A Study on the Application of the Stratified Teaching Model in the Design of English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

Hanxue Zhu*

No. 126 Middle School Changbai Education Group, Shenyang, 110000, China
**Corresponding author: chann54@outlook.com*

Abstract: *With the advancement of the basic education curriculum reform, the design of English after-school assignments in junior high schools has attracted considerable attention. Traditional assignments fail to address the objective differences in students' language abilities. As a teaching strategy that respects individual differences, the stratified teaching model provides a new theoretical perspective for assignment optimization. This study focuses on the application of the stratified teaching model in the design of English after-school assignments in junior high schools, and it elaborates on this application from three dimensions: theoretical basis, component structure, and implementation mechanism. At the theoretical level, this study explains the connotation of stratified teaching and its interactive logic with assignment design. At the component level, it deconstructs the core elements of stratified assignments from three dimensions: diagnosis of learning conditions, regulation of cognitive load, and development of metacognition. At the implementation level, it explores the operational mechanisms of student stratification mobility, teacher role configuration, and multiple feedback pathways. This study aims to provide a theoretical reference for the design of English after-school assignments in junior high schools and to promote the transformation of assignments from tools for knowledge consolidation into vehicles for language ability development.*

Keywords: *Stratified Teaching; Junior High School English; After-School Assignments; Assignment Design; Cognitive Load; Metacognition*

Introduction

Homework serves as a key component of the junior high school English teaching system, as it carries the functions of knowledge internalization, skill development, and competency cultivation. Current after-school assignment design often adopts a uniform standard, which overlooks the differences among students in language foundation, cognitive style, and developmental pace. This oversight leads to students either feeling anxious or experiencing burnout, and the root cause lies in the failure of assignments to form an effective alignment with individual characteristics.

Stratified teaching, with its philosophy of attending to differences and dynamic adaptation, provides a pathway for addressing the aforementioned issues. The integration of stratification into assignment design allows the difficulty level to be anchored in students' Zone of Proximal Development, and it stimulates metacognitive engagement through structured tasks, thereby promoting the coordinated development of language ability and autonomous learning. This study explores this topic from three dimensions: theoretical logic, component structure, and implementation mechanism, aiming to construct a theoretical framework for the application of stratified teaching in junior high school English assignment design and to provide theoretical support for the shift of assignment design from uniformity to differentiation.

1. The Theoretical Logic of Stratified Teaching and the Design of English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

1.1 The Connotation of the Stratified Teaching Model and Its Pedagogical Basis

The stratified teaching model refers to a form of instructional organization in which teachers, based on objective assessments of students' existing knowledge levels, cognitive abilities, and learning styles,

divide the teaching subjects into several homogeneous or heterogeneous groups. Accordingly, teachers set differentiated teaching objectives, deploy diversified teaching contents, and adopt flexible teaching methods. Its connotation goes beyond simple grouping operations, as it embodies a teaching mindset of dynamic adaptation, emphasizing the optimal match between various elements of the teaching system and learners' characteristics. At the level of specific operation, stratification encompasses multiple dimensions such as objective stratification, process stratification, and evaluation stratification, thereby constituting a complete system of teaching strategies. Its fundamental aim is to promote the maximum development of each learner on the basis of their original level[1].

From the perspective of its pedagogical basis, the stratified teaching model possesses a solid theoretical foundation. Cognitive constructivist theory holds that learning is a process in which individuals actively construct meaning based on their existing cognitive structures. Since learners at different developmental levels exhibit significant differences in their methods of information processing and their capacity for assimilation, stratified teaching serves as a practical response to this cognitive principle. Differentiated instruction theory directly provides methodological support for stratification, as this theory advocates that teaching should adapt to students' differences rather than attempting to eliminate them, and it should respond to students' individual needs by adjusting learning content, process, and outcomes. Furthermore, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences also offers important insights for stratified teaching. The developmental pathways of linguistic intelligence display diversity among different individuals, and stratified design can attend to the uniqueness of learners' intellectual structures, thereby creating a more inclusive space for English learning.

1.2 The Educational Value and Functional Positioning of English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

English after-school assignments in junior high schools carry multiple educational values within the language teaching system, as their significance extends far beyond the realm of mere skill practice. From the perspective of the inherent laws of language acquisition, the assignment phase provides the necessary temporal dimension and psychological space for the transformation of classroom input into language intake. Learners, in situations that lack the immediate support of the classroom, complete tasks either independently or collaboratively, thereby achieving deep processing and internalization of linguistic knowledge. This autonomous language practice helps to form stable language abilities, facilitates the transformation of declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge, and extends language learning from the cognitive level to the level of application. Meanwhile, the assignment process also serves as a crucial opportunity for learners to engage in deep interaction with linguistic materials. During this process, the comprehensibility of language input is enhanced, and the accuracy of language output is refined.

In terms of functional positioning, English after-school assignments in junior high schools need to expand from a single function of knowledge consolidation to multiple educational functions. First, assignments serve a cognitive development function. By designing language tasks that contain a substantial cognitive component, they guide students to engage in higher-order thinking activities such as comparison, analysis, and evaluation, thereby promoting the coordinated development of language ability and cognitive ability. Second, assignments carry a metacognitive development function. As students plan their assignment processes, monitor the quality of their assignments, and reflect on their assignment outcomes, they gradually develop the ability to regulate their own learning, which serves as the core mechanism for the generation of autonomous learning ability. Third, assignments fulfill an affective cultivation function. Appropriate assignment difficulty and task formats enable students to experience success, sustain their intrinsic motivation for language learning, and avoid learning burnout caused by excessive frustration or monotonous repetition.

1.3 The Appropriateness and Interactive Logic of Integrating Stratified Teaching into Assignment Design

The integration of stratified teaching into the design of English after-school assignments in junior high schools possesses inherent appropriateness, a judgment that is based on an in-depth examination of the laws of language learning and the developmental characteristics of students. The junior high school stage represents a critical period for the development of students' language abilities, during which individual differences in language aptitude, learning foundation, and cognitive style tend to become more explicit. Uniform assignment design thus struggles to meet diverse learning needs. The integration of stratification enables the difficulty level of assignments to be precisely anchored in

students' Zone of Proximal Development, thereby avoiding the learning anxiety caused by tasks that are excessively difficult and also preventing the cognitive burnout induced by tasks that are overly simple. From the perspective of the Input Hypothesis, comprehensible input constitutes a necessary condition for language acquisition. Stratified assignments can ensure that a moderate gap is maintained between the input content and students' current language proficiency, thereby forming an optimized input structure of i+1 and creating ideal conditions for language acquisition[2].

Stratified teaching and assignment design share a deep interactive logic, and this logic is manifested as a dynamic relationship of two-way construction. On one hand, the concept of stratification permeates the entire process of assignment design, from objective setting, content selection, to format arrangement, all of which require consideration of students' differential characteristics to form a stratified assignment system. On the other hand, the completion of assignments, in turn, serves as an important basis for stratification adjustments. Information such as students' cognitive performance, error patterns, and strategy use demonstrated in assignments provides an empirical foundation for teachers to re-evaluate their stratification judgments and optimize their stratification strategies. This interactive mechanism ensures that assignments are no longer merely the endpoint of instruction, but instead become a mediating tool connecting teaching and learning. Through the medium of assignments, teachers' instructional assumptions and students' actual learning situations engage in continuous dialogue, thereby driving the teaching system toward optimization through dynamic adjustment.

2. The Deconstruction of Elements and Systematic Architecture of Stratified Design for English After-School Assignments in Junior High Schools

2.1 Stratified Objective Setting and Adaptation Mechanism Based on the Diagnosis of Learning Conditions

The logical starting point for the design of stratified assignments lies in the precise diagnosis of learning conditions, and this diagnostic process must transcend simple performance differentiation to shift toward a systematic assessment of students' multidimensional language development. The dimensions of this diagnosis encompass the breadth and depth of language knowledge reserves, the balance of language skills, the tendency of cognitive styles, and the type and intensity of learning motivation. Through the collection of information from multiple channels — such as formative assessment tools, diagnostic tests, and the analysis of learning portfolios — teachers can delineate a relatively complete language learning profile for students, thereby identifying the areas of strength and points of growth in different students' language ability development. This multidimensional analysis of learning conditions constitutes the objective basis for stratified objective setting, enabling subsequent assignment design to genuinely respond to students' authentic needs.

Based on the diagnosis of learning conditions, the setting of stratified objectives needs to follow the principle of adaptation, which requires that the assignment objectives form a moderately tension-filled match with students' current levels of language development. For students at the foundational level, the assignment objectives focus on the consolidation of language knowledge and the formation of basic skills, emphasizing the accuracy of language structures and the cultivation of basic language sense. For students at the developmental level, the assignment objectives expand to the comprehensive application of language knowledge and the integration of skills, focusing on language production in relatively authentic contexts. For students at the advanced level, the assignment objectives target the creativity of language use, the depth of cognitive engagement, and the emergence of cross-cultural awareness. The vertical progression of this objective system is not a linear segmentation, but rather it presents a continuous characteristic of overlapping and interconnection. The core of the adaptation mechanism lies in ensuring that each student receives learning tasks that are challenging yet achievable based on their existing foundation.

2.2 The Gradient of Assignment Difficulty and the Typology of Tasks Oriented Toward Cognitive Load

Cognitive load theory provides an important analytical framework for the scientific design of assignment difficulty, as this theory distinguishes among three types of cognitive load — intrinsic cognitive load, extraneous cognitive load, and germane cognitive load—thereby offering a perspective for understanding the mechanism through which assignment difficulty affects student learning

outcomes. Intrinsic cognitive load originates from the interaction between the complexity of the learning task itself and the learner's existing knowledge. In English assignment design, it is manifested in the degree of match among the complexity of linguistic materials, the cognitive depth required by the task, and the learner's existing language schemas. Moderate intrinsic cognitive load can activate the learner's cognitive processing, whereas excessive intrinsic load may lead to the depletion of cognitive resources. Therefore, the setting of the assignment difficulty gradient requires precise control over this balance point, ensuring that language tasks are both challenging and remain within the students' information processing capacity.

Based on the regulation of cognitive load, the design of the assignment difficulty gradient needs to be mutually supported by a diverse typology of assignment types. From the dimension of language input, assignment types can encompass comprehension tasks, discrimination tasks, and integration tasks, which respectively target the surface-level decoding, deep processing, and meaning construction of linguistic materials. From the dimension of language output, assignment types can include reproduction tasks, reorganization tasks, and generation tasks, thereby forming a continuum of ability development that extends from imitation to creation. Different types of assignments vary in their methods of mobilizing students' cognitive resources: comprehension tasks primarily activate the language processing system, whereas generation tasks simultaneously engage both the language processing system and the executive control system. By constructing this typology, stratified assignments can establish a dynamic balance between the difficulty gradient and cognitive load, ensuring that students at different levels achieve dual benefits of cognitive engagement and language development during the process of completing their assignments[3].

2.3 Construction of a Structural Model for Stratified Assignments That Promotes Metacognitive Development

Metacognitive ability constitutes the core component of students' autonomous learning ability, and the deeper pursuit of stratified assignment design lies in stimulating and cultivating students' metacognitive awareness and metacognitive regulation ability through structured task arrangements. The structural model for assignments that promotes metacognitive development requires the integration of metacognitive guiding elements into task design, enabling students to simultaneously experience the awareness, monitoring, and regulation of their own learning processes during the completion of language tasks. Specifically, the assignment structure can incorporate planning prompts to guide students in estimating task difficulty and planning their completion pathways; it can incorporate monitoring checkpoints to prompt students to examine their comprehension status and adjust their solution strategies during the task process; and it can incorporate reflective segments to help students review their task completion process, summarize effective methods, and identify remaining problems.

The construction of this structural model needs to take into account both the characteristics of stratification and the phased patterns of metacognitive development. For students at the foundational level, the assignment structure focuses on providing explicit metacognitive scaffolds, such as prompts for completion steps and the presentation of self-questioning checklists, in order to help them establish initial metacognitive awareness. For students at the developmental level, the assignment structure gradually reduces scaffold support and shifts toward guiding them to internalize metacognitive strategies, for instance, by requiring them to briefly describe their problem-solving approaches or their ways of handling difficulties after completing the assignment. For students at the advanced level, the assignment structure opens up more space for autonomy, encouraging them to independently select strategies, set standards, and evaluate effectiveness according to the characteristics of the tasks. Through this hierarchical structural arrangement, stratified assignments not only serve the acquisition of language knowledge but also become important vehicles for the development of metacognitive ability, enabling students to gradually grow into language learners with self-regulatory awareness during the process of completing assignments.

3. Interactive Mechanisms and Feedback Regulation in the Implementation Process of Stratified Assignments

3.1 Student Stratification Mobility and Dynamic Adjustment Strategies for Assignment Tasks

The effective implementation of stratified assignments is predicated on the premise that the state of stratification possesses variability, as students' language development constitutes a continuously

evolving process, and their adaptability to assignment tasks changes accordingly. The core of the student stratification mobility mechanism lies in breaking the potential labeling effect that static stratification may cause, and it involves identifying the developmental trajectories and changing trends of students across the dimension of language ability through periodic assessments of learning conditions and analyses of assignment performance. This mobility is manifested not only as students' vertical transitions between different levels but also as the horizontal expansion of areas of strength within the same level, and its fundamental aim is to ensure that the state of stratification remains synchronized with students' authentic developmental levels at all times.

Based on stratification mobility, the dynamic adjustment of assignment tasks requires a balance between systematic design and flexible implementation. From a periodic dimension, the adjustment strategies can be differentiated into overall resetting at the unit level and localized fine-tuning at the lesson level. The former involves reassigning the assignment levels based on periodic academic assessment results, whereas the latter involves making immediate modifications to task difficulty or task type based on the completion status of a single assignment. From the perspective of task elements, dynamic adjustment encompasses multiple aspects, such as raising or lowering the difficulty level, converting the task type, and increasing or decreasing scaffold support. The continuous operation of this adjustment mechanism endows the assignment system with the capacity for self-renewal, enabling it to promptly respond to the developmental changes in students' language abilities and ensuring that assignment tasks remain anchored within the students' Zone of Proximal Development.

3.2 Differentiated Configuration of the Teacher's Guiding Role in Stratified Assignments

During the implementation process of stratified assignments, the positioning of the teacher's guiding role must break away from a uniform model and shift toward a mindset of differentiated configuration based on students' differential characteristics. This configuration is not a simple matter of increasing or decreasing the amount of guidance, but rather a systematic adjustment of guidance functions, guidance methods, and guidance timing. For students in the early stages of language ability construction, the teacher's guidance primarily assumes a scaffolding function, which lowers the cognitive threshold of assignments through task decomposition, the provision of examples, and strategic prompts, thereby helping them establish confidence and a basic pathway for completing tasks. For students with a certain language foundation, the teacher's guidance shifts to a scaffolding fading mode, gradually transferring task control to the students and guiding them to develop independent language processing abilities during the process of completing their assignments[4].

The differentiated configuration of the teacher's guiding role is also manifested in the hierarchical selection of intervention timing and intervention methods. From the perspective of timing, guidance can be divided into pre-task guidance, process intervention during the task, and post-completion feedback, and students at different levels exhibit varying degrees of dependence on guidance at these different points. Students at the foundational level have a greater need for the clarity of pre-task guidance and the timeliness of process intervention, in order to maintain the continuity of task progression. Students at the advanced level, in contrast, benefit more from the depth and reflectiveness of post-completion feedback, in order to promote the optimization and enhancement of language use. From the perspective of method, guidance can adopt two forms: direct instruction and indirect elicitation. The former is suitable for the transmission of knowledge with clear rules, whereas the latter is more conducive to the generation of strategic competence. Through this differentiated configuration, the teacher's guidance can precisely respond to the authentic needs of students at different levels, thereby making the assignment process a medium for effective interaction between the teacher and students.

3.3 Multiple Feedback Pathways Based on Stratified Assignments and Their Diagnostic Function

Feedback serves as a critical link connecting assignment completion with learning improvement, and the feedback mechanism within the framework of stratified assignments needs to transcend simple judgments of right or wrong and shift toward the construction of a multiple feedback system with a diagnostic function. The multiplicity of this feedback system is reflected in three dimensions: the feedback subject, the feedback form, and the feedback focus. From the perspective of the feedback subject, a three-dimensional pathway combining teacher feedback, peer feedback, and self-feedback can be constructed. Teacher feedback provides professional judgment and corrective guidance, peer feedback creates opportunities for language exchange and social comparison, and self-feedback promotes the development of students' metacognitive abilities. From the perspective of the feedback

form, multiple methods such as written feedback, oral feedback, and symbolic feedback can be integrated, with the appropriate feedback medium selected according to the assignment type and the student level.

The diagnostic function of multiple feedback serves as the core mechanism for realizing the educational value of assignments. Through an in-depth analysis of the completion status of stratified assignments, teachers can identify structural problems in students' mastery of language knowledge, weaknesses in the application of language skills, and tendencies toward deviation in the choice of learning strategies. This diagnosis needs to extend from problem identification to attribution analysis, helping students understand the cognitive roots of their errors and clarifying the specific directions for subsequent improvement. The realization of the diagnostic function also depends on the systematic processing of feedback information. Teachers are required to synthesize and integrate the diagnostic material obtained during the marking process, transforming it into empirical evidence for adjusting teaching objectives and optimizing assignment design. Through this feedback mechanism with its diagnostic function, stratified assignments complete a full instructional cycle, moving from design and implementation through student completion and teacher feedback, and finally returning to the continuous optimization of the teaching system.

Conclusion

This study has conducted a systematic discussion on the application of the stratified teaching model in the design of English after-school assignments in junior high schools from three dimensions: theoretical logic, component structure, and implementation mechanism. At the theoretical level, stratified teaching, with its profound pedagogical basis, forms an inherent alignment with the educational value of assignment design, and the interactive logic between the two constitutes the theoretical foundation for assignment optimization. At the component level, the setting of objectives based on the diagnosis of learning conditions, the difficulty gradient oriented toward cognitive load, and the structural model that promotes metacognitive development collectively construct a systematic framework for stratified assignment design. At the implementation level, the dynamic adjustment of student stratification mobility and assignment tasks, the differentiated configuration of the teacher's guiding role, and the diagnostic function of multiple feedback pathways together ensure the possibility of transforming stratified assignments from a concept into effective teaching practice.

The study reveals that the core of stratified assignment design lies not in the simple categorization of students, but in the construction of a dynamic, open, and self-renewing system that enables assignments to continuously respond to the developmental changes in students' language abilities. Subsequent research can be further deepened in two directions. First, it can explore the pathway for the deep integration of stratified assignment design with information technology, utilizing intelligent analysis tools to achieve precision in the diagnosis of learning conditions and intelligence in task recommendation. Second, it can focus on the differential impact of stratified assignments on various dimensions of language skills, further refining stratification strategies for specific competencies such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, thereby promoting the development of stratified assignment research in a more refined direction.

References

[1] Ge, Burong. “The Construction and Practical Research of the Stratified Teaching Model for Junior High School English Writing under the Guidance of Core Competencies.” Inside and Outside the Classroom (High School Edition), no. 43 (2025): 17-19.

[2] Wu, Wenbin. “An Exploration of the Application of the Stratified Teaching Model in Junior High School English Teaching.” Questions and Research, no. 07 (2024): 171-173.

[3] Zhang, Shuhui. “The Application of the Stratified Teaching Model in Junior High School English Teaching.” Learning Weekly, no. 16 (2023): 121-123.

[4] Du, Yun. “An Inquiry into the Application Effect of the Stratified Teaching Model in Junior High School English Teaching.” Campus English, no. 13 (2023): 76-78.