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A Comparative Study of Reading Materials in Senior High School English Textbooks from the Perspective of Core Competencies —Taking the Reading Texts in Compulsory Book 2 of the FLTRP and BNUP Editions as Examples

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Abstract

English core competencies represent the essential qualities cultivated in English subject education. As a pivotal component of English textbooks, reading texts serve as a vital window into language proficiency enhancement and knowledge acquisition for students. Therefore, this study focuses on the reading texts in Compulsory Book 2 of the FLTRP and BNUP editions of senior high school English textbooks. Employing comparative analysis and content analysis methods, it examines the distinctive features and limitations of the two textbook editions in fostering core competencies across four dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. The research aims to provide educators with deeper insights into the instructional materials, thereby offering meaningful didactic implications.

Keywords

English core competencies; comparative analysis; reading texts; BNUP textbooks; FLTRP textbooks

1. Introduction

Amidst the tide of contemporary development, cross-boundary integration and innovation have emerged as defining characteristics, placing heightened demands on talent cultivation. The construction of a high-quality talent framework and the nurturing of exceptional individuals are not only imperative for fulfilling the nation's fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, but also align with the intrinsic needs of each student's holistic growth (Song, 2022). Within this context, the objectives of English education have undergone a profound

transformation. The focus has shifted beyond the mere transmission of linguistic knowledge towards the cultivation of students' core competencies, aiming to empower them to communicate effectively in English within diverse cultural landscapes. The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision) explicitly positions the development of students' core competencies in English as a paramount curricular goal. These competencies encompass four interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability, which collectively orchestrate the enhancement of students' comprehensive English proficiency and overall literacy.

Textbooks, serving as the cornerstone of English instruction, play a foundational role in implementing curriculum standards and nurturing core competencies. Domestic scholars have conducted multifaceted research on textbooks. In the realm of comparative textbook analysis, existing studies have largely concentrated on contrasting cultural content across different editions. For instance, Si (2024) compared cultural representations in the People's Education Press (PEP) and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) editions, finding comparable amounts of explicit cultural content, while the PEP edition contained more implicit cultural representations than its FLTRP counterpart. Fan (2024) analyzed the cultural architecture of reading materials in the new PEP and FLTRP editions from the dimensions of "cultural source" and "cultural significance", exploring their alignment with the curriculum standards requirements for cultural knowledge. Zhou (2023) conducted a comparative study of junior high school English textbooks published by Yilin Press and PEP, focusing on the selection and presentation methods of cultural content. Regarding comparisons between old and new textbook editions, Li and Wang's analysis of different PEP versions revealed that the new edition featured updated content, a reduced number of units with expanded capacity per unit, the use of question chains to connect content with enhanced contextualization, improved unit structures, and the addition of pronunciation sections, opening pages, and flexible learning resources (Li & Wang, 2025). Sun's research on cultural comparisons across editions found an increased emphasis on culture in the new version, although both editions exhibited a lower proportion of Chinese culture compared to target-language cultures, with reading texts demonstrating signs of an "aphasia of Chinese culture" (Sun, 2023). In terms of reading material comparisons, Wan (2023) examined differences between Chongqing University Press and PEP editions from the perspectives of internal and external evaluation. Jin (2022) compared thematic coverage, text types, length, and vocabulary data using compulsory modules 1 and 2 of the old and new FLTRP editions as examples.

In summary, research analyzing the reading texts of FLTRP and BNUP editions specifically from the perspective of core competencies remains relatively

underexplored within the domestic academic landscape. Aa a consequence, this study focuses on this specific avenue of inquiry. By conducting a comparative analysis of how core competencies are manifested in the reading texts of Compulsory Book 2 from both textbook editions, it aims to provide teachers with deeper insights for understanding the instructional materials, optimizing pedagogical approaches, and enhancing teaching quality. Ultimately, this endeavor seeks to facilitate the more effective implementation of core competency cultivation in senior high school English education.

2. A Comparative Analysis of Core Competencies in the Reading Materials

2.1. Comparison of Language Ability in the Reading Materials

In the FLTRP edition, the "Understanding Ideas" module presents multimodal discourses that reflect the unit theme, accompanied by corresponding pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading intensive activities. These include tasks such as matching main ideas with titles, mind-map completion exercises, summary Q&As based on textual information, and in-depth reflective questions. This module primarily lays the foundation for training reading and speaking abilities, thereby strengthening text comprehension and the initial articulation of viewpoints. The "Developing Ideas" module is divided into two components. The first part also utilizes theme-reflective multimodal discourses to help students deepen their understanding of the unit's thematic significance, placing greater emphasis on the internalization and output of language at the cognitive level to cultivate reading proficiency, perspective articulation, and innovative thinking. The second part involves writing training based on shorter texts. By integrating the module's topic and students' acquired language knowledge, it expands on previously learned grammar and functional sentence patterns, progressively training students in the application of specific written genres such as narratives, expositions, argumentative essays, letters, or summaries. This component aims to foster students' speaking and writing abilities on the foundation of reading.

Similar to the FLTRP edition, the BNUP edition also meticulously designs pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. However, the BNUP edition places a stronger emphasis on the structural scaffolding of knowledge, with both pre- and post-reading phases involving knowledge framework construction. In terms of activity design, the post-reading activities in the BNUP edition are more diversified. They include not only various mind maps for summarizing textual information to aid comprehension but also group discussions on fundamental aspects of the text. This process exercises students' speaking ability, with subsequent discussion segments further reinforcing oral skill training. Additionally, the BNUP edition features a dedicated section titled "Express Yourself" following the reading module, providing a platform for students to articulate their personal

viewpoints.

In conclusion, both editions broadly support language ability, but the BNUP edition shows a stronger and more systematic focus on developing speaking proficiency through structured frameworks and a wider range of expressive activities.

2.2. Comparison of Learning Capacity in the Reading Materials

In the design and implementation of cooperative learning, the FLTRP and BNUP editions demonstrate different emphases and organizational patterns. The FLTRP edition typically incorporates a "Work in groups" task following the second reading passage in each unit, guiding students to engage in cooperative learning centered on the text and its related themes, culminating in a presentation to the class.

The BNUP edition's arrangement for cooperative learning is more flexible and distinctly layered. Pre-reading activities often initiate with "Pair work," prompting students to discuss the article's theme, activating background knowledge through peer sharing and laying a cognitive foundation for reading. Post-reading task designs include both peer collaboration focused on extracting basic information or summarizing character emotions—targeting foundational cognitive levels—and small-group cooperative sessions requiring in-depth exploration. These group tasks often involve critical analysis of the article's main idea or designing solutions to complex problems, demanding that students synthesize information and engage in collaborative reasoning to internalize knowledge and enhance abilities through cooperation.

Overall, the BNUP edition, through its multi-layered cooperative task design spanning pre- and post-reading phases, constructs a complete learning chain from knowledge activation and basic comprehension to deep inquiry. Comparatively, it demonstrates a higher degree of emphasis on cooperative learning, not only in terms of more frequent tasks but also through a more systematic progression in task difficulty and cognitive levels. This approach is more conducive to cultivating students' teamwork abilities and higher-order thinking qualities.

2.3. A comparative analysis of Cultural Awareness in the Reading Materials

Table 1. Cultural Distribution in Reading Passages of the BNUP Textbook

Unit	Lesson1	Lesson3	RC1	RC2
Unit4	Cybersecurity	Interpersonal Relationships	Ancient Chinese Culture & Art (Chinese)	Technology Application
Unit5	Human Attitude Towards Nature (USA)	Antarctic Expedition (UK)	Physical Geography (New Zealand)	Ecological Environment (France)
Unit6	Scientists' Virtues (Chinese)	Great Figures (India & USA)	Space Heroes (USA & China)	Life Attitude (Germany)

（The BNUP edition uses continuous unit numbering across Compulsory Books 1, 2, and 3. This study only examines Compulsory Book 2, hence Units 4, 5, and 6.）

Table 2. Cultural Distribution in Reading Passages of the FLTRP Textbook

Unit		
	Understanding ideas	Developing ideas
Unit1	Dietary Culture (Sino-British Comparison)	Lifestyles
Unit2	Literature (British Culture)	Spring Festival Customs (Chinese)
Unit3	Sports	Sports
Unit4	Dramatic Arts (Comparison)	Literature & Film (USA & UK)
Unit5	Physical Geography (Australia)	Physical Geography (Canada)
Unit6	Ecological Conservation (USA)	Lifestyles

2.3.1. Native Culture

As indicated in the tables, the BNUP edition incorporates elements of Chinese culture in three instances (including the Chinese elements in the introduction to Chinese and American space heroes), covering ancient art, the exemplary virtues of Chinese scientist Tu Youyou, and Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei. Furthermore, during the analysis of the reading passages, it was observed that certain sentences in the BNUP texts exhibit distinct cultural signposts, which are conducive to cultivating students' cultural awareness. For example, in Unit 4, Reading Club 1, which discusses how modern technology can revitalize artworks like Along the

River During the Qingming Festival and the Dunhuang murals, the passage concludes with: "It also makes the art accessible to the world while protecting the original artworks for the future." By guiding students to interpret this statement, teachers can elevate their perspective to a global stage of cultural sharing, fostering a global vision. Simultaneously, students can be prompted to contemplate the dual value of modern technology in cultural heritage: dissemination and preservation.

The FLTRP edition incorporates Chinese cultural elements in two instances (including the Chinese elements within the Sino-British dietary culture comparison), concerning Spring Festival customs and dietary culture. Therefore, regarding the inclusion of native culture, the BNUP edition demonstrates a slightly more extensive coverage than the FLTRP edition.

2.3.2. International Culture

This study defines “international culture” as cultural content from countries other than China, encompassing diverse cultural entities such as the United States, Germany, and Australia. In terms of the breadth of cultural coverage, the BNUP edition exhibits a broader international cultural horizon. Its reading passages involve cultures from the United States, the United Kingdom, India, New Zealand, Germany, and France. Through this presentation of multinational cultures, it conveys an editorial intent to cultivate students' multicultural perspective, guiding them to understand the uniqueness and commonalities of different national cultures. Conversely, the international culture in the FLTRP edition is more centered on Anglo-American culture, with reading content primarily revolving around the UK and the USA. While Australia and Canada are mentioned, their proportion is minimal. British and American cultures recur frequently throughout the texts. Considering the language learning context of senior high school students (primarily exposed to British and American English), the FLTRP edition's focus on Anglo-American culture as the core target-language culture aligns with students' language input environment, possessing practical rationality.

In essence, the BNUP edition, leveraging its wide national cultural coverage, emphasizes broadening students’ multicultural cognitive dimensions. The FLTRP edition, by concentrating on an in-depth exploration of Anglo-American culture, achieves deep-seated alignment with students' language learning scenarios. Thus, the two editions develop differentiated focal points in presenting international culture: “breadth expansion” versus “depth alignment.”

2.4. A comparative analysis of Thinking Quality in the Reading Materials

In English textbooks, questions constitute a vital component(Xiong, 2022), distributed extensively across various sections. Post-reading questions can serve as a vehicle for knowledge assessment, while high-quality questions act as a critical

tool for cultivating students' thinking quality. Accordingly, to compare the differences between the FLTRP and BNUP editions in this regard, this study analyzes the questions following the reading materials in both textbooks. For precise analysis, the scope of "questions" is strictly defined as those presented in interrogative form that require student responses, located specifically within the reading sections of both editions.

Table 3. Statistical Analysis of Question Distribution by Cognitive Level

Cognitive Level	FLTRP Edition		BNUP Edition	
	Quantity	Proportion	Quantity	Proportion
Remember	1	2%	2	4%
Understand	9	25%	14	32%
Apply	6	17%	3	7%
Analyze	6	17%	13	30%
Evaluate	9	25%	8	18%
Create	5	14%	4	9%

The statistical data reveals a structural divergence in the distribution of cognitive levels within post-reading questions between the FLTRP and BNUP editions, mirroring different pathways in competency cultivation. Both editions de-emphasize assessment at the Remembering level, with proportions below 5%, distinctly embodying the philosophy of fostering cognitive advancement over rote memorization.

At the Understanding level, the BNUP edition's proportion (32%) exceeds that of the FLTRP edition (25%), indicating its stronger focus on the solidification of foundational textual meaning construction. In contrast, the FLTRP edition exhibits a tendency to integrate comprehension training with higher-order thinking. Regarding the Application level, the FLTRP edition's notable 17% proportion significantly surpasses the BNUP's 7%, highlighting an emphasis on the transfer and utilization of linguistic knowledge in novel contexts. Within the Analysis level, the BNUP edition leads with a 30% proportion, prioritizing the training of students' ability to deconstruct textual structures. The FLTRP edition, while at 17%, places greater stress on information synthesis and logical connection. At the Evaluation level, the FLTRP edition allocates 25% of its questions (equal to its highest level, Understanding), underscoring its commitment to nurturing students' critical thinking. Comparatively, the BNUP edition's 18% proportion for evaluation questions suggests its primary focus remains on cultivating analytical capabilities. Notably, both editions allocate less than 15% of their questions to the Creation level. Although the FLTRP edition's proportion is slightly higher, there remains significant room for elevating the training of innovative thinking.

A deeper analysis suggests that the FLTRP edition exhibits a distinctive profile in fostering thinking quality, characterized by an orientation towards critical thinking and applied competence. Its high proportion of evaluation questions, designed to guide students in dialectical reflection on textual viewpoints, effectively promotes the development of critical thinking. Concurrently, application-oriented questions embedded in real-life scenarios facilitate the transformation of linguistic knowledge into practical ability. However, its lower proportion of analysis questions may constrain students' capacity for probing the deeper architecture of texts. Conversely, the BNUP edition emphasizes the cultivation of logical analysis and depth of understanding. Its high ratio of analysis questions aids students in mastering text deconstruction techniques, while its ample understanding questions lay a solid foundation for higher-order cognitive development. Nonetheless, the relative scarcity of application and creation questions may result in insufficient training for knowledge transfer and innovative praxis. These differences not only reflect the distinct pedagogical philosophies underpinning the textbooks' compilation but also provide significant insights for teachers seeking to integrate instructional resources and optimize strategies for thinking skill development.

2.5. Similarities and Differences in the Reading Texts

2.5.1. Commonalities

In the compilation and design of reading texts, both textbook editions anchor themselves firmly to the cultivation of English subject core competencies. Through systematic content selection and activity design, they comprehensively cover the four dimensions—language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning capacity—reflecting a deep-seated alignment with the mandates of the new curriculum standards.

Specifically, regarding language ability, both editions focus on developing the five skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing. By uniformly incorporating pre-, while-, and post-reading activities, they strengthen students' text comprehension and language output capabilities, ensuring the integrity of language skill training. In the dimension of cultural awareness, both prioritize a balanced presentation of native and international cultures. Through diverse content selection, they help students broaden their international perspective while deepening their understanding of their own culture, thereby fostering intercultural understanding and communication awareness. For thinking quality, both editions de-emphasize rote memorization questions, instead designing inquiries at the analysis and evaluation levels to guide students toward deep thinking, cultivating logical and critical thought. Concerning learning capacity, both leverage explicit or implicit learning strategy guidance, coupled with cooperative learning tasks, to assist students in mastering effective learning methods and enhancing their autonomous learning and collaborative abilities.

Furthermore, the reading texts in both editions cover a rich array of topics such as technology, nature, and notable figures. Supplemented with multimodal resources like illustrations and mind maps to aid instruction, they solidify the foundational vehicle for core competency cultivation, forming an educational roadmap that converges with the requirements of the new curriculum standards.

2.5.2. Differences

The two textbook editions exhibit distinct differences in their emphases and implementation methods across the various dimensions of core competencies, reflecting divergent compilation philosophies and educational logics.

In cultivating language ability, the BNUP edition focuses more intently on elevating "speaking" proficiency. By employing structured knowledge frameworks and high-frequency small-group interactive activities, it provides students with more opportunities for logical expression and perspective articulation. The FLTRP edition, conversely, emphasizes systematic training in writing," guiding students to master the application norms of different genres through dedicated writing modules. In fostering "viewing" skills, the FLTRP edition's illustrations exhibit a functional split, with some serving a decorative purpose and others corresponding to the text. The BNUP edition primarily utilizes content-corresponding illustrations but suffers from visual gaps in some texts, affecting the continuity of viewing skill development.

Within the cultural awareness dimension, the BNUP edition features richer native cultural content, encompassing diverse themes like ancient art and scientists' deeds, and boasts a broader international cultural scope involving elements from multiple countries. The FLTRP edition's native cultural focus leans towards traditional areas such as cuisine and festivals, while its international culture centers on Anglo-American culture, aligning more closely with students' daily language learning context. In presenting Sino-Western cultural comparisons, the FLTRP edition directly showcases cultural collision and integration through a greater number of passages, whereas such content is relatively scarcer in the BNUP edition.

Regarding the cultivation of thinking quality, the FLTRP edition places greater weight on critical thinking and knowledge transfer ability. It uses a substantial number of evaluation questions to guide students in examining textual viewpoints dialectically and employs application questions to facilitate the transformation of linguistic knowledge into practical competence. The BNUP edition, however, prioritizes analysis and deep comprehension questions, focusing on training students to deconstruct textual structures and construct foundational meaning, with relatively less emphasis on applied practice.

In fostering learning capacity, the FLTRP edition provides clear methodological guidance through systematic, explicit learning strategy modules. The BNUP edition, though offering less explicit strategic guidance, places greater emphasis on stimulating students' self-directed inquiry consciousness through extensive reading

resource expansion and open-ended task design. In cooperative learning design, the BNUP edition constructs a complete learning chain via multi-layered tasks before and after reading, while the FLTRP edition relies more on consolidated end-of-unit activities with a relatively simpler hierarchical design.

In summary, both textbook editions are designed around core competencies but exhibit distinct emphases in specific skill training, content selection, and activity arrangement, offering diversified pathways for implementing core literacy goals.

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