

An Empirical Case Study on Teacher Questioning Strategies Targeting Thinking Quality in Senior High School English Reading Instruction

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Abstract

In the context of China's curriculum reform emphasizing core competencies in English education, the cultivation of students' thinking quality—encompassing logical, critical, and creative thinking—has emerged as a central objective of senior high school English reading instruction. Among various classroom practices, teacher questioning stands out as a pervasive and powerful tool to foster cognitive engagement and deep learning. This study investigates how strategically designed questioning can support the development of thinking quality in students, using a 40-minute senior high school English reading lesson as a case. Grounded in the three-level cognitive questioning model and Zone of Proximal Development theory, the study employs a mixed-method approach that integrates content analysis and case-based inquiry. Teacher questions were systematically analyzed from three dimensions: cognitive level, scaffolding function, and alignment with thinking quality. The findings reveal a progressive pattern of questioning across different instructional phases, moving from lower-order to higher-order questions. These questions provided cognitive support through prompting and guided elaboration and effectively stimulated higher-order thinking skills. The study concludes that a systematic, hierarchical approach to designing teacher questions plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' thinking quality. By providing both theoretical grounding and empirical evidence, this research contributes to the refinement of teacher questioning strategies in high school English reading classrooms and offers practical implications for fostering deeper student engagement and intellectual development.

Keywords

Thinking Quality; Teacher Questioning; Reading Instruction; Scaffolding Instruction; Core Competencies

1. Introduction

In the context of China's recent curriculum reform, the General Senior High School

English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2020) emphasize the development of core competencies, with thinking quality—including logical, critical, and creative thinking—identified as a key instructional goal. This marks a shift in English reading instruction from language knowledge transmission to higher-order cognitive development.

As a central mode of classroom interaction, teacher questioning plays a vital role in engaging students cognitively and promoting deeper thinking. The design and implementation of questions significantly affect the level of cognitive challenge and processing depth. However, current teaching practice often suffers from low-level questions, weak structure, and limited feedback, which hinder students' critical engagement (Li, 2020; Chen, 2016; Yang, 2022).

Although prior studies have explored questioning frameworks and effectiveness, most focus on theoretical classifications or general patterns. There remains a lack of empirical research that examines how specific questioning strategies in real classroom settings foster students' thinking quality.

To address this gap, this study analyzes a 40-minute senior high school English reading lesson, designed to simulate an authentic classroom environment. Guided by Zhang Qihui's three-level questioning model and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, the study examines teacher questioning from three dimensions: cognitive level, scaffolding function, and alignment with thinking quality. Through a combination of content analysis and case-based inquiry, the research aims to uncover how structured, scaffolded questions can support the development of students' higher-order thinking, providing practical insights for improving question-based pedagogy in English reading instruction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Thinking Quality and English Reading Instruction

As China continues to implement core competencies in its basic education system, thinking quality has increasingly become a focal point of curriculum standards and pedagogical research, recognized as a crucial dimension of English subject core competencies. According to the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2020) (Ministry of Education, 2020), thinking quality is explicitly defined as students' cognitive abilities demonstrated in logical, critical, and creative aspects. Facione (1990) elucidated logical thinking as coherence in thought processes and rigor in reasoning. Critical thinking, on the other hand, is manifested in the abilities of judgment, questioning, and discernment. Creative thinking, as defined by Sternberg (2003), involves the capacity for information integration and novel expression. These dimensions collectively form the core foundation for students to engage in higher-order cognitive activities.

As an integral component of the English curriculum, reading instruction is not merely a channel for language knowledge input but also a vital domain for fostering

students' thinking quality. English reading is a complex cognitive activity involving interaction with texts and meaning construction. The U.S. National Research Council (2012) explicitly states that the essence of reading ability lies in the comprehensive application of reasoning, critical, and integrative thinking skills.

Despite the widespread recognition of thinking quality's value at policy and theoretical levels, its practical implementation in senior high school English reading instruction still faces numerous challenges. Some teaching practices continue to prioritize the explanation of language points and the extraction of superficial textual information, with insufficient emphasis on delving into students' cognitive depth. Furthermore, teachers generally lack the awareness and capability for systematic instructional design based on higher-order thinking objectives, which impedes students' cognitive processing from reaching the desired depth when encountering complex texts. Research by Smith and Johnson (2017) also corroborates this, finding that students' comprehension often remains at a lower level, hindering the development of critical and creative thinking, if teachers fail to provide effective cognitive support. Consequently, how to promote the development of thinking quality in English reading through specific instructional behaviors has become a crucial direction for current English education research.

2.2. Teacher Questioning Strategies

Teacher questioning, as the most common and fundamental verbal behavior in classroom instruction, serves as a crucial intermediary linking knowledge presentation, student cognitive processing, and the achievement of instructional objectives. High-quality questioning not only effectively guides students to comprehend textual content but also stimulates their deep cognitive engagement and promotes cognitive construction, playing an irreplaceable and critical role, especially in English reading instruction.

Regarding the assessment of the cognitive levels of teacher questions, domestic and international scholars have proposed various classification systems. For instance, the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) categorizes cognitive objectives into six levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating, establishing a universal analytical framework. In this study, when analyzing the cognitive levels of teacher questions, we will primarily adopt three-level cognitive questioning model (Zhang Qihui, 2018), which classifies cognitive questions into factual-recall, comprehension, and thinking-oriented levels. This model aligns more closely with the realities of senior high school English reading instruction in China and effectively differentiates cognitive demands at various levels.

Effective teacher questioning strategies should possess characteristics of hierarchy and interactivity. This implies that teachers should construct a "shallow-to-deep, progressive" questioning chain, guiding students from superficial textual compre-

hension towards in-depth analysis and evaluation, ultimately achieving creative expression. Furthermore, classroom feedback, as an essential component of the questioning process, directly influences students' depth of thinking and knowledge internalization through its content, manner, and timing. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasized that effective feedback should transcend simple "right or wrong" judgments, providing new cognitive pathways that guide students to reflect on and refine their thinking strategies, thereby truly fulfilling its scaffolding function.

However, despite the widespread recognition of the importance and effectiveness of questioning strategies, teacher questioning in real-world teaching still faces various challenges. Research indicates that questions are generally concentrated at lower cognitive levels, problem organization lacks progression, wait time is insufficient, and feedback forms are mechanically uniform, issues that remain prominent. Simultaneously, some students exhibit weak questioning awareness and lack genuine thinking and deep engagement in teacher-student interactions, which to some extent diminishes the educational value that classroom questioning should have.

On a theoretical level, the Zone of Proximal Development theory provides a solid foundation for understanding the cognitive support function of teacher questioning. This theory posits that students, with the "scaffolding" assistance from more experienced individuals, can complete cognitive tasks beyond their current independent level. In instructional practice, teacher questioning is one such crucial form of scaffolding. Through prompts, follow-up questions, and example-based guidance, it provides a transitional platform for students' cognitive development, effectively promoting their cognitive leap from "other-assistance" to "self-assistance".

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for this study, focusing on two core dimensions: constructivism and scaffolding theory, and the integration of Bloom's Taxonomy with the questioning model. These theories aim to provide a theoretical basis and analytical dimensions for the subsequent analysis of teaching cases and strategy generalization.

3.1. Constructivism and Scaffolding Theory

Constructivist learning theory posits that learning is a process wherein learners continuously construct meaning based on existing experiences through interaction with the environment and others. This theory emphasizes that knowledge is not an external entity transmitted by teachers to students, but rather is jointly constructed by students through internal cognitive processing and external social interaction within specific contexts. In this process, teachers serve as organizers and facilitators of students' cognitive development.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as a central tenet of constructivism, offers critical insights into the pedagogical function of classroom questioning. Vygotsky un-

derscored the central role of social interaction in cognitive development, and his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) clearly delineates the gap between a student's current independent developmental level and their potential developmental level achievable with the assistance of more experienced individuals. In teaching practice, this theory inspired the development of scaffolding instruction, which emphasizes that teachers should provide appropriate support and collaboration when students' cognition is not yet fully constructed, gradually withdrawing the scaffolding as students progress, ultimately facilitating their autonomous development.

In senior high school English reading instruction, teacher questioning is a crucial linguistic form for constructing scaffolding. Effective scaffolding questions should possess three basic characteristics: cognitive challenge, dynamic adjustability, and responsiveness to individual differences. Teacher questioning is not merely a tool for information exchange but also a pathway for cognitive intervention and a key mechanism for eliciting students' deep thinking activities and meaning construction. Vygotsky's scaffolding theory highlights the significant role of external support in the formation of internal cognition, providing the theoretical basis for this study to understand the function of teacher questioning in the development of students' thinking quality, and forming an important dimension for analyzing the intensity of questioning support and its cognitive value.

3.2. Bloom's Taxonomy and questioning model

Teacher questioning should not only provide support for students' cognitive development but also guide students to engage in thinking activities at different cognitive levels through appropriate hierarchical design. Cognitive psychologist Bloom and his successors, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), proposed the "Revised Taxonomy of Educational Objectives," which established a macroscopic theoretical framework widely applied in curriculum design and instructional analysis. This framework categorizes cognitive objectives into six levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

However, constrained by the abstractness of its terminology and the ambiguity of its level boundaries, the direct application and operation of this framework in specific teaching practices, especially in oral-intensive senior high school English reading classrooms with complexly structured texts often face issues such as unclear questioning criteria and high operational complexity.

In this context, Zhang Qiuhui (2018), in conjunction with the realities of English teaching in China, proposed a "Three-Level Cognitive Questioning Model," which categorizes teachers' cognitive questions into three levels: factual-recall, comprehension, and thinking-oriented. This model corresponds to the lower-order, middle-order, and higher-order cognitive activities in Bloom's Taxonomy, but its concepts are more targeted, and its judgment criteria are easier to operate,

aligning more closely with the characteristics of students' language development in the context of senior high school classrooms in China. Factual-recall questions primarily focus on students' identification, extraction, and retelling of explicit textual information; comprehension questions require students to summarize, paraphrase, explain, or structurally process the discourse content based on factual recall; thinking-oriented questions guide students to analyze, compare, evaluate, infer, or reconstruct from the text. This model provides operable judgment criteria for the coding and quantitative analysis of classroom transcripts in this study.

In this study, Bloom's cognitive taxonomy provides a macroscopic theoretical perspective and framework for classifying the cognitive objectives of classroom questions, while the three-level model offers more practical and operational specific analytical dimensions tailored to the context of senior high school English reading classrooms in China. The integration of the two not only ensures the scientific rigor and cutting-edge nature of this research but also enhances its practical feasibility, contributing to the precise analysis of the cognitive levels of teacher questions within a case classroom context and further revealing their intrinsic connection to the development of students' thinking quality.

4. Research Design and Case Analysis

This chapter details a case study investigating how teacher questioning strategies develop students' thinking quality in senior high school English reading classrooms. It covers research methods, the chosen text, and uses both quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore question levels, scaffolding, types, structures, and their impact on thinking quality. This validates the theoretical groundwork and provides empirical evidence for teaching practice.

4.1. Research Design

This study examines the practical use of teacher questioning strategies to develop thinking quality in senior high school English reading. Key questions include: How do teachers use cognitively guided questions to stimulate logical, critical, and creative thinking? How are scaffolding, cognitive levels, and heuristic functions seen in actual teaching?

To control variables and ensure focused, deep analysis, a 40-minute live classroom recording was used. The text was "Time for a Change?" from a 2019 textbook. This text explores cultural understanding and critique, showing the tension between tradition, change, emotion, and reason through two readers' views on Spring Festival customs. As an argumentative piece, it presents opposing viewpoints: Wang Peng values convenience and believes form changes don't alter essence, while Liu Yonghui upholds tradition and family connection. Its cultural depth and cognitive challenge make it suitable for designing higher-order questions.

The lesson follows an "input-processing-output" structure, aligning with the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages. Each stage aims to activate background knowledge, build critical analysis, and apply new values. The language is precise, and the argumentative style combined with teaching tasks shows diverse discourse cohesion, helping teachers guide multi-level questioning and manage discussions.

For analysis, this study used a "Teacher Questioning Analysis Coding Sheet," based on Chapter 3's theoretical framework, integrating the three-level cognitive questioning model and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory. It covers three dimensions: First, cognitive level: identifying if questions are factual-recall, comprehension, or thinking-oriented, measuring cognitive challenge; second, scaffolding function: determining if questions provide cognitive support, analyzing types like prompting, guiding, follow-up, and example-based guidance; third, thinking quality orientation: assessing if questions stimulate logical reasoning, critical judgment, or creative expression.

The research combines content analysis and case study methods. Content analysis systematically codes and statistically analyzes all cognitively functional questions in teacher discourse, providing a quantitative overview. Case analysis examines typical questioning segments, using the theoretical framework for qualitative deconstruction and discourse analysis. This ensures both quantitative and qualitative insights, leading to comprehensive and deep research. All teaching dialogues were transcribed verbatim and numbered. Two researchers independently coded the data, resolving any differences through discussion to ensure reliability.

In the quantitative phase, the study classified and counted all cognitively functional questions from the 40-minute recording. The following section presents the results of the quantitative analysis, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistics of Cognitive Levels of Teacher Questions in Senior High School English Reading Classrooms

Teaching stage	Total Questions	Factual-Recall Questions(Count/%)	Comprehension Questions(Count/%)	Thinking-Oriented Questions(Count/%)
Pre-reading Stage	15	13 / 86.7%	2 / 13.3%	0 / 0%
While-reading Stage	22	7 / 31.8%	5 / 22.7%	10 / 45.5%
Post-reading Stage	12	3 / 25.0%	2 / 16.7%	7 / 58.3%
Total	49	23 / 46.9%	9 / 18.4%	17 / 34.7%

The data show that question cognitive levels gradually increase during the lesson. Early questions are mostly factual-recall, shifting later to comprehension and thinking-oriented types. This indicates strong intentional design in guiding thinking.

4.2. Multi-dimensional Deconstruction of Teacher Questioning Strategies

In the pre-reading stage, teachers mainly asked recall and guiding questions to activate students' prior knowledge about Spring Festival customs, building a background scaffold for text comprehension. Most questions (86.7%) were factual-recall, but a few comprehension questions showed a "shallow-to-deep" cognitive progression. According to Vygotsky's ZPD theory, these questions were just beyond students' independent level. Through follow-up questions, teachers built cognitive scaffolds, moving students from simple memory to initial meaning-making. This stage smoothly transitioned students from personal experience to the subject theme, preparing them for higher-order thinking.

The while-reading stage is central to reading instruction. Here, question types and structures were more varied, guiding students to compare views, infer reasons, and form judgments about the characters' opinions on Spring Festival changes, thus deepening critical thinking. Questions primarily aimed to create deep dialogue and provide dynamic cognitive scaffolding. Statistics show that thinking-oriented questions made up 45.5% of this stage, significantly more than factual-recall and comprehension questions. Teachers used structured question chains to guide critical analysis, moving from "identifying differences" to "exploring reasons" and "forming opinions." Within Vygotsky's ZPD framework, these questions provided "dynamic support." Teachers flexibly adjusted questioning based on student feedback, continually increasing cognitive challenge and improving students' analysis, evaluation, and argumentation skills. This stage systematically built students' cognitive development pathways through progressive tasks and question tracking, enabling multi-faceted interpretation and evaluation of cultural phenomena.

The post-reading stage aimed to apply students' thinking to new contexts, encouraging independent insights and a shift from "learning to read" to "reading to think." Teacher questions were mostly open-ended and situational, designed to activate knowledge and generate ideas, emphasizing heuristic and situational aspects. From Vygotsky's ZPD perspective, teachers gradually removed external scaffolding at this stage, guiding students to independently form judgments based on existing knowledge, demonstrating the "gradual withdrawal" principle of scaffolding optimization. By comparing changes in Spring Festival customs with societal transformations, students developed a cognitive understanding where cultural preservation and change coexist, ultimately achieving the triple goals of values, logical thinking, and creative expression.

5. Discussion

5.1. Characteristics of Teacher Questioning Cognitive Level Distribution

Quantitative analysis (Table 1) shows a clear progression in the cognitive levels of teacher questions in this English reading classroom, aligning with higher-order thinking cultivation. While pre-reading questions were mostly factual-recall (86.7%)

to activate background knowledge, thinking-oriented questions significantly increased to 45.5% in the while-reading stage, forming the core with comprehension questions. By the post-reading stage, higher-order thinking questions dominated (58.3%), promoting knowledge transfer and deep reflection. Overall, thinking-oriented questions constituted 34.7% of the total questions.

This positive distribution contrasts with common issues in current senior high school English reading, where questions often remain at lower cognitive levels, lacking intellectual challenge (Li Mingyuan, 2020; Chen Fengmei, 2016; Yang Mengke, 2022). This highlights the advanced questioning design in our case. Our findings validate the three-level cognitive questioning model (Zhang Qiuhui, 2018) for stratified cognitive objective design, showing that systematic planning can shift questions from lower-order recall to higher-order thinking. However, the high proportion of factual-recall questions in the pre-reading stage, while aiding schema activation, suggests teachers could moderately integrate preliminary comprehension or critical questions to better prepare students for deeper reading and prevent cognitive inertia.

5.2. Scaffolding Function of Teacher Questioning and Student Thinking Quality Development

Teacher questioning in this classroom effectively promoted logical, critical, and creative thinking through its unique scaffolding function. This aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, where teacher questions bridge students to higher cognitive goals. This scaffolding role manifests in three ways:

First, questions exhibited cognitive challenge. Numerous thinking-oriented questions in the while-reading and post-reading stages (e.g., "Why do you agree/disagree with Wang Peng's point of view?" and "Has the essence of Spring Festival changed?") placed students in their ZPD, prompting deep analysis, comparison, and judgment, directly stimulating critical thinking. Second, teachers demonstrated dynamic adjustability. Flexible use of follow-up questions and heuristic feedback (e.g., "Can you give me more details?" or "What makes you think so?") allowed teachers to adjust scaffolding based on student responses. This dynamic support helped students clarify thoughts and build rigorous logical reasoning for complex problems. Lastly, questions showed responsiveness to individual differences. By encouraging diverse answers, affirming different perspectives, and providing structural scaffolds like expression frameworks, teachers offered various cognitive levels opportunities for higher-order thinking, fostering autonomy and exploration, thus creating a safe space for creative thinking.

These findings support Hattie and Timperley's (2007) view on effective feedback and clarify Li Danmei's (2017) concept of questioning as a key scaffolding form. By building effective scaffolds, teacher questioning successfully shifted student cognition from passive reception to active construction, significantly enhancing logical,

critical, and creative thinking.

5.3. Evolution of Questioning Strategies across Different Teaching Stages and Thinking Cultivation Mechanisms

This study's multi-dimensional analysis of teacher questioning strategies across pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages reveals their evolution in type, structure, and function, and how these contribute to systematic thinking cultivation. In the pre-reading stage, questions were mainly factual-recall, with a "What-Why-How" progression. Their core function was to activate prior knowledge and build background scaffolds for text comprehension, laying cognitive foundations for subsequent reading and thinking development.

In the while-reading stage, question types shifted to emphasize both comprehension and thinking, forming tight question chains and progressive tasks. Their function was to guide students in internal text comparison, analysis, inference, and evaluation. Through continuous follow-up and open-ended questions, teachers moved students' attention from "what the text says" to "why it says it" and "how I view it," directly promoting logical and critical thinking. This stage was central to driving higher-order thinking.

In the post-reading stage, questions were predominantly thinking-oriented, with more open-ended and situational structures. Their core function was to prompt students to transfer learning to new contexts for independent value judgments and creative expression. Teachers provided structural scaffolds, encouraging independent construction based on existing cognition, which solidified critical thinking and significantly enhanced creative expression.

Overall, the teacher questioning strategies in this case demonstrated high systematicity and gradual progression. By using diverse question types and levels with scaffolding functions across stages, the teacher successfully guided students' thinking from superficial recall to deep meaning construction and higher-order expression. This validates teacher questioning as a core strategy for promoting thinking quality. This staged, graded questioning design reflects the teacher's deep understanding of cognitive development and precise grasp of core competencies. While Zhang Qihui's model simplifies classroom analysis, future research should acknowledge its limitation in finely differentiating higher-order objectives like "evaluation" and "creation," perhaps by combining it with Bloom's six-level taxonomy for more refined analysis.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Conclusion

This study employed a case analysis to deeply explore how teacher questioning strategies cultivate students' thinking quality in senior high school English reading classrooms.

Firstly, the cognitive level distribution of teacher questions in this case showed a clear staged progression: from being primarily factual-recall in the pre-reading stage, it gradually transitioned to higher-order thinking questions dominating the while-reading and post-reading stages. This reflects the teacher's strategic consideration of thinking guidance in question design. Secondly, teacher questioning effectively served a scaffolding function through its cognitive challenge, dynamic adjustability, and responsiveness to individual differences. This significantly promoted the development of students' logical, critical, and creative thinking qualities, empirically validating Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory as a guide in classroom instruction. Finally, this study revealed the evolutionary characteristics of teacher questioning strategies across different teaching stages—from schema activation in the pre-reading stage, to deepening critical analysis in the while-reading stage, and then to knowledge transfer and innovative expression in the post-reading stage. This systematic and progressive questioning design was key to successfully cultivating students' thinking qualities in this case.

In summary, this case study indicates that teachers, by meticulously designing and implementing questioning strategies with progressive levels and effective scaffolding, can significantly enhance students' thinking quality in senior high school English reading instruction.

6.2. Implications

Based on the findings of this study, there are implications for both senior high school English reading teaching practice and future research.

At the teaching practice level, this study emphasizes that senior high school English teachers should strengthen their awareness of higher-order questioning design, making the cultivation of students' thinking quality a core teaching objective. This means consciously designing questions that include comprehension and thinking-oriented levels during lesson preparation, arranging them systematically and progressively according to text content and student learning conditions. In the classroom, teachers should flexibly use various scaffolding questioning techniques, such as timely follow-up questions, effective prompts, precise guidance, or providing expression frameworks, and dynamically adjust questioning based on immediate student feedback to effectively guide their cognition within their Zone of Proximal Development. Simultaneously, teachers must also focus on the structured and phased nature of questioning, viewing questioning as an organic whole, building logically connected questioning chains, and designing questions aligned with the teaching objectives of each reading stage to form a gradual path for thinking guidance. Furthermore, providing heuristic and guiding feedback is crucial to prompt students to think deeply and construct meaning.

Regarding future research, as a case study, this research has certain limitations in the generalizability of its conclusions, thus providing directions for subsequent ex-

tended research. Future studies could consider expanding the sample size to include teachers from different regions and with various teaching styles, or compare teaching practices across different textbook versions to enhance the generalizability of the conclusions. Additionally, research could incorporate student perspectives, using interviews or questionnaires to understand students' perceptions of teacher questioning and their level of thinking engagement, thereby forming a more comprehensive and in-depth research picture. Further exploration into how specific teacher questioning strategies quantitatively impact the quality of student language output, and the quantitative relationship between higher-order thinking questions and student output content, is also an important research direction. Finally, intervention studies could be designed to evaluate the actual impact of teacher questioning training on teacher behavior and student thinking quality development, offering more practically relevant suggestions.

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