

Holistic Unit Homework Design in High School English: Cultivating a Sense of Community with a Shared Future through a Project-based Learning Approach

Jinfei Zhu^a, Siyi Qin^b

School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

^a qinsiyi0630@163.com, ^b 1004545642@qq.com

Abstract: Under China's "Double Reduction" policy, enhancing the quality of homework has become an ongoing focus, yet approaches to innovating homework forms to align with English subject core competencies require further exploration. Currently, some problems in high school English homework, like no clear objectives, without extension activities and flexible evaluation methods, limit the cultivation of students' awareness of a community with a shared future of mankind. Based on a project-based learning approach, this study analyses the feasibility and key components of project-based homework design. Focusing on the preparation, design, and evaluation stages of homework, it refines holistic unit teaching goals, structures project-based homework tasks, and implements the integration of teaching, learning, and evaluation to improve homework quality and foster students' awareness of a shared social destiny.

Keywords: *A community with a shared future of mankind; Homework design; Project-based learning*

1. Introduction

In October 2017, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China called upon all nations to work together in building a community with a shared future of mankind, aiming at a world that is peaceful, secure, prosperous, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable.^[1] In June 2020, *the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)* (hereinafter referred to as the "New English Curriculum") recommended that, in addition to regular teaching activities, teachers should mobilize students' learning potential, organize more open and more challenging project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and creative learning activities.^[2] In July 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Tutoring for Students in Compulsory Education*. This document emphasized the need to improve the quality of homework design to fully utilize its diagnostic, reinforcing, and learning analysis functions, thereby promoting quality-oriented education.^[3]

In alignment with the requirements of the above policies, a reflection on high school English reveals prevalent issues in homework design and assignment. The quality of after-class homework is generally low, detached from students' real-life contexts, and fails to meet the needs of cultivating students' cultural awareness and enhancing their critical thinking abilities. Homework mainly consists of basic tasks such as copying, recitation, and exercises, leading to monotonous and tedious formats. Its content emphasizes textbook knowledge reinforcement, with little focus on fostering English subject core competencies or integrating the concept of a community with a shared future of mankind. The evaluation methods for homework are rigid, relying primarily on simple correctness judgments and lacking diversified and scientific evaluation approaches.

2. The Feasibility

At the theoretical level, project-based learning involves the exploration of complex, real-world problems. Students engage in in-depth and sustained inquiry into driving questions, mobilizing all their knowledge, abilities, and qualities to creatively solve new problems, resulting in tangible outcomes that

lead to a profound understanding of core knowledge and learning processes, as well as the transfer and application of this understanding in new contexts.^[4] At the practical level, foreign scholars have found through mixed-method research that project-based learning can enhance students' creativity, help them acquire high-level information, affection, and skills, and improve joint work and collaboration with their classmates.^[5] The "Double Reduction" policy emphasizes the requirement to reduce the burden and increase the effectiveness of homework, necessitating teachers to continuously improve and innovate in homework design. By connecting with real-life situations to create problem contexts that stimulate students' interest in learning, and by focusing on problem-solving to develop students' higher-order thinking skills, this kind of homework can effectively promote the development of English subject core competencies, which is highly aligned with the philosophy of project-based learning.^[6]

A community with a shared future of mankind is a scientific concept rooted in the excellent traditional culture of China. Its principle of "openness and inclusiveness" corresponds to the view of civilization that embraces "harmony in diversity". This principle emphasizes the importance of respecting the diversity of world civilizations, transcending civilizational barriers through intercultural exchanges, fostering mutual learning among civilizations to overcome conflicts, and promoting coexistence to transcend notions of civilizational superiority.^[1] Designing high school English homework aiming at cultivating social destiny awareness through a project-based learning approach can help students fully utilize their existing knowledge and experiences. By completing project-based homework, they can understand cultural differences, appreciate cultural connotations, broaden their international perspectives, and promote excellent culture, thereby achieving a beautiful coexistence of diverse cultures.

3. Key Elements of Holistic Unit Project-based Homework Design

3.1. Project-based Homework: Goals Setting

Currently, conventional English homework is primarily based on written exercises and is organized by class periods, corresponding to the learning content of each lesson in the textbook. While the focus of homework for each lesson may vary, the overall structure lacks clarity, and the goals of the homework are not well-planned. In order to echo the requirements in "New English Curriculum", teachers should thoroughly understand the course content, content requirements, and their interconnections before designing holistic unit project homework and sub-project homework. Based on the curriculum structure and overall goals for the high school stage, they should establish teaching objectives for each lesson within the unit, ensuring an embedded relationship between lesson objectives, which collectively serve the holistic unit teaching goals.

3.2. Project-based Homework: Content Planning

Due to factors such as time constraints, energy limitation, and exam-oriented education, teachers often follow the workbook in a routine manner when assigning homework, focusing only on reinforcing language knowledge from the textbook while neglecting the extension and expansion of extracurricular knowledge. This goes against the holistic, practical, and diverse nature of homework design. Homework planning should not only be based on the thematic and logical integration of texts within the unit but also involve real-life context tasks aimed at cultivating students' problem-solving abilities, thus effectively enhancing their English subject core competencies. Specifically, teachers should analyze unit content to holistically plan the holistic unit homework system, and design sub-project homework for each lesson around thematic meaning and real-life contexts, promoting deep learning characterized by higher-order thinking and healthy cultural enlightenment for students.

3.3. Project-based Homework: Evaluation Designing

Under the influence of exam-oriented education, the evaluation of some high school English homework remains limited to checking answers and discussing questions in isolation. The evaluation is often conducted solely by teachers, focusing on written or verbal error correction, and leans heavily toward summative evaluation while neglecting diagnostic and formative evaluation, which contradicts the concept of the integration of teaching, learning, and evaluation. Homework evaluation serves as both evidence of teaching effectiveness and a means to identify students' success and highlights. A good evaluation can not only reflect students' current performance but also help them build confidence and stimulate interest in learning.^[7] Therefore, project-based homework evaluation can emphasize full-process execution and multi-participant involvement. By developing evaluation rubrics for both holistic

unit project homework and sub-project homework, and combining teacher evaluation, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and public evaluation, students can learn from one another during the homework exchange process.

4. Basic Process of Holistic Project-based Homework Design

4.1. Homework Preparation: Align with Curriculum and Set Holistic Unit Goals

A teaching unit is often designed around one thematic context. The teaching objectives for each unit are the organic components of the overall goals, and the objectives for each lesson should contribute to achieving the holistic unit teaching goals.^[2] Before determining the theme and goals of project-based homework, teachers should first consider the holistic unit teaching goals and lesson-specific objectives to ensure that the teaching goals, lesson objectives, and the holistic project-based homework goals complement each other, finally maximizing the validity of the homework and its contribution to achieving the teaching objectives.^[6] Additionally, the starting point of project-based homework design is to build a core knowledge framework, beginning with the core knowledge that students are expected to understand and master. Based on the “New English Curriculum”, this study analyzes unit texts, explores thematic meaning, clarifies content requirements, and establishes the holistic unit teaching goals and lesson-specific learning objectives within the cultural dimension under the theme of a community with a shared future of mankind.

The theme of Unit 1 “Cultural Heritage” in PEP High School English Book 2 is “Cultural Heritage”, which falls under the theme group “History, Society, and Culture” within the broader category of “Man and Society.” It specifically addresses the establishment and cultivation of awareness of a community with a shared future of mankind. In line with the requirements of cultivating English subject core competencies, the learning goals at the cultural level for the holistic unit is defined as follows: Through studying the protection of cultural heritage by individuals, organizations, and nations, students are able to understand the history and current status of Chinese and foreign cultural heritage. Through sub-project homework such as in-class speeches, expository writing, and written explanations, students are able to deeply appreciate the cultural value of the concept of a community with a shared future of mankind and actively apply it in practice. By integrating sub-project homework, students are able to complete the holistic unit project homework, promoting the concept of a community with a shared future of mankind by expanding and publicizing other cultures at home and abroad. On this basis, the learning objectives at the cultural level for each lesson have been outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Holistic Unit Cultural Learning Goals.

Lesson	Content	Learning Goals
Lesson 1: Listening and Speaking	Introduces the actions of international youth organizations in protecting the cultural heritage of Mount Tai	Be able to think dialectically about the necessity and urgency of cultural heritage protection
Lesson 2: Reading and Thinking	Describes the challenges and solutions of cultural heritage preservation during the dam construction in Egypt	Be able to understand the construction process of the dam, recognizing the shared social destiny
Lesson 3: Discovering Useful Structures	Aids students in reviewing and reinforcing restrictive relative clauses for more detailed descriptions	Be able to use English to document local cultural heritage forms, trying to promote excellent traditional culture
Lesson 4: Listening and Talking	Discusses the history and culture of historical sites, guiding students to understand the state quo of cultural heritage protection	Be able to comprehend the inheritance of world cultural heritage, broadening international perspectives and embracing diverse cultures
Lesson 5: Reading for Writing	Reports on the preservation process of artifacts at the Dunhuang Mogao Caves through digital technology	Be able to understand the role of digital technology in artifact preservation
Lesson 6: Assessing Your Progress	Encourages students to review and reflect on what they've learned, expanding their knowledge of Chinese intangible cultural heritage	Be able to consolidate the grammar and expand knowledge of intangible cultural heritage, reinforcing cultural confidence and strength
Lesson 7: Video Time	Documents the efforts of Mr. Mei Jingtian and volunteers in safeguarding the Great Wall	Be able to promote and celebrate outstanding traditional Chinese culture, enhancing social responsibility

4.2. Homework Design: Analyse Goals and Design Project-based Tasks

4.2.1. Relate Unit Themes to Design Holistic Unit Project Homework

Thematic contexts not only regulate the learning scope of linguistic and cultural knowledge, but also provide meaningful contexts for language learning and incorporate emotions, attitudes, and values organically.^[2] Project-based homework centered on unit themes can stimulate students' curiosity and desire for exploration, fostering a willingness to engage in active inquiry. This approach helps students deeply explore linguistic, cognitive, and cultural meanings, linking language learning with real-life contexts through the process of meaning construction. Meanwhile, project-based learning prompts students to think about and explore core concepts by transforming essential questions into driving questions. Well-designed driving questions can directly address the core content of the theme, spark students' interest in the project, and guide them toward mastering the knowledge, skills, and methods required by the "New English Curriculum".

The region where the teachers and students are located is a national pilot city for the "Double Reduction" policy and the birthplace of the national intangible cultural heritage—Jinhua Wu Opera. Wu Opera has a long and rich history, with its unique vocal system, role system, and costumes, making it "a living fossil" of Chinese opera. Exploring the value of Wu Opera and promoting its culture can help students understand the cultural significance of a community with a shared future of mankind, so as to internalize this concept and apply it in practice. In light of this, the author designs the holistic unit driving question for Unit 1 as: "What can we do to take part in the protection of cultural heritage at home and abroad?" The holistic unit project homework is set as follows: During the Spring Festival of the Year of the Dragon, Wu Opera will appear on the stage of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala for the seventh time. To further promote Wu Opera as a "golden name card", the Jinhua Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism Bureau is collecting bilingual Vlogs on the protection and inheritance of Wu Opera. Well-prepared Vlogs, with rich content, coherent language, and smooth editing, will be published on the "Jinhua Culture" public account for wider promotion. During the completion of the project-based homework, teachers can provide strategies for problem-solving, communication language, and methods for planning and implementation.^[8]

Additionally, this unit can be divided into seven lessons, each designed as a sub-project homework, as shown in Figure 1. By completing the holistic unit project homework, students can integrate the content and language of the sub-project homework, gaining a deeper understanding of the theme of world cultural heritage protection. This process can also allow them to fully recognize the necessity and importance of everyone's participation in protection efforts, thereby fostering and implementing the awareness of a community with a shared future of mankind.

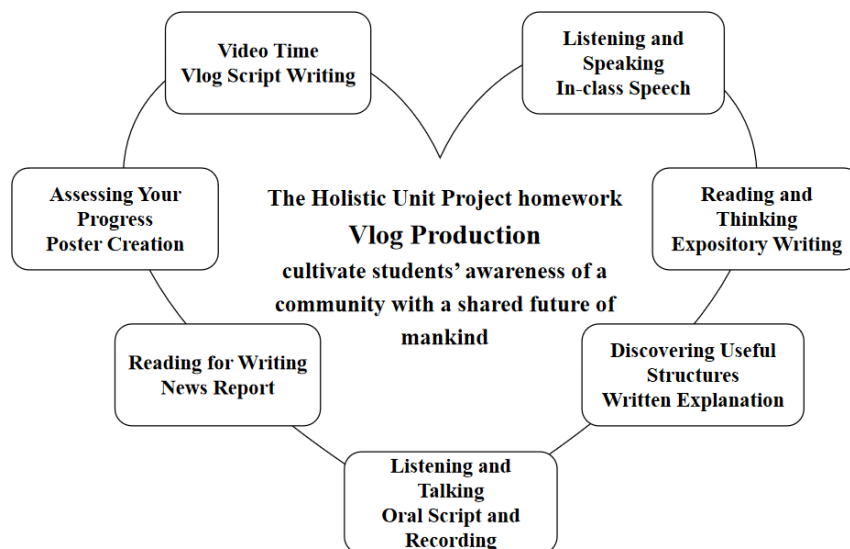


Figure 1: Holistic Unit Project Homework and Sub-project Homework Overall Design.

4.2.2. Integrate Unit Content to Plan Sub-project Homework

The various sub-lessons in holistic unit project-based learning are closely integrated with the common

unit teaching theme, characterized by inherent logical connections and a scientific sequence, all serving the holistic unit project learning goals. The construction of sub-project tasks should fully consider the overall coherence, gradual progression, and interrelatedness of the unit project under the guidance of the theme. It should “reflect the breakdown of holistic unit teaching goals and the advancement of English subject core competencies through a well-planned lesson structure.”^[9] During the implementation of sub-project homework, teachers act as coaches and facilitators, guiding students to ensure their projects meet the requirements of the curriculum standards and multiple evaluation criteria.^[10]

Based on the holistic unit project homework for Unit 1 “Cultural Heritage”—“Creating a Bilingual Vlog on the Preservation and Inheritance of Jinhua Wu Opera,” the author analyses and integrates the lesson content to construct seven sub-project homework tasks centered around the development of Jinhua Wu Opera. Each sub-lesson focuses on a different form of project homework, integrating the evolution of Wu Opera from both vertical and horizontal dimensions. These tasks cover the vocal systems, character structures, costumes, and classic repertoire of Wu Opera, supplemented by formats such as news reports, and posters, encouraging students to actively promote and disseminate Jinhua Wu Opera while appreciating its cultural significance, thus embedding the concept of a community with a shared future of mankind. While systematically engaging in unit-based learning, teachers provide students with information resource scaffolds and learning strategy scaffolds to tackle project-based homework effectively, thereby stimulating students’ motivation, driving their learning tasks, and fostering a positive cycle of high-quality homework design and implementation. The specific design of sub-project homework tasks for each lesson is shown in table.2.

Table 2: Sub-project Homework Design for Each Lesson.

Lesson	Sub-project Homework	Teacher Scaffolding	Student Tasks
Lesson 1	In-class Speech: Reflect on and articulate the necessity and value of preserving Jinhua Wu Opera in the context of Mount Tai’s cultural heritage protection	①Introduce the basic information of Wu Opera and showcase the value of its preservation and inheritance ②Introduce the basic components of the speech and provide examples	Team members collaborate to discuss the necessity and value of preserving Wu Opera, forming a unified viewpoint for the in-class speech
Lesson 2	Explanatory Writing: Skillfully utilize a timeline to trace, collect, organize, and complete the explanatory writing on the development of Wu Opera	①Present the development of Wu Opera, accompanied by a timeline ②Present an English sample explanatory essay that writes in chronological order	Each group utilizes the timeline provided by the teacher to collaboratively write an explanatory essay on the development of Wu Opera, followed by internal revisions and improvements
Lesson 3	Written Explanation: Based on the history of Wu Opera, explore its vocal system, character structure and etc. to create a written explanation	①Explain the vocal system, characters, and costumes of Wu Opera in conjunction with the PPT ②Provide language scaffolds for written explanations	Collect materials using the internet and library resources, combining them with teacher-provided content, and apply learned restrictive relative clauses to complete the written explanation
Lesson 4	Oral Script and Recording: Introduce the performance and its reception of Wu Opera at home and abroad	①Collect information on the performance of Wu Opera at home and abroad ②Invite school’s computer teacher to provide technical support for the recording of the oral script	Gather and integrate information on the dissemination and reception of Wu Opera at home and abroad, completing the oral recording with the help of the computer teacher
Lesson 5	News Report: Write news report on actions taken by individuals or organizations to protect Wu Opera, such as the Zhejiang Wu Opera Troupe	①Stress the components of a news report and highlight the objectivity of the language ②Revise the format of the student group’s news report	Use the news report format learned in this lesson to report on individual or organizational actions for Wu Opera preservation

Continuation Table

Lesson	Sub-project Homework	Teacher Scaffolding	Student Tasks
Lesson 6	Poster Creation: Select images, colors, and layout design, accompanied by text, to create a bilingual poster for Wu Opera	①Introduce the components of a poster ②Invite the art teacher to provide suggestions and assistance on color and layout	Incorporate feedback from the art teacher to produce a bilingual poster for Wu Opera promotion
Lesson 7	Vlog Script Writing: Integrate the results of all sub-project homework to complete a Vlog script about Wu Opera	①Organize students to integrate sub-project homework and create the final vlog script	Integrate the results of various sub-project homework to complete the final Vlog script

4.3. Homework Evaluation: Activate Tasks and Integrate Teaching, Learning and Evaluation

From the perspective of evaluation, homework serves not only as a tool for teachers to diagnose and assess students but also as a means for students to understand their own learning process. The evaluation of project-based learning is closely linked to the generation of outcomes and public presentations of results, demonstrating consistency between goals, practice, outcomes, and evaluation. Its characteristic of backward design, starting with the end in mind, aligns with the concept of “the integration of teaching, learning and evaluation” proposed by the “New English Curriculum”. This effectively integrates three interrelated, and complementary classroom key elements: teachers’ instruction, students’ learning, and learning outcomes. The evaluation of project homework should not be separated from the project process but should be carried out alongside it, as the two are inseparable.^[11] All in all, teachers are advisable to focus on full-process execution and multi-participant involvement in project-based homework evaluation.

4.3.1. Full-process Execution of Project-based Homework Evaluation

4.3.1.1. Developing a Rating Scale for Holistic Unit Project Homework

The holistic unit project homework rating scale is an important tool for evaluating the practices and outcomes of unit project learning and homework. As a scoring system or guideline, the scale lists specific criteria for student performance and describes different levels of achievement based on these criteria, helping to guide students in self-reflection and deeper exploration and creativity. The rating scale for the holistic unit project homework outcome “Vlog Production” in Unit 1 is consistent with the holistic unit teaching goals and focuses on responses to the unit-driven questions. Based on the various elements involved in the project product, the rating scale can differentiate student homework levels through assigned scores, supplemented with specific descriptive language to refine the evaluation dimensions.

4.3.1.2. Designing a Checklist for Sub-project Homework

The type and focus of the sub-project homework checklist are determined by the different types of sub-project homework, which can also adopt a backward design approach, starting with the end in mind. This involves providing detailed descriptions of the expected knowledge and skills that students should master based on the lesson goals, the characteristics of the lesson type, and the features of the project product, thus outlining the evaluation dimensions. Taking the sub-project homework from Lesson 1—“in-class speech” as an example, it requires students to deliver a concise and clear statement on a designated topic within a specified time. The checklist can be developed across various dimensions such as content, structure, presentation, learning motivation, and teamwork, as illustrated in table 3.

Table 3: Sub-project Homework Checklist (Lesson 1).

Checklist	
Items	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I have occupied information related to the theme.	
I have sound framework and good logic.	
I can speak loudly, clearly and fluently.	
I have body language and eye contact.	
I have increased my interest in learning English.	
I have improved my spirit and ability to cooperate.	
I have enhanced my sense of social responsibility.	

4.3.2. Multi-participant Involvement in Project-based Homework Evaluation

Teacher evaluation, student self-assessment and peer assessment, and public evaluation can effectively enhance learning motivation and promote diversified evaluation subjects. Teachers can build a homework exchange platform to showcase excellent project homework outcomes and conduct feedback sessions, guiding students to reflect on, regulate, and improve their own learning. Students can engage in intra-group peer assessments, inter-group peer assessments, and self-evaluations to communicate and provide feedback on the results and processes of the series of sub-project homework, thereby enhancing their thinking quality while gaining a deeper understanding of evaluation criteria and methods, thus cultivating autonomous learning abilities. Public evaluation can transcend the classroom assessment perspective, providing in-depth, multi-faceted evaluations and feedback on holistic unit project homework, thereby stimulating students' motivation to learn and promoting self-reflection.

5. Conclusion

Based on the project-based learning approach, this study plans high school English homework aiming at cultivating awareness of a community with a shared future of mankind, focusing on three aspects: homework preparation, design, and evaluation. This approach not only helps students deconstruct and reconstruct their old and new knowledge and experiences but also assists them in understanding cultural differences and broadening their international perspectives while permeating and implementing the awareness of a community with a shared future. Project-based homework follows the fundamental principles of “controlling quantity, improving quality, and increasing efficiency”, serving as a reference for high school English teachers to innovate homework formats and achieve student competency development. However, deepening understanding and promoting the application of project-based homework aiming at cultivating awareness of a community with a shared future in regular English teaching is an ongoing process of practice, reflection, and optimization. We need to rethink the direction of competency-oriented classroom reform and examine the design of project-based homework aiming at cultivating awareness of a community with a shared future from a critical, integrative, and dynamic perspective to enhance students' core competencies.

References

- [1] Xi, J. P. (2017). *Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era—Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- [2] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2020). *General senior high school English curriculum standards (2017 edition, revised in 2020)*. Beijing: People's Education Press.
- [3] Zhao, D. C. (2023). What makes good homework: New concepts of homework design. *Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method*, 43(06), 45–53.
- [4] Xia, X. M. (2018). *Design of project-based learning: International and local practices from the perspective of learning literacy*. Beijing: Education Science Press.
- [5] Alacapınar, F. (2008). Effectiveness of project-based learning. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, (33), 17–34.
- [6] Wang, L. X., Guo, H. Y., & Li, F. F. (2024). Design and implementation of unit project homework in junior high school English under the 'Double Reduction' policy. *Classroom Teaching Research for Primary and Secondary Schools*, (02), 40–44.
- [7] Liang, Y. P., & Jiang, J. L. (2023). High school English homework design based on holistic unit teaching. *Journal of Tianjin Normal University (Basic Education Edition)*, 24(02), 21–26.
- [8] Moss, D. (1997). *Project-based learning and assessment: A resource manual for teachers*. Arlington, VA: The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP).
- [9] Wan, S., & Bao, M. F. (2023). Design of unit-based project learning in junior high school English. *Teaching and Management*, (22), 41–44.
- [10] Buck Institute for Education. (2008). *Project-based learning teacher's guide: Teaching in the 21st century (2nd ed.)*. Beijing: Education Science Press.
- [11] Xia, X. M. (2022). Evaluation of project-based learning aimed at core competencies. *Chinese Journal of Education*, (09), 50–57.