the students involved are sure to make greater progress and teachers are sure to gain more experience that enables students to do better in their unit projects.

References

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