

Overall Unit Teaching Design of Military English Listening and Speaking from the Perspective of Big Ideas

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Abstract: The 2018 military academy syllabus mandates Military English as a compulsory content for cadets. In practice, however, teachers often follow the textbook mechanically, lacking an integrated understanding of unit content, which leads to fragmented knowledge acquisition, imbalanced listening and speaking practice, and ineffective material integration. To address these issues, this paper proposes a holistic unit teaching design for Military English listening and speaking guided by the concept of Big Ideas. Taking Unit 6 "Convoy" as an example, the study examines the internal connections among listening texts, reorganizes teaching resources following the Production-Oriented Approach, and implements an integrated design of teaching, learning, and assessment activities. This design enables teachers to move beyond isolated language instruction, establish coherent unit frameworks, and embed ideological and political education naturally into language teaching. The holistic unit design based on Big Ideas thus offers a practical approach to improving both teaching effectiveness and cadets' communicative competence.

Keyword: Big Ideas; Military English Listening and Speaking Instruction; Holistic Unit Teaching; Ideological and Political Education; Production-Oriented Approach (POA)

1. Introduction

In response to ongoing military reforms and the new roles and responsibilities of the Chinese armed forces under current circumstances, a new version of the military academy syllabus was officially issued and implemented in 2018. For the first time, this syllabus explicitly designates Military English as a compulsory part of the undergraduate education for commissioned

officers. In our academy, we use two textbooks during the fourth semester: Military English for reading and writing, and Campaign English for the military [1,2] for listening and speaking. Campaign English for the military covers diverse military themes, features combat-oriented teaching scenarios and authentic linguistic materials, making it an excellent textbook for military cadets.

When using this textbook for instruction, we have also identified several issues that need to be addressed. First, teachers tend to follow the sequence of the textbook mechanically, lacking a clear understanding of the logical relationships between different parts of each unit. As a result, the knowledge and skills that students acquire remain fragmented. Second, the textbook contains a large amount of listening content, which often leads teachers to focus disproportionately on listening training while neglecting the development of students' communication competence, resulting in an imbalance between listening practice and speaking practice. Third, the learning materials are not well integrated and teaching activities also lack optimal design, which undermines both the effectiveness and efficiency of classroom instruction. From the perspective of "Big Ideas", this paper explores the holistic unit teaching design of military English listening and speaking through specific teaching cases. It aims to improve classroom teaching effectiveness and further cultivate cadets' ability to apply English in authentic military contexts.

2. The Connotation of Big Ideas

Big Ideas, also referred to as Big Concepts are defined by Erickson as statements of conceptual relationships that meaningfully connect discrete facts and extract important concepts [3]. Clark equates the term "concepts" with "Big Ideas," viewing Big Ideas as a cognitive framework that connects numerous smaller concepts and helps construct students' understanding [4]. The

research and practice of big idea-based English instruction in China's basic education are still in the initial exploratory stage. Professor Wang Qiang believed that according to Big Ideas teachers should not focus solely on the mastery of isolated pieces of knowledge, instead, they should guide students, based on a grasp of the essence and core meaning of the discipline, toward understanding upper-level, umbrella terms such as disciplinary content and methods [5]. From the perspective of curriculum content, big ideas serve as a conceptual framework of the curriculum system and linking various teaching contents, functioning as "the framework and backbone of the discipline". From the perspective of processes and methods, big ideas are "the principles and approaches that govern teaching and learning", as well as the core and foundation of instructional design. They guide teachers to integrate teaching contents and design teaching and assessment activities from a top-level perspective. For students, big ideas help them establish connections among fragmented knowledge, enable integrated learning, and lead students toward in-depth learning [6].

3. The Significance of Big Ideas for Holistic Unit Design

Holistic unit design refers to teachers' approach of treating units as instructional modules, intentionally integrating various teaching resources centered around unit themes, and exploring their functions in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Teachers should design their teaching from a macroscopic perspective to comprehensively enhance students' core disciplinary competencies. Holistic unit teaching requires teachers to consciously integrate teaching resources, emphasizing the coherence of the unit as a curricular whole. Teachers should be able to both grasp the overall framework of unit teaching and conduct instructional design step by step to achieve optimal teaching outcomes. The significance of implementing holistic unit teaching based on big ideas is elaborated as follows:

On the one hand, big ideas help realize the educational function of the course and fulfill the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education. To achieve the curriculum's educational objectives in listening and speaking instruction, teachers need to adopt the perspective of big ideas, focus on constructing

the thematic meaning of each unit and exploring the ideological and political elements embedded in the listening materials, when necessary they should supplement relevant supporting materials. In doing so, they can lay the foundation for the development of students' competencies and enable military English course to serve as an important platform for ideological and political education.

On the other hand, big ideas enable teachers to integrate teaching content and conduct holistic design for teaching, learning and assessment. Guided by big ideas, teachers will no longer focus excessively on explaining individual language points and key knowledge. Instead, they adopt a backward design approach, starting with unit objectives and then planning classroom activities accordingly, so that students can improve their abilities and competencies while achieving the set goals.

4. Overall Unit Teaching Design of Military English Listening and Speaking from the Perspective of Big Ideas

To carry out holistic unit design for military English listening and speaking instruction, teachers should first start from big ideas, analyze the logical relationships among the unit content, establish a unit framework, and set unit teaching objectives. Second, they should examine the listening passages, in particular the key concepts and functional sentence patterns; and set the teaching objectives of every two periods. Third, based on the objectives, teachers should integrate teaching resources, select appropriate input materials that can help achieve these objectives, and supplement the teaching content as needed. Fourth, from the perspective of big ideas and based on the planned lesson-level objectives, teacher should design classroom teaching activities and guide them through a series of listening and speaking tasks. Meanwhile, students should also pay attention to the agents of assessment, assessment criteria, and assessment standards, thereby promoting the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment. The following section takes Unit 6 Convoy as an example to illustrate how to carry out holistic unit design from the perspective of Big Ideas.

4.1 Establish a Unit Framework and Clarify Unit Teaching Objectives

First, teachers need to carefully study the teaching content of the unit and divide it into

different modules according to their inner connections. Second, teachers can explore the ideological and political elements embedded in the unit theme and the specific listening passages, clarify the unit's moral and educational objectives, and incorporate value guidance and moral shaping into knowledge transmission and language skill development.

Unit 6 Convoy mainly covers the convoy briefing, strip map reading and plotting, negotiation at military checkpoints, and vehicle breakdown and maintenance. This unit is designed to be completed in four teaching periods. In the textbook, the Alpha part focuses on vehicle arrangement, and the Bravo part on the convoy route. As both are related to the convoy briefing, they are combined into the first teaching module — the convoy briefing — which is allocated two teaching periods. Charlie and Delta deal with checkpoint negotiation and vehicle maintenance respectively, each taking one teaching period. Foxtrot is assigned as pre-class self-study. Thus, the unit content can be organized into three modules — convoy briefing, checkpoint negotiation, and emergency response — which are closely interconnected and logically coherent (see Table 1).

Table 1. Unit Framework and Teaching Schedule

Teaching Period	Textbook Content	Module	Learning Mode
1-2	Alpha: Convoy Tasks	Convoy Briefing	Classroom Instruction
	Bravo: More Convoy Tasks		
3	Charlie: At the Checkpoint	Checkpoint Negotiation	
4	Delta: Vehicle Security and Maintenance	Emergency Response	

Teachers should carefully study each listening passage during instruction, identifying the internal connections among the passages. Take the first and second audio clips of the unit as an example, upon careful examination, it becomes clear that these two listening passages, when combined, form a complete convoy briefing. The first audio clip focuses on vehicle arrangement, while the second focuses on the convoy route.

A three-dimensional approach encompassing by integrating these two passages, we can summarize key elements of a convoy briefing, such as mission, vehicle placement, route, etc., thereby enabling students to develop a clear and comprehensive understanding of the convoy

briefing. In terms of language, functional sentence patterns are summarized (see Table 2) to help students organize their language in preparation for subsequent oral production.

Table 2. The Elements of Convoy Briefing and Functional Sentence Patterns

mission	Our mission is to escort...from...to..
time	We will leave at ...and our ETA is ..., the whole movement will take ...
vehicle placement	The convoy is composed of... The convoy commander will be at the front of the convoy, and he'll be followed by... Another... will follow behind ..., and...will be at the rear of the convoy.
route	The total distance of our route is... ...continue along the A5... take the third exit for B35... turn left onto the B12, signposted ...

The unit teaching objectives of Military English should encompass knowledge transmission, competency cultivation, and quality shaping. To this end, these objectives are designed to fulfill the fundamental mission of fostering virtue through education and cultivating combat-ready military personnel. As the hope of the nation and the backbone of the country, military cadets hold ideological and political views that are vital to social stability and national progress [7]. During the lead-in part, students watch a video of Chinese peacekeepers escorting a UN convoy in South Sudan, thereby gaining an understanding of China's role and contribution to UN peacekeeping operations and enhancing their sense of mission and responsibility as Chinese soldiers. When explaining the duties of a peacekeeping convoy commander, teacher can cite the five essential qualities of a military leader as articulated in *The Art of War*—wisdom, integrity, benevolence, courage, and discipline—to guide students in building a strong sense of responsibility and commitment as commanders who are loyal to their mission, enhancing their professional competence, and improving their ability to perform in command positions. Based on the above teaching approach, the unit' teaching objectives are as follows (see Table 3).

Table 3. Unit Teaching Objectives

Teaching Module	Teaching period	Unit Teaching Objectives
Convoy briefing	1-2	1. Identify vocabularies and expressions related to convoy operations. 2. List the key components of a strip map. 3. Master the structure and

		essential elements of a convoy briefing. 4. Deliver a convoy briefing in English with accuracy and clarity. 5. Strengthen the students' sense of responsibility and commitment as commanders. 6. Enhance students' professional competence and improve their ability as future commanders.
Checkpoint Negotiation	3	1. Identify vocabularies and expressions related to checkpoint. 2. Use appropriate language, negotiation strategies, and principles to conduct checkpoint negotiation conversations. 3. Appreciate the ancient Chinese military wisdom that "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.", thereby strengthening their cultural confidence. 4. Understand the importance of dialogue and negotiation, and put into practice the value of win-win cooperation.
Emergency Response	4	1. Describe the procedures for armed escort and the response protocols for emergencies. 2. Properly handle emergencies arising during armed escort. 3. Improve the adaptability to deal with unexpected incidents while performing military tasks.

4.2 Integrate Teaching Resources Based on Unit Teaching Objectives

Given the limited class time and the large number of listening exercises in the unit, targeted listening materials should be selected based on unit objectives to improve teaching efficiency. The selection and use of teaching materials should be based on the three criteria defined by the Production-Oriented Approach (POA): appropriateness, enabling effectiveness, and attainability of the production objectives [8]. Guided by this theory, we have integrated the teaching resources of this unit as follows. First, we selected listening materials that align with the production objectives. Second, we reordered the listening materials: on the one hand, we adjusted the sequence of certain audio clips according to the principle of progressing from easier to more difficult tasks. Third, we deleted redundant content to improve teaching efficiency.

Fourth, we supplemented the teaching materials with the pragmatic principles of politeness and cooperation to enhance students' understanding of communicative norms and improve their cross-cultural military communication competence. Fifth, we integrated ideological and political elements: through positive and negative cases of checkpoint negotiation, we distilled the principles of position and flexibility in foreign military communication. In presenting the principle of upholding our position, we incorporated the heroic deeds of the Galwan Valley to guide students in carrying forward the heroic spirit and safeguarding national sovereignty. In presenting the principle of flexibility, we cited the quote from *The Art of War*: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting" to help students draw on traditional military wisdom and strengthen their cultural confidence.

4.3 Integrated Design of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Activities

After determining the teaching objectives and instructional resources, teachers should design a series of teaching activities to integrate the knowledge and language points of individual texts. In the Production-Oriented Approach (POA), the teaching process consists of several cyclic chains, each comprising the stages of motivating, enabling, and assessing. Each unit contains a major production objective, each of which is further divided into several minor objectives aligned with different cycles [9]. Guided by the big ideas, the teacher designs the overall output objective: recording a video log documenting the armed escort mission of a UN convoy by Chinese peacekeeping forces in Mali. This objective is then broken down into three sub-objectives — delivering a convoy briefing, negotiating at the checkpoint, and handling emergencies during the escort. Each sub-objective follows the three-stage cycle of motivating, enabling, and assessing, and together they constitute the enabling stage of the overall production objective. Under each sub-objective, specific tasks are designed (see Table 4), following the principles of precision, progressiveness, and diversity. These tasks are designed to equip students with the ability to express military intentions and positions appropriately and accurately in English.

Assessment is an important part of teaching activities. Guided by the teacher-student

collaborative assessment principle [10], a multi-dimensional assessment approach is adopted, with a focus on the following three aspects: knowledge, language skills, and value-oriented educational impact, thereby promoting student development and enhancing teaching practices. The subjects of assessment are not merely a simple combination of teachers and students; rather, under the teacher's guidance, students engage in continuous self-assessment alongside learning, with both teachers and students participating collaboratively [11]. In actual teaching practice, digital platforms such

as Xuexi Tong and the online survey app Wenjuanxing can be used for student self-assessment, enabling students to reflect on their own learning behaviors and outcomes. Peer assessment can also be conducted, in which students evaluate each other's oral productions against established criteria covering language, content, and presentation, thereby fostering their critical thinking. Teachers, meanwhile, may offer real-time feedback based on students' classroom performance, providing positive reinforcement to enhance student engagement and motivation.

Table 4. Unit Teaching Design

Table 4: Unit Teaching Design		
Motivating	Recording a video log documenting the armed escort mission of a UN convoy by Chinese peacekeeping forces in Mali.	
Enabling	Sub-objective 1: Delivering a convoy briefing.	Task 1: Arranging Vehicles for Convoy.
		Task 2: Reading and plotting of the strip map.
		Task 3: Summarizing key elements of a convoy briefing.
	Sub-objective 2: Negotiating at the checkpoint	Task 1: Revising the checkpoint negotiation sample.
		Task 2: Summarizing the negotiating strategies.
		Task 3: Concluding the negotiating principles.
	Sub-objective 3: Handling emergencies during the escort.	Task 1: Identifying the vehicle repair tools.
		Task 2: Handling Vehicle Breakdowns.
		Task 3: Responding to Emergencies.
Assessing	Give the assessment of the students' video log	
Note: Each sub-objective follows the three-stage cycle of motivating, enabling, and assessing.		

5. Conclusion

Guided by the concept of "big ideas," the holistic design of Military English units focuses on the internal connections among various listening texts, reorganizing the previously fragmented and isolated listening and speaking practices into a systematic and integrated teaching model. With a focus on knowledge integration, it restructures and optimizes teaching resources to enhance efficiency, while incorporating interdisciplinary knowledge to help students integrate knowledge of different fields. From the perspective of value education, it thoroughly explores ideological and political elements, highlights the course's role in fostering virtue through education, and guides students' value orientation, thereby shaping their character and cultivating their competence. Through the integrated design of teaching, learning, and assessment, it foregrounds students' central role in the learning process and facilitates effective classroom learning.

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