

Beyond Surface Reading: Mapping Deep Learning Research in Junior Secondary English under the Core Competency Perspective

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Abstract

The 2025 revised edition of the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards(2022 Edition), hereafter referred to as the New Curriculum Standards, places core competencies at the center of the overall goals of English education and calls for junior secondary English reading instruction to move beyond a narrow model of language-knowledge training. Instead, reading instruction is expected to promote discourse-based meaning construction, the development of thinking, and transferable language use. Taking studies on deep learning in junior secondary English reading published between 2021 and 2026 as its main object of analysis, this paper adopts thematic retrieval, source-text verification, and thematic review to examine the development of this field over the past five years. The review shows that existing studies have effectively promoted a shift in junior secondary English reading instruction from superficial extraction of textual information to deeper construction of discourse meaning. Nevertheless, the field still faces several challenges, including unclear definitions of key concepts, insufficient alignment between teaching strategies and the developmental characteristics of junior secondary learners, a lack of empirical classroom evidence, and underdeveloped assessment systems and tools. This paper argues that deep learning in junior secondary English reading should take discourse themes as its central anchor, textual evidence as the basis for reasoning, cognitive scaffolding as continuous learning support, and authentic tasks as the endpoint of language transfer. Future research should further deepen the construction of internal mechanisms, accumulate classroom-based evidence, accelerate the development of specialized assessment tools, and regulate the boundaries of intelligent technologies in teaching contexts.

Keywords

Junior secondary English reading; deep learning; core competencies; activity-based approach; integration of teaching, learning and assessment.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the full implementation of the New Curriculum Standards, the central task of junior secondary English reading instruction has shifted from helping students “understand the text” to cultivating their core competencies in English through reading. This shift means that reading lessons can no longer be reduced to vocabulary memorization, sentence analysis, and exercise training. Instead, they should promote the coordinated development of students’ language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning capacity through thematic inquiry, discourse analysis, and authentic language expression. The New Curriculum Standards identify these four dimensions as the core competencies of the English subject and explicitly state that curriculum content should be theme-led and discourse-

based. They also advocate an activity-based approach to English learning, characterized by integrating learning and thinking and prioritizing application and creation [1, pp.2–5]. This policy orientation indicates that the educational value of reading instruction has long exceeded basic language input. Teachers are expected to use discourse-based learning to guide students in understanding a diverse world, expressing personal views, and solving real-life problems. Therefore, the primary value of research on deep learning in junior secondary English reading lies in responding to the renewed positioning of reading instruction as a means of educating the whole learner.

The widespread superficiality of classroom instruction is the immediate reason research on deep learning in reading continues to attract scholarly attention. At present, junior secondary English classrooms in China have actively responded to the reform requirements of the New Curriculum Standards, and many innovative explorations have been carried out in reading instruction. However, many teachers still face common uncertainties and practical difficulties about how to genuinely and effectively implement deep learning in reading lessons. Even when students complete surface-level reading tasks, they may not engage in deeper-thinking activities such as meaning construction, logical reasoning, or transfer-oriented expression. Lin Xiaoyan points out that many teachers hold misconceptions about deep learning: some equate it with the simple accumulation of knowledge, some weaken their own instructional guidance, and others narrowly equate deep learning with the cultivation of thinking quality. As a result, inefficient teaching practices such as superficial questioning, knowledge transmission, and text retelling remain common [2, pp.9–10]. This observation identifies the practical deviations that occur when the idea of deep learning is translated into classroom practice. From the perspective of reading comprehension theory, Snow argues that reading comprehension is a dynamic process in which readers, texts, learning activities, and sociocultural contexts interact to extract information and construct meaning [3, pp.11–13]. This view further confirms that reading is not a passive act of receiving information, but an exploratory process in which learners actively construct meaning within specific tasks and contexts. Thus, the problem with superficial reading instruction lies not only in monotonous teaching methods, but also in its erosion of the constructive and contextual nature of reading itself.

Unlike general research on reading instruction, research on deep learning in junior secondary reading must fully consider the distinctive characteristics of this educational stage. Junior secondary students are in a critical transitional period of cognitive development. They are gradually moving from concrete, image-based thinking to abstract, logical thinking. Although they have begun to develop basic abilities in textual summarisation, logical inference, and value judgment, their metacognitive capacity, ability to refine abstract concepts, and capacity for long-term knowledge transfer still require further development. Gu Haiyan argues that junior secondary English reading instruction, informed by deep learning, can be advanced across four dimensions: learning themes, learning objectives, learning activities, and learning assessment. Such an approach can help reading instruction move from fragmentation to systematization and from surface-level processing to deeper learning [4, pp.42–43]. This framework shows that deep reading instruction is not simply a matter of adding higher-order thinking questions; rather, it requires the construction of coherent logical connections among teaching objectives, classroom activities, and learning assessment. Fletcher and Nicholas, in their study of adolescent reading, found that students aged 11 to 13 rely heavily on teacher-provided scaffolding, peer support, and a relaxed, safe classroom climate. Once learning tasks exceed students' perceived capacity, students tend to avoid participation or reduce their engagement [5, pp.11–12]. This finding reminds educators that deep learning in junior secondary English reading should include challenging learning goals, but it must also provide cognitively accessible pathways with appropriate gradation.

In light of this policy context, classroom reality, and the developmental profiles of learners, this paper reviews the literature on three core questions: how deep reading actually occurs in the classroom, how it can be effectively supported, and how its learning outcomes can be evidenced. Existing studies cover a wide range of topics, including the reconstruction of teaching objectives, deep discourse analysis, tiered question-chain design, implementation of the activity-based approach, performance-based assessment, and the integration of intelligent technologies. If these studies are merely listed side by side, however, the internal operating logic of deep learning in junior secondary English reading remains obscured. Guo Hua emphasizes that deep learning is not a fixed teaching model, but a process in which students engage in active learning under teachers' guidance and support; it is also an ideal form of high-quality teaching [6, p.89]. Inspired by this view, this paper moves beyond a strategy-by-strategy review and instead integrates the literature from the perspective of learning mechanisms. Accordingly, it takes studies published between 2021 and 2026 as its analytical sample and discusses the field through three major dimensions: clarification of key concepts, review of research progress, and identification of existing problems and future directions. The focus is on the goals, internal mechanisms, implementation pathways, and evidential basis of deep learning in junior secondary English reading from the perspective of core competencies.

2. Key Concepts and Analytical Framework

Clarifying the hierarchical logic among key concepts is a basic prerequisite for preventing a literature review from becoming a mere accumulation of terminology. In current research, terms such as deep learning, core competencies, the activity-based approach to English learning, question chains, and performance-based assessment are often used in parallel. Yet these concepts belong to different levels and serve different functions. Specifically, core competencies represent the ultimate educational goal of the English curriculum; deep learning refers to the internal mode through which students learn; the activity-based approach provides the overall framework for organizing classroom instruction; and question chains and performance-based assessment serve as concrete vehicles for implementing and assessing instruction. The New Curriculum Standards define the overall goals of the curriculum through core competencies and promote the transformation of English teaching through the integrated design of themes, discourse, classroom activities, and learning assessment [1, pp.2-5]. This policy framework clearly indicates that reform in reading instruction should not stop at the renewal of classroom activity formats. Instead, it should reconstruct the entire learning process around the goal of competency development. Accordingly, this paper positions core competencies at the level of goals, deep learning at the level of mechanisms, and the activity-based approach, question chains, and assessment tools at the level of pathways and evidence.

Deep learning should not be narrowly equated with higher-order thinking training; rather, it is a comprehensive process through which students achieve structured understanding and flexible transfer with the support of teacher-provided cognitive scaffolding. Guo Hua argues that deep learning requires breaking away from the isolated, fragmented, and disordered presentation of knowledge points, so that teaching content can be organized into coherent learning units with internal logic [6, p.90]. This view highlights the structural feature of deep learning: the core of student learning is not the isolated mastery of scattered knowledge points, but the understanding of relationships among forms of knowledge. Lin Xiaoyan applies this educational idea to junior secondary English reading instruction and identifies five features of deep reading: wholeness, activity, gradation, transfer, and educational value [2, pp.10-11]. While Guo interprets deep learning from a general educational perspective, Lin adapts it to English as a school subject and to the junior secondary stage. The two perspectives are mutually reinforcing. Together, they show that deep learning in junior secondary English reading

requires both a logically structured system of teaching content and classroom scaffolding that matches students' cognitive level.

The activity-based approach provides a clear organizational logic for deep learning in reading, but it is by no means a simple aggregation of classroom activities. This approach advocates that students, guided by discourse themes, engage progressively in three types of learning activities: learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation. This progression corresponds closely to the cognitive chain of deep reading: understanding the text, interpreting meaning, evaluating viewpoints, and transferring what has been learned. Zhang Qiuhui, Wang Qiang, and Jiang Jingli point out that the activity-based approach requires students to integrate language knowledge, language skills, cultural interpretation, thinking development, and learning strategies through discourse analysis and problem inquiry [7, p.1]. It follows that the number of classroom activities should not judge the effectiveness of this approach, but by whether those activities form a progressively deepening cognitive chain around the discourse theme. On this basis, the present paper positions the activity-based approach as an intermediate framework that connects core competency goals to the process of deep learning, rather than as a single teaching method parallel to question chains or performance tasks.

Based on the logical relations among these concepts, this paper constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework of "goals, mechanisms, pathways, and evidence" to review studies from the past five years. At the level of goals, it examines how reading instruction has shifted from textual interpretation to the external demonstration of students' comprehension competencies. At the level of mechanisms, it explores how students form deep understandings of texts through discourse themes and textual evidence. At the level of pathways, it analyzes how discourse analysis, activity chains, and question chains support the gradual improvement of students' cognition. At the level of evidence, it examines how assessment can verify whether students have truly achieved deep learning. Research in the learning sciences suggests that learners continuously organize relationships among pieces of information, construct increasingly complex knowledge systems, and gradually acquire the ability to reason with existing knowledge [8, pp.106–107]. This finding provides cognitive-theoretical support for the analytical framework adopted in this paper: the central aim of deep reading is not merely to complete predetermined classroom tasks, but to help students construct knowledge structures that can be transferred and applied. The following sections take this framework as the main line of analysis.

3. Research Progress over the Past Five Years

3.1. Reconstructing Objectives: From Textual Understanding to Competency Performance

Under the dual guidance of core competencies and academic quality standards, the objective system of junior secondary English reading instruction has undergone comprehensive reconstruction. Traditional reading objectives focus mainly on basic abilities such as understanding words and sentences, identifying detailed information, and answering comprehension questions. By contrast, the new teaching objectives, guided by the New Curriculum Standards, place greater emphasis on the comprehensive competencies that students demonstrate in textual interpretation, logical judgment, and knowledge transfer. Dong Jianxin argues that academic quality standards can effectively address persistent problems in reading instruction, including vague objectives, disorganized classroom activities, and delayed learning assessment [9, p.1]. This view indicates that academic quality standards are not assessment criteria external to the classroom, but important references that can guide the design of teaching objectives in reverse. He Xiuying and Xiao Yuman, from the perspective of

reading test design, argue that assessments based on academic quality standards should clarify testing formats, item structures, and multidimensional specification tables to ensure consistency between assessment content and core competency objectives [10, pp.2–3]. The former focuses on the precise positioning of teaching objectives, while the latter focuses on the practical transformation of assessment. Together, these studies confirm the direction of change in reading objectives: from asking “what content has the teacher taught?” to asking “what competencies can students demonstrate?”

The reconstruction of teaching objectives has further shifted the logic of reading lesson design from content-first to outcome-first. In traditional classrooms, teaching usually follows the text's original sequence: teachers explain vocabulary, sentence structures, and paragraph meanings, and then students complete post-reading exercises. This model easily leads to a disconnection among teaching objectives, classroom activities, and learning assessment. Zhu Lin argues that backward instructional design begins with intended learning outcomes and then designs assessment methods and classroom activities accordingly; this can effectively address the problems of vague reading objectives and delayed assessment [11, pp.50–51]. This study demonstrates that core competencies should not be treated as an abstract slogan at the end of a lesson, but as the starting point of the entire instructional design process. Compared with research on academic quality standards, backward instructional design places greater emphasis on the internal organization of classroom teaching. Teachers need to first clarify the kinds of understanding, expression, and transfer students are expected to achieve, and then design reading activities and assessment tasks in reverse. Only in this way can reading instruction move beyond the conventional pattern of “following the text” and build a classroom system around students' learning outcomes.

Whether reconstructed teaching objectives can be effectively implemented depends crucially on their alignment with the cognitive developmental gradient of junior secondary students. Although students at this stage already possess basic abilities in reasoning and evaluation, they still need concrete texts, visual tools, and tiered questioning scaffolds when engaging in abstract generalization. Fletcher and Nicholas demonstrate that students aged 11 to 13 are highly dependent on teacher-provided scaffolding, peer collaboration, and an inclusive classroom atmosphere; once reading tasks exceed their cognitive range, they tend to respond passively to classroom activities [5, pp.11–12]. This finding reminds educators that challenging learning objectives must be accompanied by sufficient scaffolding; otherwise, deep learning becomes an “exclusive task” for a small number of high-achieving students. Gu Haiyan, drawing on the realities of junior secondary English reading instruction, proposes an integrated design framework built around learning themes, learning objectives, learning activities, and learning assessment [4, pp.42–43]. This study resonates with research on adolescent reading. Further, it suggests that junior secondary reading objectives should both align with the higher-order requirements of core competencies and reflect stage-specific characteristics through layered and progressive learning content.

3.2. Constructing Mechanisms: From Discourse Evidence to Transferable Use

The internal mechanism of deep reading lies in guiding students to use textual evidence to organize informational relationships, ultimately achieving knowledge transfer and language expression. Deep learning is not a matter of adding open-ended discussion after textual interpretation, nor is it simply a matter of increasing the difficulty of questions. Rather, under teachers' guidance, it helps students integrate scattered textual information into structured content that can be interpreted, evaluated, and applied. Guo Hua points out that the core of deep learning is to break away from the fragmented presentation of knowledge points and to organize teaching content into coherent learning units through internal logic [6, p.90]. This argument identifies the essence of deep learning as structured understanding. Snow,

meanwhile, argues that reading comprehension is a process in which readers, texts, learning activities, and sociocultural contexts interact to construct meaning [3, pp.11–13]. Guo's account foregrounds the construction of knowledge systems, whereas Snow's account foregrounds the contextual nature of meaning construction. Taken together, they show that deep learning in reading must rely on both the internal logic of the text and authentic classroom activity contexts. In teaching deep reading of expository discourse, the core pathway is to guide students from factual information retrieval to the interpretation of thematic meaning and then to transferable language expression. The "World Book Day" reading material in the appendix to the New Curriculum Standards focuses on the origin of World Book Day, the value of reading, and related thematic activities. Its clear theme and simple structure make it suitable for guiding students from information extraction to value interpretation. Teachers may first lead students to identify basic information such as time, activities, and purposes in the text; they can then guide students to explore the central question of "why reading can change people's lives"; finally, they can assign a transfer task such as writing an English proposal for a school book festival [1, pp.63–64]. This case demonstrates that understanding textual facts is not the endpoint of deep learning, but the starting point for exploring thematic meaning. The value of this instructional design lies in transforming the text's thematic meaning into a task chain that students can participate in, express, and transfer. Through this process, students move from understanding textual content to using textual ideas to express their own position.

In teaching deep reading of narrative discourse, greater emphasis is placed on a progressive movement from textual evidence to plot structure and then to character evaluation. Wu Qingxi and Wang Xianrong, in their reading lesson based on the English version of "Chang'e Flying to the Moon", guide students to circle key verb phrases such as "shot down", "gave...medicine", "refused to share", "tried to steal", and "flew up". They also use an interactive whiteboard to create a plot mind map and help students reconstruct the sequence of events: Hou Yi shooting down the suns, obtaining the elixir, Peng Meng attempting to steal it, Chang'e taking the elixir, and her ascent to the moon [12, pp.58–59]. This design firmly anchors students' thinking in textual evidence and effectively prevents character evaluation from becoming detached from the text or reduced to subjective impressions. On this basis, the teacher further guides students to analyze the reasonableness of different characters' choices in relation to causal logic, character traits, and traditional cultural background. Students are thereby led through a complete cognitive pathway: identifying linguistic evidence, clarifying plot relations, interpreting behavioral motives, and making value judgments. This indicates that cultivating thinking quality at the junior secondary stage should not begin with abstract evaluation, but with the construction of basic scaffolds for evidence extraction and relational analysis.

To present more directly the internal relationship between the two typical lessons and the core argument of this paper, Table 1 summarises their shared logic. The table is not intended to prove the universal applicability of the two cases, but to identify the common mechanism by which deep learning in reading operates across different discourse types. The "World Book Day" case illustrates how thematic meaning in expository discourse can be transformed into a transfer task, whereas the "Chang'e Flying to the Moon" lesson illustrates how textual evidence in narrative discourse can be transformed into thinking-based evaluation [1, pp.63–64; 12, pp.58–59]. Although the two texts differ in genre and instructional focus, they support the same conclusion: deep reading must begin with the discourse itself, proceed through learning scaffolds, and ultimately lead to language expression and value judgment.

Table 1. Typical Cases and Their Correspondence with Core Claims about Deep Learning in Junior Secondary English Reading

Case	Discourse type	Main instructional scaffold	Students' cognitive pathway	Research claim supported	Key implication
"World Book Day" reading sample	Expository discourse	Information extraction, thematic interpretation, proposal writing	Factual understanding → thematic generalisation → authentic expression	Deep reading requires transforming thematic meaning into transfer tasks	Thematic value can serve core competency development only when it enters a task chain in which students can participate, express ideas, and transfer learning
"Chang'e Flying to the Moon" reading lesson	Narrative discourse	Verb-phrase marking, plot map, evaluation of characters' choices	Linguistic evidence → plot relations → motive interpretation → value judgement	Thinking quality requires textual evidence and cognitive scaffolding	Junior secondary students should not be required to make abstract judgements directly; scaffolds for evidence extraction, relational analysis, and inferential evaluation should be provided first

Table 1 suggests that deep learning in junior secondary English reading follows a common operational logic: entering the text, proceeding through scaffolding, constructing meaning, and achieving transfer-oriented expression. Students do not move directly into abstract evaluation. Instead, they first develop a basic understanding through textual information, linguistic evidence, or visual tools, and then upgrade their cognition through interpretation, evaluation, and expression. Lin Xiaoyan's account of the wholeness, gradation, and transfer-oriented nature of deep reading explains the shared structure of these two cases [2, pp.10–11]. Guo Hua's discussion of knowledge transfer and application further indicates that the extent to which students can apply what they have learned in new contexts and externalize their learning outcomes is an important criterion for judging whether deep learning has genuinely occurred [13, p.79]. In this sense, deep reading is not the deliberate complication of classroom procedures, but the structural upgrading of students' cognitive pathways.

3.3. Classroom Pathways: From Activity Chains to Evidence Chains

The first prerequisite for implementing deep reading in the classroom is teachers' in-depth analysis of discourse. The depth of teachers' interpretation of textual themes, discourse structure, language forms, and educational value directly determines the direction and effectiveness of subsequent classroom activities. Wang Qiang, Qian Xiaofang, and Zhou Min argue that in-depth discourse analysis, grasping thematic meaning, uncovering cultural value, analyzing genre features and linguistic characteristics, and clarifying the relationship between language form and thematic meaning are essential prerequisites for instructional design and for implementing English subject core competencies [14, pp.40–41]. This view makes clear that discourse analysis is not a mechanical step in lesson preparation, but the starting point for bringing core competencies into classroom practice. Cheng Xiaotang further observes that although English classrooms increasingly advocate organizing teaching content and activities around thematic meaning, teachers still tend to overemphasize language knowledge, deviate from the core theme, and fail to ensure sufficient student participation [15, p.3]. These two studies complement each other: the former explains the value of discourse analysis, while the latter identifies how its absence pushes reading instruction back towards traditional knowledge-point explanation.

The activity-based approach builds a progressively deepening chain of activities for deep learning in reading. If a reading lesson remains at the level of textual explanation, students cannot engage in active meaning construction. Conversely, if the lesson consists only of scattered open-ended activities, the learning process may become detached from textual evidence. Therefore, the classroom activity chain must be guided by the discourse theme and should continuously advance understanding, application, and transfer. Zhang Qiuhui, Wang Qiang, and Jiang Jingli emphasize that under the activity-based approach, students participate successively in learning and understanding, application and practice, and transfer and innovation. Through discourse analysis and problem inquiry, they integrate language, culture, thinking, and learning strategies [7, p.1]. This means that the number of classroom activities should not measure the effectiveness of the activity-based approach, but by whether those activities continuously promote students' cognitive development. In relation to research on discourse analysis, the activity-based approach addresses how learning should continue after the text has been deeply interpreted: it transforms static textual understanding into dynamic application and transfer.

Question chains are the most direct and effective thinking scaffold within the activity chain. High-quality classroom questions are not merely used to check whether students have understood a text; rather, they guide students progressively through factual extraction, meaning interpretation, logical inference, and transfer-oriented expression. Liu Xiaolan divides questioning in junior secondary English reading into three levels: text decoding, meaning construction, and transfer and innovation, and argues that tiered questioning is a core driver of students' thinking development [16, p.60]. This classification provides a clear cognitive basis for designing question chains. Chen Qifeng further summarises four key features of question chains: clear goal orientation, internal relevance, graded difficulty, and appropriateness to learners. He argues that question chains can support deep reading through critical understanding, content integration, reflective construction, and transfer application [17, pp.62–63]. Liu's work focuses on the levels of questions, whereas Chen's work highlights the logical relationships among questions. Together, they show that the core of question-chain design is not to indiscriminately increase the number of questions, but to use tiered questions centered on the discourse theme to continuously drive students' thinking development.

The evidence generated through assessment is necessary for determining whether deep reading has genuinely occurred. If reading instruction values activity design but cannot observe students' textual understanding, viewpoint expression, logical judgment, and knowledge transfer, then deep learning cannot be objectively examined, and instructional improvement has no basis. Cheng Xiaotang and Xie Shiyu argue that the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment in English is not merely the addition of three elements, but rather their alignment, interconnection, and coordinated operation in terms of goals, content, and implementation [18, pp.5–6]. This view emphasizes that assessment should be embedded throughout the teaching process rather than added after the reading lesson has ended. Cheng Shujuan and Zhang Yunqiao argue that performance-based assessment enables teachers to clarify assessment objectives, design performance tasks, and formulate assessment criteria, thereby allowing continuous assessment of unit learning and supporting the development of students' core competencies [19, pp.22–24]. The former stresses the alignment between assessment and teaching goals, while the latter foregrounds the evidential value of performance tasks and rubrics. Taken together, the complete classroom pathway for deep learning in junior secondary English reading can be summarised as follows: discourse analysis establishes the thematic core; the activity chain structures the learning process; the question chain promotes the development of thinking; and assessment evidence diagnoses learning outcomes.

4. Core Issues and Future Prospects

The first major limitation in current research is that the boundaries of core concepts remain insufficiently clear. Existing literature frequently refers to deep learning, core competencies, higher-order thinking, and transfer and innovation, but some studies conflate the levels of goals, mechanisms, and teaching strategies. This directly leads to formalization, model imitation, and labeling in classroom practice. Zhou Min and Sun Weiwei summarise deep learning as involving the development of thinking, autonomous inquiry, and whole-process assessment, and they emphasize that it ultimately points to the cultivation of students' core competencies [20, p.52]. This summary offers a comprehensive account of deep learning, but it also indirectly reveals the risk that the field may reduce deep learning to a fixed type of classroom activity. Guo Hua's repeated emphasis that deep learning is not a standardized teaching model reminds future researchers that inquiry should return to the operating mechanism of learning itself [6, p.89]. Therefore, future research needs to move beyond superficial concept borrowing and towards a deeper construction of the internal mechanisms of deep learning, clearly defining the levels and functions of deep learning, core competencies, the activity-based approach, and question chains. Insufficient stage-specific adaptation is a key obstacle to the implementation and wider dissemination of deep learning in junior secondary English reading. Existing studies often focus on higher-order goals such as thematic inquiry, thinking development, and transfer and innovation, but research specifically addressing junior secondary students' language foundations, cognitive characteristics, and scaffolding needs remains limited. Fletcher and Nicholas again demonstrate that junior secondary students' engagement in deep learning depends on teacher-provided scaffolding, peer support, and a relaxed classroom climate [5, pp.11–12]. This suggests that deep learning is not equivalent to teachers completely withdrawing and allowing students to explore independently. Gu Haiyan's four-dimensional framework of "theme, objective, activity, and assessment" offers a feasible approach to deep reading instruction at the junior secondary level [4, pp.42–43]. This study further shows that improving stage-specific adaptation does not mean lowering learning requirements. Rather, it means using layered objectives and tiered scaffolds to enable students to participate meaningfully in higher-order thinking activities. Future research should therefore refine scaffolding principles and implementation strategies for junior secondary English reading classrooms according to grade level, text type, and learner profile.

The lack of classroom-based empirical evidence is a major bottleneck that prevents existing research from moving beyond experiential summaries towards scientific validation. Most current studies are based on lesson demonstrations or summaries of teaching strategies. They can clearly explain teachers' instructional design, but they often struggle to provide objective evidence of the actual changes students undergo during learning. Pearson and colleagues argue that to determine whether students have achieved deep understanding, researchers need to observe external manifestations such as textual interpretation, logical argumentation, integration of multiple sources of information, and discipline-specific language expression, and they need to establish corresponding empirical assessment systems [21, pp.140–142]. This view indicates that research on deep reading should not remain at the level of displaying classroom procedures. It should systematically collect diverse empirical materials, including student work, classroom discourse, learning journals, and pre-and post-test data. Kamil and colleagues similarly argue in their research on adolescent literacy development that all instructional recommendations should be specific, coherent, and evidence-based [22, p.2]. Together, these studies suggest that future research on deep learning in junior secondary English reading should gradually move beyond isolated lesson analysis and towards research designs supported by empirical data.

The development of specialized assessment tools is an important direction for the normalization of deep learning in reading instruction. The field generally recognizes the value of formative assessment, performance-based assessment, and the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment. However, there remain clear gaps in practical issues such as defining assessment dimensions for deep reading, setting proficiency levels, and testing the reliability and validity of assessment scales. Cheng Xiaotang and Xie Shiyu's concept of integrated teaching, learning, and assessment provides a core direction for the design of assessment systems. However, it still needs to be translated into operational assessment tools [18, pp.5–6]. Cheng Shujuan and Zhang Yunqiao's research on performance-based assessment tasks and scoring rules shows that complex reading activities can be made observable and assessable through performance tasks and rubrics [19, pp.22–24]. On this basis, future research may develop performance tasks, standardized rubrics, and classroom feedback tools suited to junior secondary English reading by drawing on academic quality standards. Such tools would allow assessment to form a complete evidence chain and genuinely support instructional improvement, rather than merely judging learning outcomes.

The integration of intelligent technologies into classroom instruction should also be included in research on deep learning in reading. However, the scale and purpose of technology use must be carefully controlled. Multimodal teaching resources and generative artificial intelligence are reshaping reading materials, the design of classroom questions, and learning feedback, but technology itself cannot directly produce deep learning. Bezirhan and von Davier, in their study of AI-generated reading materials, found that AI can significantly improve the efficiency of generating reading texts and accompanying exercises. However, machine-generated content still requires human review and expert refinement to ensure textual coherence, stage appropriateness, and readability [23]. This finding shows that AI can only serve as an auxiliary tool for material generation and learning feedback; it cannot replace teachers' professional work in discourse interpretation, task design, or assessment interpretation. In light of the previous discussion of stage-specific adaptation and empirical evidence, future research should not focus on whether intelligent technologies should be used, but on how such technologies can serve discourse analysis, thematic inquiry, assessment feedback, and empirical evidence collection. It should also clarify teachers' core responsibilities in content review, task design, and assessment interpretation, thereby regulating the boundaries of technology use.

5. Conclusion

Over the past five years, under the guidance of the core competency orientation of the New Curriculum Standards, research on deep learning in junior secondary English reading has gradually developed, outlining a clear trajectory of pedagogical transformation. Existing studies have explored four major directions: the reconstruction of teaching objectives, the construction of internal mechanisms, classroom implementation pathways, and assessment evidence. These studies have consistently advanced the shift in junior secondary English reading instruction from superficial information extraction to deeper meaning construction, thinking development, and knowledge transfer. The New Curriculum Standards establish the overall goal of English education through core competencies. At the same time, scholars such as Guo Hua and Lin Xiaoyan explain how these competency goals can be integrated into classroom practice from the perspectives of deep learning mechanisms and junior secondary reading instruction. Taken together, existing research makes clear that deep learning in junior secondary English reading is not about deliberately increasing the number of classroom activities or raising the difficulty of questions. Rather, it should adhere to four core directions: taking discourse themes as the center of meaning, using textual evidence as the basis for reasoning, employing cognitive scaffolding as process support, and using authentic tasks as the endpoint of transfer.

Looking ahead, research on deep learning in junior secondary English reading needs to maintain its core focus while continually improving the quality of empirical evidence. The review in this paper shows that existing studies have accumulated rich theoretical insights and practical pathways. Yet problems remain, including unclear definitions of core concepts, insufficient stage-specific adaptation, a lack of specialized assessment tools, and inadequate regulation of the use of intelligent technology. Pearson and colleagues argue that students' deep understanding must be verified through observable manifestations such as textual interpretation, logical argumentation, and knowledge transfer. This conclusion offers important guidance for future research: only by establishing a complete and stable chain of classroom-based empirical evidence can deep learning in reading move from a forward-looking pedagogical idea to a normalized classroom practice that can be diagnosed, assessed, and improved.

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