

A Study of Generative Instructional Design for Senior High School English Large-Unit Teaching Based on the Process Model under the New Curriculum Standards

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Abstract: The *General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2025)* emphasize an orientation toward subject-specific core competencies and advocate large-unit teaching organized around thematic contexts. However, current large-unit English teaching in senior high schools is commonly constrained by Tyler's "Objectives Model." Its excessive pursuit of predetermined behavioral objectives and formulaic language output makes the teaching process inflexible and overlooks both the dynamic, generative nature of language acquisition and the deeper development of students' thinking capacity. This paper introduces Stenhouse's "Process Model" and examines its distinctive value for large-unit English teaching in senior high schools. By reconceptualizing the objectives, content, activities, assessment, and teacher's role in large-unit teaching, it seeks to move beyond the traditional procedural and linear model of instruction. In doing so, it offers a new theoretical perspective and practical pathway for implementing the activity-based approach to English learning and effectively cultivating students' core competencies.

Keywords: New Curriculum Standards; senior high school English; large-unit teaching; Process Model; core competencies.

1. Introduction

As the latest round of basic education curriculum reform advances, the *General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2025)* (hereafter, the "New Curriculum Standards") explicitly set out a subject-specific core-competency framework comprising language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability [1]. To remedy the long-standing problem of fragmented, lesson-by-lesson instruction in isolated knowledge points, the New Curriculum Standards advocate using thematic contexts to organize large-unit teaching that integrates language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. Against this background, large-unit teaching has gradually become a central discourse and mainstream trend in the reform of senior high school English education [2].

Nevertheless, a review of current practice reveals a tendency toward formalism in large-unit English teaching. When designing large units, many teachers still rely primarily on Ralph W. Tyler's Objectives Model, producing designs that are new in appearance but unchanged in substance—piecemeal and label-driven rather than genuinely integrated. As Guo et al. observe, some current designs are "units in name but not in substance": teachers often mechanically regroup previously independent texts without establishing a logical thread oriented toward core competencies or a mechanism for generative learning[3]. Although this model is clearly structured and convenient for examination preparation and management, it has obvious limitations in practice. It reduces the complex and nonlinear process of language acquisition to a mechanical and linear instructional sequence[4]. At the final stage of integrated output, students often complete tasks merely by applying fixed templates. Such work may look inquiry-based but is, in substance, template-driven. It deprives students of opportunities to negotiate meaning and experiment with language in authentic contexts, making it

difficult to achieve the New Curriculum Standards' goals for developing thinking capacity and cultural awareness.

To address the mechanistic impasse created by the Objectives Model, the field of foreign-language education urgently needs a different curriculum theory that can restore vitality to large-unit teaching. The Process Model proposed by the renowned British curriculum theorist Lawrence Stenhouse provides such a theoretical foundation[5]. The Process Model rejects blind adherence to predetermined behavioral objectives. It maintains that education should guide students in exploring domains of knowledge that possess intrinsic value, while attending to the dynamic emergence of learning and students' independent reflection. Introducing the Process Model into senior high school English large-unit teaching can shift the instructional focus from the mechanical attainment of predetermined objectives to dynamic development through language practice, thereby providing a new generative mechanism through which core competencies can be genuinely realized.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Internal Relationship among Core Competencies, Large-Unit Teaching, and the Process Model

To construct a system of senior high school English large-unit teaching based on the Process Model, it is first necessary to clarify theoretically the logical relationship among the New Curriculum Standards and their core-competency orientation, large-unit teaching, and the Process Model. Within the overall instructional system, core competencies provide the value orientation, large-unit teaching provides the organizational form for content, and the Process Model provides the theoretical framework for implementation.

2.1. Large-Unit Teaching: A Structural Vehicle for Cultivating Core Competencies

The integrated and developmental nature of subject-specific core competencies means that they can hardly be genuinely developed through isolated lessons or decontextualized explanations of grammar points. Zhong Qiquan argues that core-competency-oriented teaching necessarily requires a shift from “lesson-based instructional design” to “large-unit instructional design” [6]. Large-unit teaching does not simply package several texts together; rather, it organizes multimodal texts, language skills, and inquiry activities around a “big idea” or thematic meaning. In senior high school English textbooks, each unit establishes a broad thematic context, such as “Human and Nature,” “Human and Society,” or “Human and Self.” Wang Qiang and Zhou Mi emphasize that the core of senior high school English large-unit teaching is to guide students in exploring thematic meaning. Teachers must therefore break down barriers between texts and construct an inquiry system with internal logical connections, enabling students to internalize and transfer language knowledge as they explore meaning[7]. Only through the macro-level organization provided by a large unit can students engage, over a sustained period of two to three weeks, in deep language input, cultural comparison, and multidimensional critical reflection on a shared theme, thereby creating the conditions necessary for cultivating core competencies.

2.2. The Process Model: A Theoretical Foundation for a Generative Turn in Large-Unit Teaching

If large-unit teaching provides the basic framework for cultivating core competencies, the choice of instructional model determines whether that framework can be implemented effectively. Tyler’s traditional Objectives Model is grounded in behaviorist psychology and treats instruction as a linear process directed toward predetermined objectives[4]. Research on foreign-language acquisition, however, has long demonstrated that second language acquisition (SLA) is a highly dynamic and nonlinear process involving continual cognitive restructuring and iterative development of interlanguage[8]. Students cannot be expected to use particular language accurately at the end of a lesson merely because the teacher specified that language as an objective beforehand.

Stenhouse’s Process Model fully recognizes this dynamic character of knowledge. He argues that, in highly interpretive and creative subjects such as literature, language, and philosophy, rigid predetermined behavioral objectives are not only unrealistic but may also constrain the development of students’ thinking[5]. The Process Model does not prescribe a single, absolute instructional endpoint; instead, it emphasizes the design of “principles of procedure” for educationally worthwhile activities. Teachers should create appropriate learning environments and guide students in meaningful inquiry. This position closely aligns, at the theoretical level, with the activity-based approach to English learning advocated by China’s New Curriculum Standards. The three tiers of activities emphasized in the Standards—learning and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and innovating—constitute a cyclical, progressive, and dynamically generative process[1]. Within the large-unit framework, the Process Model encourages

students to inquire actively, develop their thinking, and refine their language expression through classroom activities, so that core competencies gradually take shape through sustained instructional practice rather than passive reception.

3. Generative Teaching Strategies for Senior High School English Large Units Based on the Process Model

In his seminal work *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, Stenhouse states that the core purpose of education is to develop and liberate students’ minds rather than discipline or restrict their behavior[5]. On this basis, he establishes four central dimensions of the Process Model. First, its conception of knowledge treats knowledge not as a fixed conclusion but as a dynamic construction achieved through inquiry and critical reflection. Second, its principles of procedure focus on the educationally worthwhile activity process itself. Third, its conception of the teacher calls for a paradigm shift toward “the teacher as researcher.” Fourth, its conception of assessment emphasizes “ongoing diagnosis and reflective response.” Once the theoretical relationship among core competencies, large-unit teaching, and the Process Model has been established, senior high school English large-unit teaching must move beyond the excessively rigid goal-setting often found in traditional backward design. It should be systematically reconceptualized across five dimensions—objectives, content, activities, assessment, and the teacher’s role—to embody the principles of the Process Model.

To demonstrate clearly the highly dynamic character and practical pathway of the Process Model in an authentic instructional context, this section presents an in-depth analysis of the complete teaching process for Unit 6, *Earth First*, in Book 2 of the new senior high school English textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP). The analysis mirrors theoretical explanation with an aligned application case. Situated within the thematic context of “Human and Nature,” the unit examines highly thought-provoking, conflict-laden multimodal texts on wildlife conservation, ecological disasters, and “green truths,” providing fertile cognitive and linguistic ground for generative teaching.

3.1. Changing the Logical Starting Point: From Behavioral Objectives to Generative Objectives

Traditional large-unit design is deeply influenced by the behavioral-objectives model and commonly uses formulations such as “Students will be able to use the ... sentence pattern accurately to describe ... and write an ...-word essay.” Although such objectives are clear and measurable, they overlook the affective dimensions and depth of thought underlying language expression. The Process Model advocates “generative objectives” or “expressive objectives.” These objectives do not prescribe a uniform form for the final output; instead, they focus on changes in students’ ways of thinking and on broadening the scope of their thinking as they explore a theme[9]. In senior high school English large-unit design, objectives should therefore be reconceptualized as guidance for students’ process of meaning inquiry.

For example, in a design for Unit 6, *Earth First*, in Book 2 of the FLTRP senior high school English textbook, a

traditional Objectives Model would typically define the unit outcome as “Students will memorize environmental vocabulary and use a template to write an advocacy letter.” Drawing on the Process Model’s conception of knowledge, the design developed in this study avoids simplistic moral judgments and instead focuses on the cognitive conflicts

embedded in the textbook. It reconceptualizes the New Curriculum Standards’ subject-specific core competencies in process-oriented and generative terms. Table 1 presents a direct comparison between traditional behavioral objectives and the generative objectives proposed in this study.

Table 1. Comparison of Instructional Objectives for the *Earth First* Large Unit

Traditional Behavioral Objectives (Objectives Model)	Expressive and Generative Objectives (Process Model)
1. Students will be able to spell accurately and use the unit’s core vocabulary related to natural disasters and ecological conservation.	1. Deconstruction and reconstruction: Through discussion of the <i>Understanding ideas</i> text, students will identify how media and culture construct and misrepresent images of wildlife, dismantle stereotypes about particular species, and develop an intrinsic motivation to protect them.
2. Through reading, students will be able to explain the negative impact of the film <i>Jaws</i> on shark population decline.	2. Inquiry and dialectical reasoning: Through scientific argumentation about “green truths” in <i>Developing ideas</i> , students will question common assumptions and unexamined beliefs, developing independent and prudent critical thinking amid uncertainty.
3. By imitating the model text, students will be able to write an approximately 120-word persuasive letter about the “Clean Plate Campaign.”	3. Interaction and dynamic revision: In simulated performance tasks, students will dynamically mobilize language resources from the unit, reach consensus while politely expressing disagreement and engaging in reasoned argument, and progressively improve an environmental advocacy letter.

Table 2. Design of the Content-Inquiry Chain for the *Earth First* Unit

Stage of Inquiry	Core Text and Section	Process-Model-Driven Pathway for the Development of Thinking and Language
Initial Perception	<i>Starting out</i>	Activating prior knowledge: Students watch a video about an ecological disaster and form an initial, intuitive understanding of “Earth First” and environmental protection.
Core Inquiry 1: Deconstructing Bias	<i>Understanding ideas (Sharks: Dangerous or Endangered?)</i>	Cognitive conflict: Students examine the collective panic generated by the novel and film <i>Jaws</i> , contrasting it with the reality of overfishing and cruel shark finning. They are guided to recognize humanity’s shift from “victim” to “perpetrator” and to develop an intrinsic motivation for species conservation.
Core Inquiry 2: Challenging Common Assumptions	<i>Developing ideas (What’s Really Green?)</i>	Scientific critique: Students question widely accepted “green beliefs”: Are paper bags always better than plastic bags? Is locally produced food necessarily more environmentally friendly? Data on energy consumption in production and transportation are introduced so that students can develop independent, prudent, and dynamically balanced decision-making in authentic contexts.
Dynamic Generation: Performance and Output	<i>Using language / Writing / Presenting ideas</i>	Integrated mobilization: Based on a carbon-footprint investigation, students undertake an authentic campus environmental initiative, draft an environmental advocacy letter through multiple rounds of revision, and present their results.

3.2. Integrating Instructional Content: From a Patchwork of Texts to Continuous Inquiry into Thematic Meaning

According to the Process Model’s conception of knowledge, knowledge is not a fixed and rigid conclusion to be transmitted; it is an object that students must examine

critically and come to understand. Traditional English teaching often treats the texts and sections within a unit as isolated lessons. Each lesson is devoted to explaining new words and difficult sentences in the current text, reducing the unit to a patchwork of materials. Mei Deming argues that texts in English textbooks embody rich cultural values and rational insight, and that the integration of large-unit content should

attend to the deeper cultural meanings and logical tensions underlying those texts[10]. Under the Process Model, multimodal texts within a unit are no longer materials to be explained and passively received. Instead, they serve as triggers of cognitive conflict and foundations for knowledge construction. Teachers should therefore use the thematic big idea to reorganize the texts into a continuous chain of inquiry into thematic meaning.

For example, the design for Unit 6, *Earth First*, breaks away from linear, section-by-section teaching. Following the Process Model's principle that knowledge is an object of critical inquiry, it organizes the textbook content around the central big idea, "How Can We Become Genuinely Green Citizens?" and reconstructs it as a logically progressive "content-inquiry chain" (Table 2).

3.3. Innovating Instructional Activities: From Template-Driven Input to Interactive Performance Tasks

The core of implementing the Process Model lies in providing "principles of procedure" for educationally worthwhile activities—that is, focusing on what students actually do in class rather than on what they remember[5]. Senior high school English large-unit activities must therefore move from template-driven input toward interactive performance tasks. This means moving beyond the limitations of a single correct answer and designing authentic-context tasks characterized by high levels of interaction, inquiry, and uncertainty[11]. On the one hand, such activities encourage students to retrieve, reorganize, and use language knowledge from across the large unit dynamically in response to immediate feedback, promoting language acquisition through the mechanism of "negotiation of meaning"[12]. On the other hand, they activate deeper thinking and prompt students to generate critical thought continuously through unpredictable chains of dialogue. Qian et al. likewise observe that the activity-based approach to English learning is by no means a static checklist of isolated tasks; it is an experiential process in which students participate actively and generate learning dynamically under the teacher's guidance^[13].

For example, when teaching *Developing ideas (What's Really Green?)* in Unit 6, *Earth First*, the teacher designed an interactive performance task titled "Challenging Pseudo-Green Claims: A Scientific Press Conference." Students used evidence from the textbook concerning paper bags, showers, and locally produced food to rebut wasteful practices or misguided environmental habits on campus. To demonstrate clearly how the Process Model resolves "uncertain cognitive conflict," the following excerpt adapts and transcribes an authentic classroom interaction from the author's action research on this unit. The classroom discourse has been standardized for presentation.

[Planned Task]: Drawing on evidence from the text, students present an argument that producing paper bags consumes more energy and water than producing plastic bags, and that uncritically promoting paper bags is therefore not environmentally responsible.

[Unplanned Emergence]: During the open discussion, Student A spontaneously poses a question grounded in everyday life, interrupting the original linear direction of the lesson.

Student A: "Teacher, the text says paper bags are also bad for the environment. But if my mom forgets her reusable bag at the supermarket, which should she choose—plastic or

paper? The textbook doesn't give us an answer."

[The Teacher's Pedagogical Tact]: The question exposes a genuine ecological dilemma. Recognizing this generative teaching opportunity, the teacher pauses the planned presentation and turns the question into a whole-class negotiation of meaning.

Teacher: "What a wonderful real-life question! You've discovered the core of critical ecological thinking: environmental conservation often has no single correct answer; it is an art of trade-offs. Let's look back at *Developing ideas* and what we know about waste. Who can help Student A analyze this dilemma by drawing on knowledge from across the unit?"

[Subsequent Emergent Outcome]: The class immediately enters a process of independent negotiation. Students dynamically mobilize linguistic and conceptual resources from across the unit and engage in deep, dialectically complementary reasoning.

Student B (supporting paper bags): "I think a paper bag would be better. Although it takes more energy to produce, it can break down quickly in nature."

Student C (supporting plastic bags): "But if she chooses plastic, she can reuse the bag as a trash bag at home. The real danger of plastic comes when it is littered. As with the marine animals we discussed, sea turtles may mistake plastic bags for food and die. If her mom can guarantee that the bag is recycled, perhaps plastic isn't necessarily the worst choice."

Student A (reflecting on the question): "Wow, I see. So the answer depends on the 'context.' If the city is more concerned about its carbon footprint, paper may be worse. But if the central concern is wildlife conservation, plastic is the real killer."

In this episode, the central idea that "environmental conservation has no single correct answer" is no longer a fixed conclusion transmitted unilaterally by the teacher. Instead, it becomes a higher-order insight that students construct independently through intertextual comparison across the unit, weighing data on the energy consumed by paper bags against the ecological toxicity of plastic. Students move from being passive seekers of a standard answer to becoming discerning thinkers capable of making rational trade-offs in complex real-world situations.

3.4. Transforming Instructional Assessment: From Summative Testing to Process-Based Cyclical Assessment

Under the dominance of the Objectives Model, assessment in English large-unit teaching often takes a single summative form: at the end of the unit, a test paper or a final essay is used to make a fixed judgment about students' learning. Such assessment is not only delayed; it is also unable to capture students' cognitive trajectories during learning. Stenhouse, the originator of the Process Model, emphasizes that the central purpose of assessment should be the teacher's "ongoing diagnosis and reflective response" to students' reactions rather than the assignment of grades[5]. This principle vividly embodies, at the classroom level, the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment advocated by the New Curriculum Standards. Wang Qiang and Li Liang argue that assessment should not stand apart from instruction; it should function as a routine mechanism embedded in the instructional process to promote students' English learning[14]. Accordingly, large-unit assessment based on the Process Model must evolve into process-based cyclical

assessment, with assessment seamlessly embedded in every phase of language practice.

For example, the culminating output for Unit 6, *Earth First*, is closely aligned with the textbook's *Writing* and *Presenting ideas* sections. Students write an "environmental advocacy letter" addressing an unsustainable practice on campus and

present their work. To embody the Process Model's principles of "reflective response" and "continuous generation," the teacher designed the integrated teaching–learning–assessment matrix shown in Table 3, in which the development of thinking and language is traced along two interwoven strands.

Table 3. Process-Based Assessment Matrix for Writing Instruction in the *Earth First* Large Unit

Assessment Round	Assessor(s)	Diagnostic and Generative Response Strategy (Integrated Teaching–Learning–Assessment Pathway)	Intended Outcome
Round 1: Logical Structure	Peer interaction (thinking partners)	Students submit a mind map for the first draft. Using a "logical soundness rubric," peers check whether the environmental claim amounts to superficial moralizing and whether it is grounded in scientific evidence from <i>Developing ideas</i> .	Stage-specific diagnosis: Challenge common misconceptions.
Round 2: Language Refinement	Teacher–student interaction (reflective scaffolding)	The teacher diagnoses formulaic discourse patterns that recur across students' first drafts. In response to language bottlenecks, the teacher provides just-in-time "reflective scaffolds," such as unit language resources involving non-finite verb forms used as modifiers.	Dynamic adjustment: Refine interlanguage expression.
Round 3: Contextual Deepening	Self-reconstruction (independent revision)	Drawing on authentic campus survey data, such as the class carbon-footprint results, students revise the real-world grounding of the arguments in their advocacy letters, complete a second draft, and add it to a "reflective learning portfolio."	Final output: Demonstrate competencies in authentic practice.

3.5. Transforming the Teacher's Role: From Plan Implementer to Action Researcher

The Process Model holds that "there can be no curriculum development without teacher development, and the most effective path to teacher development is research into one's own teaching"[5]. Introducing the Process Model into senior high school English large-unit teaching is not merely a minor adjustment to instructional strategies or techniques; it entails a profound transformation of the teacher's role. In traditional instructional models, teachers often function chiefly as implementers of teaching plans[15], directing students along a predetermined path. In a generative large-unit classroom based on the Process Model, however, teachers must undergo a deep paradigm shift.

First, teachers should move from being "implementers of plans" to becoming "designers of language environments." Their work is no longer limited to preparing teaching materials and standard explanations. Instead, they must use the large-unit theme to design carefully sequenced open-ended questions that provoke cognitive conflict and to create a learning environment that supports free inquiry and expression.

Second, teachers should move from being "authoritative judges of knowledge" to becoming "astute observers of the learning process." In interactive performance tasks, students may express views beyond the anticipated scope or encounter unexpected language problems. Rather than dismissing these responses, teachers should exercise flexible pedagogical tact, recognize the educational value of such generative resources, and transform them at the appropriate moment into new topics for further whole-class inquiry[16].

Finally, teachers should move from being "passive implementers of the curriculum" to becoming "instructional

action researchers." As Stenhouse maintains, there can be no curriculum development without teacher development. When senior high school English teachers move beyond the constraints of fixed objectives and closely observe, document, and reflect on students' developmental trajectories and changes in thinking throughout a large unit, they complete the transition from passive instructional implementers to action researchers[5].

4. Conclusions and Reflections

The introduction of the New Curriculum Standards and the core-competency framework presents China's basic education sector with the historic task of shifting fundamentally from a knowledge-centered orientation to a competency-centered one. As an effective pathway for achieving this shift, large-unit teaching must not once again be constrained by the old, mechanistic Objectives Model. By introducing Stenhouse's Process Model into senior high school English large-unit teaching, this study seeks primarily to overcome the tendency toward formulaic and routine-driven instruction and to restore the dynamic, holistic, and generative nature of language acquisition.

By reconceptualizing instructional objectives as generative objectives, content as continuous inquiry, activities as interactive performance tasks, and assessment as dynamic, process-based assessment, Process-Model-based senior high school English large-unit teaching can genuinely provide students with space for independent inquiry, negotiation of meaning, and productive exchanges of ideas in authentic contexts. More importantly, this paradigm shift enables teachers to move from passive "consumers of curriculum" to professionally autonomous "action researchers." It can not only help address the long-standing problems of "high scores

but low practical ability” and formulaic language output in senior high school English education in China, but also promote the coordinated development of teachers’ instructional capacity and students’ subject-specific core competencies through vibrant classroom practice.

The implementation of the Process Model nevertheless poses serious challenges to established instructional habits. In the pursuit of open and generative classroom teaching, large class sizes place substantial demands on teachers’ ability to identify and use emergent instructional resources. At the same time, finding an appropriate balance between the standardized requirements of entrance examinations and the process-oriented development of classroom learning remains an issue for frontline senior high school English teachers and foreign-language education researchers to investigate through deeper action research in the future, adopting the stance of “the teacher as researcher.”

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