

# *Research on Project-Based Learning in the Chinese Language “Activities & Exploration” Unit at the Junior High Level*

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**Abstract:** The incorporation of project-based learning (PBL) into junior high Chinese language teaching, particularly within the "Activities & Exploration" unit, offers an innovative approach to engage students actively in learning. This article explores the application of project-based learning in the teaching of the "Activities & Exploration" unit in junior high Chinese language curriculum. Through an analysis of project-based learning, the distinctive features of this unit, and the cognitive development characteristics of junior high students, the feasibility of implementing project-based learning in Chinese language teaching is demonstrated. Furthermore, principles to be followed during the implementation of project-based learning are proposed, including the challenge and openness in designing problems, the authenticity and diversity of learning contexts, the autonomy and collaboration in the exploration process, the diversity and demonstrativeness of activity outcomes, and the richness and continuity of assessment feedback. Building upon these principles, teaching strategies such as creating appropriate activity contexts, compiling comprehensive task sheets, and organizing presentation and communication activities are suggested.

## **1. Introduction**

In the comprehensive edition of junior high Chinese language curriculum, particularly in "Task Two" of the "Activities & Exploration" unit, the aim is to guide students to apply wisdom on the basis of mastering theoretical knowledge, thereby enhancing their ability to apply knowledge. For instance, in the ninth-grade first semester, the "Poetry" unit requires students to delve into the linguistic characteristics of modern poetry through appreciation, recitation, and attempting to create poems, culminating in organizing class recitation competitions. This learning method breaks away from the traditional classroom lecture mode, emphasizing the student's role and providing an opportunity for practical project-based learning. Compared to traditional teaching methods, this approach encourages active student participation, disrupts existing teaching structures and singular teaching approaches, making teaching more diverse and lively, and providing favorable conditions

for students to engage in project-based learning.

## **2. Feasibility Analysis of Applying Project-Based Learning to the "Activities & Exploration" Unit Teaching**

### **2.1 Alignment with the "Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)"**

Chinese language courses are no longer perceived as closed or rigid subjects but are considered practical and encompassing comprehensive literacy. The new curriculum standards define Chinese language as a highly comprehensive and practical course, implying the necessity for communication within and beyond the classroom, making full use of diverse educational resources to engage in practical activities, expand learning spaces, and increase students' practical opportunities. Within this framework, the project-based learning model emphasizes the idea of gaining learning experiences through practical activities. It focuses on designing challenging tasks, conducting exploratory activities in real-life contexts, and utilizing various resources to acquire subject knowledge, thereby enhancing students' comprehensive literacy and capabilities. This aligns perfectly with the emphasis of Chinese language courses on comprehensiveness and practicality<sup>[1]</sup>.

The mission of the Chinese language curriculum lies not only in imparting language proficiency but also in emphasizing the cultivation of students' core literacy and comprehensive abilities, laying the foundation for their lifelong development. The project-based learning model centers around challenging questions, guiding students in continuous exploration, nurturing their abilities for truth-seeking, innovation, and practical skills. Simultaneously, it encourages teamwork and involves sharing outcomes after project completion, aiding in the development of students' expression and collaboration skills. This learning method hones students' critical thinking, creativity, self-management, and self-directed learning abilities, qualities that will assist them in better addressing future challenges and achieving lifelong development goals.

### **2.2 Common Features between Project-Based Learning and the "Activities & Exploration" Unit**

Project-based learning and the "Activities & Exploration" unit share several aspects, embodying the common characteristics of task orientation and situational authenticity. Firstly, in terms of task orientation, both revolve around challenging and motivating tasks to drive inquiry, breaking down into specific tasks to propel the entire learning process. In terms of situational authenticity, both emphasize real-life problems and the significance of solving them within authentic contexts, where the learning process and outcomes need to be demonstrated within real situations. The "Activities & Exploration" unit explicitly outlines interlinked tasks; for instance, the ninth-grade poetry unit delineates activities into tasks like appreciation, recitation, and creation, guiding students through detailed task descriptions to ensure correct learning methods and standardized learning behavior. This is advantageous in driving student learning and ensuring task completion. Similarly, project-based learning focuses on setting challenging tasks, translating abstract objectives into specific tasks, situated within authentic contexts to achieve learning goals. Both the "Activities & Exploration" unit and project-based learning emphasize the authenticity of problems and learning contexts. In the "Activities & Exploration" unit, task selection and activity settings are closely related to students' lives, enabling them to gain real-life experiences in Chinese language learning, ranging from news interviews to poetry creation. The curriculum requires students to base their poetry creation on real-life scenarios, such as birthday wishes to friends, prompting students to apply language knowledge to practical problem-solving<sup>[2]</sup>.

Project-based learning and the "Activities & Exploration" unit share similarities in process inquiry and outcome presentation. Firstly, project-based learning emphasizes deep thinking and inquiry as students solve problems, autonomously seeking solutions. It encourages active, explorative, and creative learning where language knowledge is applied across diverse activities. Similarly, the core of the "Activities & Exploration" unit lies in explorative Chinese language learning, engaging students in various activities like reading, writing, surveys, interviews, and drama performances, enabling active participation, exploring problem-solving methods, and enhancing their knowledge and abilities. Project-based learning stresses showcasing learning outcomes through various forms, encouraging team-based presentations, fostering student communication, learning, and mutual assessment. The "Activities & Exploration" unit also places significant importance on outcome presentations, applying and showcasing the exploration outcomes from tasks one and two in task three. Through activities such as news writing, speech competitions, poetry, or drama performances, students exhibit their Chinese language learning outcomes, transforming theoretical knowledge into practical results, experiencing the significance of language knowledge in practical application. This public presentation method aids in multi-dimensional and multi-form assessment of students' collaborative inquiry levels.

### **2.3 Alignment with the Cognitive Development Characteristics of Junior High Students**

The junior high phase marks a critical period in the cognitive and psychological development of adolescents who possess a certain learning foundation and experience. During this stage, there are notable changes in the thinking patterns of junior high students, demonstrating characteristics such as independent thinking, dialectical reasoning, and divergent thinking. The application of project-based learning in teaching the "Activities & Exploration" unit aligns significantly with the cognitive traits of junior high students. Project-based learning emphasizes student-led exploration, fostering independent thinking. Students explore problems within authentic contexts, independently gather information, collaborate, and produce outcomes, all of which resonate with the tendencies of junior high students toward independent thinking and questioning. Their dialectical reasoning evolves to encompass a comprehensive view of issues. Project-based learning requires students to autonomously collect information, analyze reliability while addressing challenging problems, collaborate, improve outcomes, thereby contributing to the cultivation of students' dialectical thinking. Similarly, project-based learning encourages students to engage in divergent thinking and creatively solve problems within real contexts, promoting the development of junior high students' divergent thinking. Integrating project-based learning into the teaching of the "Activities & Exploration" unit not only sparks students' interest in learning, making the learning process more engaging, but also effectively nurtures and promotes the development of junior high students' independent thinking, dialectical reasoning, and divergent thinking. This integration is in line with the cognitive developmental characteristics and patterns observed in junior high students.

## **3. Implementation Principles of Project-Based Learning in the Junior High Chinese "Activities & Exploration" Unit**

### **3.1 Principle of Challenging and Open-Ended Problem Design**

Problem design plays a crucial role in project-based learning within the "Activities & Exploration" unit, necessitating adherence to the principles of challenge and openness. Firstly, challenging problems should spark students' interest, prompting them to solve issues through in-depth thinking, investigation, and research. These problems should not have straightforward answers but rather require prolonged contemplation and research, such as "What constitutes genuine

learning?" Such questions encourage students to step out of their comfort zones, driving them to delve deeper into investigation and reflection. Simultaneously, the difficulty of the problems should not be excessively high but instead align with students' actual proficiency, ensuring solvability within a reasonable timeframe to motivate students in their learning endeavors. When crafting challenging problems, teachers should clearly define teaching objectives to effectively stimulate students' learning interests, integrate with the teaching content of the "Activities & Exploration" unit, ultimately enhancing students' core language literacy.

The design of open-ended questions should encompass diversity, lacking a single definitive answer, covering a wide range of topics to inspire diverse thinking and exploration in students. Closed-ended questions typical in traditional teaching often have only predetermined answers, hindering the cultivation of students' higher-order thinking skills. Project-based learning requires teachers to design open-ended questions that inspire students' thinking from emotional, experiential, and imaginative perspectives, stimulating divergent thinking and fostering innovative awareness. This design approach can evoke unique perceptions and diverse thinking in students, encouraging them to form distinctive insights and enhance language expression and innovative thinking by articulating their viewpoints. Hence, the setup of open-ended questions contributes to an engaging classroom atmosphere, encourages proactive thinking in students, improves their comprehensive literacy, and also enhances teachers' teaching capabilities<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **3.2 Principle of Authenticity and Diversity in Learning Contexts**

The principle of authenticity in learning contexts plays a crucial role in project-based learning within the "Activities & Exploration" unit. To ensure students' engagement and motivation, teachers should create as authentic learning contexts as possible. This doesn't require every element to be literally real; rather, it's about linking the investigated problems to real-life contexts, encouraging genuine reflection and problem-solving approaches. Even in simulated scenarios, if students' thinking aligns with real-world situations, that context is considered authentic. For instance, in a simulated United Nations self-candidacy speech activity, students naturally draw upon their life experiences to contemplate how to express themselves better and use language styles effectively. Such projects encourage students to internalize learning into practical life, enabling knowledge and skills to be better applied in everyday practice.

The principle of diversity in learning contexts is of paramount importance in project-based learning within the "Activities & Exploration" unit. To make teaching more relatable to students' actual situations, teachers should create diverse learning contexts. Diversifying these contexts can be achieved through various teaching methods such as real-life situations, experiential scenarios, or problem-oriented scenarios. Employing these methods can help students better comprehend and grasp the learning content, spark positive learning emotions, thereby enhancing the quality of project-based learning within the "Activities & Exploration" unit. Teachers should prioritize connecting learning content with the real world during the teaching process, enabling students to complete various learning tasks in different contexts, showcasing diversified manifestations of language literacy.

### **3.3 Principle of Autonomy and Collaboration in the Inquiry Process**

The principle of autonomy is particularly significant in project-based learning within the "Activities & Exploration" unit. Students take on a central role in this learning model, while teachers act more as guides, aiding students in navigating through the activities. Throughout the inquiry process, whether constructing theoretical knowledge from text readings, developing skills during activities and exploration, or ultimately creating and presenting outcomes, students need to

autonomously display an inclination towards active inquiry. This autonomous learning mode contributes to students' holistic development, allowing them to comprehensively develop their skills and abilities.

Collaboration is another pivotal factor in project-based learning within the "Activities & Exploration" unit. Beyond emphasizing individual autonomous learning, this method highlights collaborative learning among students. During the inquiry process, students need to collaborate within their groups, complementing each other's strengths and leveraging teamwork to accomplish project tasks. This collaboration stimulates idea exchange, enhancing students' cooperative awareness, communication skills, and organizational abilities. Through group collaboration and division of tasks, students better understand the significance of teamwork and gain rich learning experiences from it.

### **3.4 Principle of Presentation Diversity and Expressiveness of Activity Outcomes**

The expressiveness of outcomes plays a pivotal role in project-based learning. Emphasizing the outward results, project-based learning considers the production and public presentation of outcomes as vital indicators of learning. In the teaching of the "Activities & Exploration" unit, merely relying on lectures or written tests falls short in providing a comprehensive understanding of students' learning situations and activity progress. Conversely, in project-based learning, students gradually produce specific outcomes throughout their tasks, showcasing their performance and accomplishments during the inquiry process. Therefore, by evaluating the specific outcomes students ultimately present, teachers can better comprehend whether students grasp the unit's focal points and can apply their learning in practical contexts.

The principle of outcome diversity underscores the encouragement of diverse formats and approaches in presenting outcomes within project-based learning. Teachers should support students in choosing and displaying formats that best suit their personalities and activity content, such as creating PPTs, shooting videos, composing poetry, editing newspapers, or engaging in stage performances. Such diversified presentation formats are more challenging compared to traditional rote learning or post-class exercises, demanding students to invest more time and effort. These presentation methods not only aid students in receiving evaluations and feedback, enhancing their sense of achievement but also strengthen their learning motivation and autonomy<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **3.5 Principle of Richness and Continuity in Evaluation Feedback**

The principle of diverse evaluation feedback encompasses the diversification of evaluators and evaluation methods. Educational experts advocate for a transformation in evaluation methods, emphasizing the need to fully respect students' positions in language assessments. Especially in project-based learning, where students are more engaged and interactive, updating evaluation methods to grant students more agency is necessary. Evaluation criteria can be determined through mutual discussion between teachers and students, integrating teacher assessments, student self-assessment, and peer evaluations. In terms of evaluation methods, besides traditional written exams and classroom questioning, diversified methods such as post-reflections, group sharing, tangible output creation, online voting, etc., can be employed to examine, diagnose, provide feedback, and motivate students' learning, propelling the deeper development of project-based learning.

The principle of continuity in evaluation feedback is integral throughout the activity process within the project-based learning of the "Activities & Exploration" unit. Evaluation should focus not only on students' outcomes but also on the process of activities. Evaluation methods encompass both process-based assessments and summative evaluations. During the project implementation

phase, process-based evaluation monitors and adjusts students' learning progress, assessing their cognitive strategies and practical levels, providing timely feedback. In the project completion phase, summative evaluation verifies students' final outcomes and learning achievements, ensuring students can comprehensively showcase their gained knowledge and abilities at the project's culmination.

## **4. Teaching Strategies for Middle School Chinese Language "Activity & Exploration" Units Based on Project-Based Learning**

### **4.1 Creating Appropriate Activity Contexts Driven by Tasks**

The essence of project-based learning lies in creating realistic activity contexts and designing suitable tasks to propel teaching. In the eighth-grade Chinese language textbook, the initial unit revolves around "News" and comprises three primary tasks:

**News Reading:** Encouraging students to read various news articles to cultivate their methods and habits in news reading, understanding different news genres' characteristics, and the principles of factual news transmission.

**News Interview:** Engaging students in practical news interview activities to familiarize them with the process of news collection, enabling group cooperation to gather news materials.

**News Writing:** Based on news reading and interviews, each group is tasked with editing and producing a school newspaper edition and hosting a day of campus radio activities.

To enable students to actively acquire knowledge, master skills, and accumulate experience, I chose "Telling Good Stories as a Great Journalist" as the theme for activity exploration and created two learning contexts:

**New School Year Campus News Activities:** Conducting news gathering and editing activities centered around new students, teachers, and experiences. This context is closely related to students' campus life and can be completed through cooperative efforts.

**City Middle School Chinese Language Master Studio Activity:** This offline activity, themed around Chinese language masters, teaching, and learning, involves news gathering and editing. This context prompts group members to construct news-related knowledge through reading and transform it into interview, writing, and editing skills.

These authentic and meaningful Chinese language practical activities will serve as the vehicle for students to learn core language literacy. Project-based learning aims to provide real or simulated real-life contexts, carefully designing tasks to guide students in actively constructing language learning experiences in diverse, comprehensive, and open language practices, fostering the formation and development of core language literacy.

### **4.2 Developing Comprehensive Activity Task Sheets as Framework Supports**

The core concept of project-based learning empowers students with the autonomy to learn, yet this doesn't imply that teachers can completely relinquish their roles. Granting autonomy in learning underscores students' pivotal roles in the learning process, but the guidance and support of teachers remain crucial. To ensure students grasp crucial language abilities through autonomous language practice activities, teachers need to create a scaffold for students' learning. In the project-based learning of activity exploration units, teachers can design learning task sheets, which serve as a list outlining the necessary learning tasks, steps, methods, and requirements for problem-solving. Developing comprehensive learning task sheets is critical for the successful implementation of project-based learning<sup>[5]</sup>.

In simple terms, a learning task sheet provides students with a list of learning tasks. This list

details the learning tasks required to solve problems, along with the steps, methods, and standards needed to complete each task. Designing a comprehensive learning task sheet is crucial for the successful implementation of project-based learning. In project-based learning, emphasis is placed on the comprehensive application of language knowledge, emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of abilities through project learning. For eighth-grade students, this learning method may still be relatively unfamiliar, thus requiring teacher guidance and collective discussions with students to establish a complete learning task sheet.

### **4.3 Organizing Display and Communication Activities to Foster Enhancement through Evaluation**

To ensure the efficacy of project-based learning, it is essential to create a multi-dimensional evaluation model centered around project outcomes, incorporating self-assessment and teacher evaluation, along with process and summative assessments. This approach places emphasis on project presentations as the ultimate assessment while breaking down this endpoint into a series of staged outcomes, providing students with a comprehensive learning experience. "Beginning with the endpoint" means that project-based learning focuses on the display of outcomes as the ultimate benchmark, the endpoint. However, during project implementation, this endpoint is broken down into staged outcomes, allowing students to progress gradually, gaining more learning experiences, which actually serve as the starting point.

Typically, completing a project-based learning unit takes about two weeks, approximately 10 class sessions. Using the news unit as an example, one week is allocated for news reading, and another week for news interviewing and writing. However, these three stages need not strictly follow a sequential order; they can be interleaved or conducted simultaneously, forming the final outcomes through shared learning and practice. Teachers primarily monitor the project's implementation effectively through process and diagnostic assessments. Evaluation is not the ultimate goal; the end of the project actually signifies the commencement of a new cycle of learning. Teachers should encourage students to display and communicate, making learning an open cyclical process. This display and communication serve not only as a platform for students to showcase their performance but also as an opportunity for mutual reflection, reference, and learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

As the new curriculum reform progresses, the "Activity & Exploration" units in middle school Chinese textbooks serve as a significant initiative to guide teachers in shifting from traditional teaching modes and fostering students' transition in learning approaches. However, these units face various challenges in practical teaching. Project-based learning, as a strategy to address teaching difficulties, has the potential to enhance teaching effectiveness. This paper, through an analysis of the structure, characteristics, and application of project-based learning in "Activity & Exploration" units, identified challenges like the lack of challenging inquiries, insufficient activity design, and students' limited self-directed learning abilities. Hence, based on teaching cases, strategies for implementing project-based learning in middle school Chinese "Activity & Exploration" units have been proposed, including setting driving questions, altering teaching methods, establishing project frameworks, diversifying outcome presentations, and emphasizing evaluation and reflection. These strategies aim to optimize teaching, stimulate student interest in learning, and promote comprehensive development in their core language skills.

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