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Continuity and Innovation in Reading Texts of Junior High School English Textbooks: A Comparative Study of Old and New PEP Grade 7 Editions

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Abstract

This study compares reading texts in the 2012 and 2024 PEP Grade 7 English textbooks across four dimensions: thematic contexts, discourse types, text length, and reading difficulty. Using Cunningsworth's evaluation model and the 2018 English Curriculum Standards, it finds that the new edition retains life-oriented themes and practical genres while significantly enhancing ecological awareness, digital literacy, and cognitive challenge through longer, more syntactically complex texts and new media discourses. These revisions reflect a shift from skill training to integrated competency cultivation. Pedagogical strategies such as task-driven design, differentiated instruction, and digital resource integration are proposed to support effective implementation.

Keywords

Junior High English; Textbooks; Reading Texts; Comparative Analysis; Core Competencies

1. Introduction

English reading is central to language acquisition and cognitive development. Textbooks, as primary teaching resources, critically shape reading instruction and student outcomes. In response to China's English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2018), which emphasize core competencies (language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, learning ability), the People's Education Press (PEP) revised its junior high English textbooks in 2024. Grade 7 is a pivotal transition stage from primary to secondary learning, yet systematic multi-dimensional comparisons of its reading texts remain scarce. Existing studies often focus on high school materials or single aspects, lacking integrated analysis. This study compares reading texts in the 2012 and 2024 PEP Grade 7 editions,

examining continuity and innovation in themes, genres, length, and difficulty. It also explores revision drivers and proposes teaching adaptations. Three questions guide the research: (1) What continuities and innovations exist? (2) What educational and social factors drive revisions? (3) What pedagogical adjustments are needed?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Cunnings worth's Textbook Evaluation Model

This study is grounded in Cunningsworth's (2002) comprehensive textbook evaluation model, which provides a systematic framework for analyzing English textbooks from macro and micro perspectives. cunnings worth argues that effective textbooks should align with learners' needs, reflect educational goals, and adapt to social changes. His model encompasses five macro dimensions and four micro dimensions, offering a holistic lens for textbook analysis (Cunningsworth, 2002).

At the macro level, the model emphasizes five principles: first, the quantity and distribution of texts should balance coverage and depth, avoiding cognitive overload or insufficient practice; second, discourse type diversity should be ensured to expose learners to various genres and develop flexible reading strategies; third, difficulty progression should follow cognitive development laws, adopting a spiral ascending design; fourth, reading strategy integration should be implicit and contextualized rather than explicit and isolated; fifth, activity design should provide cognitive scaffolding to support learners' meaning construction (Cunningsworth, 2002).

At the micro level, the model focuses on four textual attributes: thematic contexts, discourse types, text length, and linguistic features (including vocabulary, syntax, and readability). These micro dimensions directly influence text authenticity, readability, and educational value, serving as the foundation for macro-level design (Cunnings worth, 2002).

Cunnings worth's model has been widely applied in international textbook research and proven effective in evaluating English teaching materials across different contexts (Surdyanto & Kurniawan, 2020; Lia & Zeynep, 2016). Its integration of macro and micro perspectives aligns perfectly with the research objectives of this study, enabling a comprehensive analysis of continuity and innovation in PEP Grade 7 reading texts.

2.2. English Curriculum Standards

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2018) serves as the fundamental policy document guiding English education in China, defining core competencies, curriculum content, and teaching requirements (Ministry of Education, 2018). The standards propose four core competencies: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability, emphasizing their integrated development. Curriculum content is organized into six interrelated

elements: thematic contexts, discourse types, linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies, which are to be taught holistically through thematic inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2018).

The standards divide thematic contexts into three core categories: Self, Society, and Nature, each with sub-themes closely related to students' daily lives and social reality. Discourse types include narratives, expositions, news reports, and new media texts, emphasizing authenticity and diversity. Reading requirements focus on extracting information, understanding themes, analyzing discourse structures, and appreciating cultural connotations, highlighting the cultivation of higher-order thinking (Ministry of Education, 2018).

This study adopts the curriculum standards as the policy framework, using its requirements for thematic contexts, discourse types, and reading abilities as evaluation criteria to examine how the 2024 textbook revisions respond to competency-oriented education goals. The alignment between Cunningsworth's model and the curriculum standards ensures that the research is both theoretically rigorous and practically relevant.

3. Literature Review

3.1. International Research on English Reading Textbooks

International research on English reading textbooks has a long history and diverse perspectives. Early studies focused on text authenticity and readability. Cunningsworth (1995) established a multi-dimensional evaluation framework covering text quantity, genre, theme, length, and authenticity, laying the foundation for systematic textbook analysis. Subsequent research expanded to discourse analysis, cognitive psychology, and educational technology.

Arda (2008) used mixed methods to explore theme selection in EFL textbooks, finding that student-centered, life-related themes significantly enhance learning motivation and comprehension. Lia and Zeynep (2016) employed the Coh-Metrix tool to analyze cohesion features in 27 textbooks, revealing that syntactic complexity and cohesive devices strongly influence reading difficulty and comprehension. Sianipar (2020) evaluated Grade 7 textbooks based on interest, theme, and vocabulary, emphasizing the importance of aligning text difficulty with students' cognitive development.

With the rise of digital education, recent international studies have focused on new media discourses and multi-modal texts. Oktarina (2022) explored the integration of digital texts in EFL textbooks, finding that authentic online materials enhance students' digital literacy and communicative competence. Madina et al. (2024) developed a standardized evaluation framework for reading texts, emphasizing the balance between linguistic complexity and cognitive accessibility. Collectively, international research provides valuable theoretical and methodological references for this study.

3.2. Domestic Research on English Reading Textbooks

Domestic research on English reading textbooks has grown rapidly alongside educational reform. Early studies focused on textbook evaluation and teaching application. Zhou (2014) analyzed authenticity issues in high school reading texts, identifying insufficient authentic materials and outdated themes. Guo (2016) and Chen (2017) examined difficulty progression and cultural integration in high school textbooks, highlighting the need for balanced cultural representation.

In recent years, research has shifted to core competency-oriented textbook analysis. Wang (2021) analyzed cultural content in 2019 PEP textbooks, emphasizing the integration of Chinese culture. Liu (2019) explored reading exercise design, advocating for higher-order thinking tasks. Liao (2013) and Yu & Ji (2025) investigated the application of visualization tools and digital resources in reading instruction.

However, existing domestic research has notable limitations. Most studies focus on high school textbooks or single-dimensional analysis of junior high materials. Few conduct systematic multi-dimensional comparisons of Grade 7 reading texts, which is critical for the transition stage. Additionally, most research adopts qualitative methods, lacking quantitative data support for readability and syntactic complexity analysis. This study addresses these gaps by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct a comprehensive comparison.

4. Research Design

4.1. Research Questions

This study addresses three core research questions:

1) What are the specific continuities and innovations in reading texts between the 2012 and 2024 PEP Grade 7 English textbooks across thematic contexts, discourse types, text length, and reading difficulty?

2) What educational philosophies, policy requirements, and social demands drive the revisions in the 2024 textbook reading texts?

3) What targeted pedagogical strategies can teachers adopt to effectively use the revised reading texts and promote students' core competency development?

4.2. Research Objects

The research objects are the reading texts from Section B of the 2012 old edition and 2024 new edition of PEP Grade 7 English textbooks. The old edition contains 21 reading texts (Section B 2b), while the new edition includes 15 reading texts (Section B 1b). All texts are core reading materials designed for intensive reading and thematic inquiry, representing the key content of each unit.

4.3. Research Methods

This study employs two main research methods, combining quantitative and

qualitative analysis to ensure comprehensiveness and rigor.

Textual Analysis: This method involves systematic analysis of reading texts, including quantitative statistics and qualitative classification. Quantitative statistics cover theme frequency, genre distribution, text length (word count, sentence count), syntactic complexity (average sentence length), and readability (FRE index). Qualitative classification involves categorizing thematic contexts and discourse types according to the curriculum standards and Cunningsworth's model.

Comparative Analysis: This method compares the two editions across four dimensions, identifying similarities (continuity) and differences (innovation). It further explores the underlying reasons for differences and their educational implications.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Continuity and Innovation in Thematic Contexts

Thematic contexts are the core carriers of educational values and learning content. Both editions follow the curriculum standards' three-category framework: "Self", 'Society," and "Nature," reflecting consistent adherence to student-centered education.

Continuity: The "Self" theme dominates both editions, accounting for 45.8% (old) and 60% (new) of texts, focusing on personal life, family, school, health, and learning. This reflects sustained attention to students 'daily experiences and cognitive proximity. Ecological sub-themes such as wildlife protection and disaster prevention are retained in both editions, demonstrating consistent emphasis on environmental education.

Innovation: The new edition makes significant thematic adjustments. The "Society", theme decreases sharply from 37.5% to 13.3%, reducing Western cultural festival content and cross-cultural topics to lower cognitive load for junior high students. The "Nature" theme increases from 16.7% to 26.7%, adding texts on human-environment relationships and sustainable development, aligning with national ecological civilization strategies. Additionally, the new edition removes explicit "learning methods" texts, integrating strategy cultivation into authentic themes.

5.2. Continuity and Innovation in Discourse Types

Discourse types determine text authenticity and skill development focus. Both editions prioritize practical genres closely related to daily communication.

Continuity: such as advertisements, letters, and notices remain important in both editions, accounting for 42.9% (old) and 26.6% (new), emphasizing real-world language use. Narratives about daily experiences are retained, connecting learning to life.

Innovation: The most striking change is the surge in new media discourses, rising from 9.5% to 46.7%, including social media posts, online articles, and forum discussions. Traditional expository texts decrease significantly, replaced by authentic digital texts. Literary adaptations such as fairy tales are added, promoting critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation.

5.3. Continuity and Innovation in Text Length

Text length directly affects reading load and cognitive challenge.

Continuity: Both editions adopt a spiral ascending length design, starting with short texts (around 80 words) in early units and gradually increasing to longer texts (150+ words) in later units, aligning with cognitive development.

Innovation: While the number of texts decreases from 21 to 15, total word count increases from 1,616 to 2,177 (34.7% growth). Average text length rises from 77 to 145 words, and average sentence length increases from 8.20 to 11.64 words, significantly enhancing syntactic complexity.

5.4. Continuity and Innovation in Reading Difficulty

Reading difficulty is measured by the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) formula: FRE = 206.835 – 0.846×ASW – 1.015×ASL (ASW = syllables per 100 words; ASL = average sentence length). Higher scores indicate easier reading.

Continuity: Both editions maintain gradual difficulty progression with small unit-to-unit fluctuations, avoiding cognitive overload.

Innovation: The old edition averages 81.0 (easy, Grade 5–6 level), suitable for beginners. The new edition averages 59.33 (difficult, Grade 7–8 level), aligning with students' zone of proximal development. Difficulty progression is more dynamic, with controlled peaks to foster growth.

6. Reasons for Textbook Revisions

6.1. Policy-Driven Core Competency Orientation

The 2024 revision directly responds to the 2018 curriculum standards' core competency requirements. Thematic adjustments strengthen cultural confidence and ecological awareness; increased complexity fosters thinking quality; new media texts develop learning ability (Ministry of Education, 2018). The revisions shift from knowledge transmission to value cultivation, aligning with fostering virtue through education.

6.2. Adaptation to Digital Age Learning

Digital transformation drives the increase in new media texts. Authentic online materials align with students' daily digital experiences, developing multi-modal literacy and digital communication skills (Li, 2021). Complex syntax and critical tasks enhance higher-order thinking essential for the information age.

6.3. Optimization of Cognitive Development Laws

The new edition adopts a "high-start, buffered progression" difficulty model, balancing challenge and accessibility. Reduced text quantity but increased depth avoids fragmentation; integrated strategy cultivation promotes "learning by doing" (Zhang & Cao, 2011). The revisions reflect a deeper understanding of adolescent cognitive development.

7. Pedagogical Implications

7.1. Design Task-Driven Reading Activities

Teachers should design tiered tasks aligned with the new edition's progression. Basic tasks (mind-mapping, information tables) support comprehension; analytical tasks (inference, evaluation) develop thinking; creative tasks (role-plays, posters) promote transfer. Authentic new media tasks (online discussions, digital projects) enhance engagement and digital literacy.

7.2. Implement Differentiated Reading Guidance

Cater to diverse learners: foundational students use scaffolded Wh-questions and color-coding; intermediate students analyze sentence structures; advanced students engage in critical reading. Differentiated tasks ensure inclusive development.

7.3. Integrate Digital Resources and Assessment

Leverage new media texts for pre-class exploration, in-depth analysis, and post-class creation. Use visualization tools (mind maps) to clarify structures. Establish digital portfolios to track progress, enabling data-driven instruction (Yu & Ji, 2025)

8. Conclusion

This systematic comparison reveals that the 2024 PEP Grade 7 reading texts balance continuity and innovation. They retain life-oriented themes and practical genres while enhancing ecological awareness, digital literacy, and cognitive challenge. The revisions reflect a shift from skill training to competency integration, driven by policy, digitalization, and cognitive science. Teachers must adopt task-driven, differentiated, and digitally enhanced instruction to maximize textbook value. This study provides empirical evidence for textbook evaluation and practical guidance for reading innovation. Future research could expand to full textbooks and cross-grade comparisons.

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