

The Structurally Shallow Treatment of Vocabulary Instruction in Core-Competency-Oriented Chinese Language Arts Classrooms and Its Improvement

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Abstract: In core-competency-oriented Chinese language arts teaching, the ultimate concern is how students understand, organize, and use language. Words are the basic units of reading comprehension and expressive production, and they also provide an important entry point for observing whether core competencies are enacted in classroom practice. The problem in current Chinese language arts classrooms is not that words are ignored, but that many forms of vocabulary instruction remain at relatively shallow levels, such as pronunciation correction, explanation of meanings, and removal of reading obstacles. They move less often toward contextual understanding, analysis of expressive effects, and students' active use of words. This article conceptualizes this phenomenon as a structurally shallow treatment and analyzes its manifestations and causes from three dimensions: objectives, activities, and assessment. It argues that improving vocabulary instruction does not require a separate and complicated instructional model. Rather, it requires reconstructing a learning process that moves from understanding lexical meaning, to grasping contextual meaning in the text, to analyzing expressive functions, and finally to using language. In this way, language development and use, a key expression in Chinese language curriculum standards, can be transformed from curriculum discourse into an observable classroom learning process.

Keywords: Core competencies; Vocabulary instruction; Structurally shallow treatment; Language development and use; Chinese language arts classroom

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1. Introduction

Core-competency-oriented reform in the Chinese language curriculum requires classroom teaching to move beyond knowledge transmission and test-oriented training, and to attend to the kinds of language experience

students develop through reading, communication, and writing. Both the 2022 Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education and the senior high school Chinese curriculum standards emphasize that students should accumulate language, develop a sense of language, and learn to express themselves through concrete language practice ^[1-2]. This means that core competencies in Chinese language arts cannot remain at the level of abstract ideas. They need to be gradually formed through specific linguistic materials such as words, sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts.

Within the Chinese language arts core competencies, language development and use have a foundational position. In the Chinese curriculum standards, this expression refers to students' capacity to build, understand, and use language in meaningful contexts. Students' understanding of a text does not usually move directly to the theme; rather, it gradually unfolds through the meaning, color, tone, and combinational relations of individual words. Words connect textual content with students' own expressive experience. Students' reading comprehension, thinking, aesthetic experience, and cultural understanding ultimately depend on their understanding and expression of language. Words are among the most basic and dynamic units of language. Whether students can accurately understand key words in a text, perceive their contextual implications and expressive effects, and transform lexical experience gained from reading into oral and written expression directly affects the quality of Chinese language arts learning. Wang Rongsheng, Wu Zhonghao, and Wang Feng argue that word mastery requires students to connect lexical and contextual meanings in texts ^[3]. Yao Wenhan and Zhang Xinke also note that vocabulary accumulation can easily become fragmented and cognitively disconnected ^[4].

However, the problem in real classrooms cannot simply be described as an absence of vocabulary instruction. Most Chinese language arts lessons deal with words, such as asking students to look up words before class, correcting pronunciation and explaining meanings in class, or practicing vocabulary discrimination in exercises. The key question is whether these practices support textual understanding, students' expression, and language use. In practice, vocabulary instruction often remains low-level, mainly removing reading obstacles. A word may have been explained, but not necessarily fully understood; students may know its meaning but may still be unable to explain its function in the text. This article describes such a phenomenon as structurally shallow treatment. Although vocabulary instruction is present in the classroom, vocabulary learning is not sufficiently developed across objectives, activities, and assessment. It fails to form a continuous process from lexical understanding to contextual interpretation, expressive analysis, and language use. This is not merely the result of an individual teacher's insufficient handling of words but a common implementation bias that may occur when core competencies enter the fine details of classroom practice.

2. Research basis and problem space

Existing studies have first confirmed the foundational status of vocabulary learning. In the past, words were often placed in the category of basic knowledge together with pronunciation, orthography, annotations, and dictation. Recent studies, however, suggest that words are not merely subordinate to character learning but should be understood within the formation of reading and expressive abilities. Research on the learning task cluster of language accumulation and organization further emphasizes that accumulation, organization, and use of language should be mutually connected ^[5]. These studies provide a basis for rethinking vocabulary

instruction.

Research on core competencies offers a broader curricular background for this view. Zheng Guomin and Li Yuhui emphasize that Chinese curriculum reform needs to grasp the educational function of the Chinese language curriculum and its direction of practical innovation ^[6]. Research on learning tasks further argues that Chinese language learning tasks should not be added as external classroom activities but should organize students' language learning within authentic Chinese language practice. Wen Yi and Cui Yunhuo discuss Chinese language learning tasks in relation to learning goals and learning processes ^[7]. Wang Rongsheng analyzes the meaning of Chinese language learning tasks from the text of curriculum standards ^[8]. Xu Peng and Wang Tongyan explain, from the perspective of disciplinary practice, that the educational pathway of the Chinese language curriculum should be realized through students' concrete language activities ^[9]. Wu Xinxin further emphasizes the role of learning task clusters in promoting changes in Chinese language teaching ^[10]. Taken together, these studies show that the enactment of core competencies must pass through operable classroom activities.

At the same time, studies of instructional design and assessment provide dimensions for diagnosing vocabulary instruction. Zheng Guihua points out that learning themes should focus on learning goals, integrate resources, connect learning activities, and promote learning progression ^[11]. Zhang Xinke and Yao Wenhan argue that, in the context of core competencies, the formulation of Chinese language teaching objectives still tends to be vague and overgeneralized ^[12]. If the teaching objective says that students should appreciate language, but classroom activities only explain word meanings; or if the lesson requires students to understand the text, but assessment only checks whether answers are correct, language learning will hardly deepen. Based on these studies, this article does not repeat the general claim that vocabulary learning is important. Instead, it asks whether a specific word is visible in classroom objectives, whether it is developed in learning activities, and whether it leaves evidence in assessment. This is the problem space of the article.

3. Analytical dimensions

Vocabulary instruction in this article refers mainly to instructional activities in reading lessons that focus on word meaning, textual context, expressive function, and transfer to use. It is not equivalent to checking new words, nor is it equivalent to dictionary explanations. Its value lies not only in helping students know what a word means, but also in helping them enter the text through words, understand language through the text, and form expressive ability through language. This definition also makes it possible to translate concrete issues in Chinese language arts classrooms into issues familiar to international readers, such as vocabulary learning and text comprehension.

This article does not treat vocabulary instruction as a small segment independent of reading instruction. Only when words enter textual relations can their functions in characterization, emotional expression, argumentative development, or register construction become visible. Only through explanation, comparison, and re-expression can students transform external word meanings into their own language experience. Therefore, the structurally shallow treatment discussed in this article does not mean that teachers have not taught words. It means that words have not been organized into a complete learning process.

The article analyzes the structurally shallow treatment of vocabulary instruction from three dimensions. First, the dimension of objectives concerns whether teaching objectives specifically point to the contextual

meaning and expressive function of key words, rather than being generally phrased as understanding words or appreciating language. Second, the dimension of activities concerns whether the classroom guides students to move from lexical meaning to contextual meaning in the text, and whether comparison, substitution, and questioning are used to analyze the expressive functions of words. Third, the dimension of assessment concerns whether teachers only evaluate whether a word's meaning has been correctly explained or whether they further evaluate students' ability to interpret, differentiate, and use words in relation to the text. Jing Hongchun's discussion of the consistency among teaching, learning, and assessment in Chinese language learning task design provides a useful reference for this analysis^[13].

On this basis, a relatively complete process of vocabulary learning can be summarized in four steps: understanding lexical meaning, grasping contextual meaning in the text, analyzing expressive function, and using language. Lexical meaning is the starting point; contextual meaning in the text is the key; expressive function analysis deepens learning; and language use is the destination. If classrooms stop at this first step, language development and use become stated objectives rather than lived learning processes.

4. Main manifestations of shallow treatment

4.1. Vague objective statements

The shallow treatment of vocabulary instruction is first reflected in the formulation of objectives. Many lesson plans include statements such as understanding key words, appreciating language, experiencing the author's feelings, or perceiving character images. Such statements are not wrong in themselves. However, if they do not further specify which words students should understand, to what depth, and through what form students should demonstrate their learning, they can hardly guide classroom activities effectively. For example, appreciating language may involve several levels: understanding word meanings, perceiving contextual implications, analyzing expressive effects, and learning ways of expression. If the objective remains general, the classroom may easily reduce it to explaining a few difficult words or asking students to use fixed answer patterns, such as the word vividly describes. In this case, words appear in the objective, but they do not become clear learning tasks.

4.2. Front-loading word treatment

The second manifestation is the front-loading of word treatment in classroom activities. In many lessons, word treatment is arranged before reading: teachers first check pre-class preparation, correct pronunciation, explain meanings, and then move into textual analysis. This procedure can help remove basic reading obstacles. Yet the problem is that, once words are treated, subsequent reading often no longer returns to them. The hidden risk of this procedure is that it separates words from textual understanding. In fact, many words can only be truly understood when they are placed back into the text. Action verbs in fiction may reveal a character's situation; sensory words in prose may create an aesthetic atmosphere; conceptual words and connectives in argumentative texts may organize the logic of argumentation. If the classroom treats these words only as difficult words to be explained, without asking how they participate in characterization, emotional expression, or structural development, vocabulary instruction becomes merely instrumental.

4.3. Insufficient contextual analysis

The key to vocabulary instruction is not whether students can recite dictionary meanings, but whether they

can understand how words generate meaning in a specific text. In actual classrooms, insufficient contextual analysis is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, teachers often treat word meanings as static answers. For instance, one word means slow, another means sad, and another indicates contrast. These explanations may not be wrong, but they do not show how the word relates to the character, situation, tone, or structure in that specific location. Second, students lack opportunities for comparison and differentiation. Without comparing the original word with possible substitutes, it is difficult to perceive the accuracy of the original expression; without connecting the word with the surrounding text, it is difficult to appreciate its implication. If reading instruction bypasses contextual meaning, it may move too early toward thematic generalization. Such themes are often conceptual conclusions rather than understandings gradually generated by students from language.

4.4. Formulaic language appreciation

In many classrooms and assignments, word appreciation is trained into fixed formulas, such as this word vividly describes and expresses the author's feelings. Formulaic training may reduce the difficulty of answering questions, but if it replaces analysis over time, students may learn to write stock phrases without explaining why a word is accurate, powerful, or meaningful. Analysis of a word's expressive function should at least involve accuracy, connotation, force, register, rhythm, and relation to the surrounding text. Words in different genres also function differently. Words in fiction are often related to characters and narration; words in prose are often related to perception and artistic mood; words in argumentative writing are often related to concepts and logic. Using one formula to handle all words obscures differences in language use.

4.5. Limited assessment evidence

The shallow treatment of vocabulary instruction is also reflected in assessment. In class, teachers often judge whether students understand a word by whether they can provide the correct meaning. Such an assessment is quick and clear, but it only measures the lowest level of understanding. Whether students can explain a word in context, compare expressive differences between two words, or use the word accurately in a new context is often not assessed. Liu Jinhua and Wu Xinxin's study of primary Chinese language classroom assessment points out problems such as unclear assessment targets and insufficient collection of evidence^[14]. Although this study focuses on primary Chinese language classrooms, its findings are also useful for understanding assessment difficulties in vocabulary instruction. If assessment only focuses on whether word meanings are correct, classroom activities will naturally move toward standard answers. Students may then think that vocabulary learning means looking up words, memorizing explanations, and applying formulas, rather than understanding, differentiating, and using language.

5. Causes of shallow treatment

5.1. The influence of positioning vocabulary as basic knowledge

For a long time, words have often been placed in the category of basic knowledge together with pronunciation, orthography, annotations, and dictation. This classification facilitates classroom management, but it also tends to lead teachers to treat vocabulary instruction as preparation before reading rather than as part of reading comprehension and expressive production. As a result, words are often assigned to pre-class preparation, lesson introduction, or after-class accumulation, and less often become objects of in-depth inquiry in class.

5.2. The thematic orientation of reading instruction

Many reading lessons are eager to complete content comprehension, character analysis, emotional summary, and thematic extraction. Specific words become merely auxiliary materials leading to these conclusions. The problem is that if students do not go through the process from words to sentences, from sentences to paragraphs, and from paragraphs to the whole text, the theme may become a conclusion provided by the teacher rather than an understanding generated through students' language practice. Wang Rongsheng and Long Xiafei's study of reading aloud argues that the cultivation of basic Chinese language abilities is often obscured by teaching methods or external forms^[15]. Vocabulary instruction faces a similar problem: the fact that a teacher has explained a word does not mean that students have formed the ability to understand and use it.

5.3. Insufficient transformation of textbook resources

Chinese language arts textbooks include annotations, after-class exercises, language accumulation activities, and expression tasks. Yet these resources are often handled separately in the classroom. Words, reading, and expression do not form a continuous task. Students may complete word lookup, reading aloud, and question answering, but they do not form a complete learning process organized around words. Chen Xianyun's study of textbook language suggests that textbook language itself has the functions of organizing learning, indicating methods, and guiding expression^[16]. Yang Bangjun's discussion of the relationship among curriculum standards, textbooks, and the college entrance examination also shows that recent assessment reforms are encouraging classrooms to return to textbooks and language practice^[17]. However, this return still needs to be implemented in the micro-level language tasks of daily reading lessons.

5.4. Narrow assessment methods

Compared with interpretation, differentiation, and transfer to use, judging whether a word's meaning is correct is easier to test and more convenient for quick feedback. Therefore, classroom assessment often remains at the level of whether the answer is correct. Yet the real quality of vocabulary learning lies in whether students can explain, differentiate, and use words well. Zhou Wenye and Dong Zehua propose that performance-based assessment should attend to the quality of students' performance in authentic tasks^[18]. Zhang Jun and Qie Huimin also emphasize the importance of performance-based assessment for the formation of practical ability in Chinese language teacher education courses^[19]. If vocabulary instruction cannot obtain similar performance evidence, it will be difficult to move beyond shallow treatment.

6. Suggestions for improving vocabulary instruction

6.1. Clarifying vocabulary learning objectives

Improving vocabulary instruction first requires revising instructional objectives. Objectives should not simply state that students will understand key words or appreciate language. Instead, they should clarify what kind of language performance students are expected to complete. For example, a lower-level objective may be that students can accurately state the basic meanings of several key words in the text. To serve core competencies, however, the objective should be further formulated as follows: students can explain the contextual meaning of key words with reference to the surrounding text and analyze their role in characterization, emotional expression, or argumentative logic. Such objectives shift vocabulary learning from explanation to interpretation and use, guiding subsequent activities and assessment^[20].

6.2. Connecting lexical meaning with context

Vocabulary instruction should not stop at isolated explanation but should form a continuous sequence of activities. Classroom tasks can follow the order of identifying words, clarifying meanings, situating words in context, and using words. Identifying words means guiding students to find key words that support textual understanding rather than only dealing with words in annotations. Clarifying meanings means understanding basic meanings, common collocations, and connotations. Situating words in context means explaining their specific implications in the text and using substitution, deletion, or rearrangement to experience the accuracy and expressive force of the original wording. Using words means transferring vocabulary experience gained from reading into students' own expression through imitation, rewriting, continuation, or micro-writing. The significance of this process is that words no longer remain obstacles to reading but become connections between reading and expression.

6.3. Refining classroom questioning

Classroom questioning should move from what does this word mean to why is this word used here. Around key words, teachers may design a series of questions: What is the basic meaning of this word? What additional implication does it have in this sentence? What would change if it were replaced by another word? Which surrounding sentences does it echo? What role does it play in character, emotion, atmosphere, or argument? Can you use this word in a new context? These questions are not complicated, but they can guide students from lexical meaning to contextual meaning in the text, and from understanding to expression. Comparing substitutes and using words in new contexts can help avoid formulaic word appreciation.

6.4. Adding performance-based assessment

Assessment in vocabulary instruction should also change accordingly. Teachers should not only check whether students can provide standard explanations, but should also observe whether they can complete three kinds of performance. The first is interpretive performance: whether students can explain the specific meaning of a word in the text in their own language. The second is differentiating performance: whether students can compare the expressive differences between the original word and a substitute. The third is using performance: whether students can use the word accurately and appropriately in a new context. In practice, teachers may design small tasks such as vocabulary notes, word substitution comparison sheets, and micro-writing pieces. Assessment criteria need not be complicated; they may include accuracy of explanation, use of context, analysis of expressive function, and appropriateness of transfer.

7. Conclusion

Vocabulary instruction is not a form of basic training outside core competencies; it is an important part of enacting language development and use. The current problem in Chinese language arts classrooms is not that words are completely ignored, but that vocabulary instruction is often fixed at the shallow level of explaining meanings and removing reading obstacles. It does not sufficiently enter contextual understanding, analysis of expressive function, or students' language use. As a result, it shows a structurally shallow treatment across objectives, activities, and assessment.

Improving this problem does not require constructing a new and complicated instructional model. It requires starting from specific words in the classroom and reconstructing the learning process of

understanding lexical meaning, grasping contextual meaning in the text, analyzing expressive function, and using language. When students can enter a text through a word and return from textual language to their own expression, core competencies can become observable, assessable, and developable language abilities. Therefore, a close understanding of how core competencies are enacted in Chinese curriculum reform can not only deepen local research on Chinese language arts classrooms, but also provide useful reference for language learning, text comprehension, and assessment improvement in international classrooms.

Disclosure statement

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