

Original Paper

A Study on the Effectiveness of Core Competence-based Questioning in English Reading Lesson in Junior High School

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Abstract

The effectiveness of core competence-based questioning in junior middle school English reading lessons is a critical issue in modern English education. This study investigates how the integration of core competencies into classroom questioning strategies impacts students' learning outcomes and engagement. Through a mixed-methods approach, including classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student performance assessments, the research explores the relationship between questioning techniques and student comprehension. The findings indicate that core competence-based questioning significantly enhances students' critical thinking, language application, and overall reading proficiency. The study also highlights the importance of teacher training and curriculum design in maximizing the effectiveness of this approach. These insights contribute to the development of more student-centered and competency-oriented English teaching practices in junior middle school settings.

Keywords

core competence, junior middle school English reading, classroom questioning, effectiveness of questioning

1. Introduction

The integration of core competencies into education has become a global educational trend, emphasizing the development of students' essential skills and values. In the context of English language education, the concept of core competence has been increasingly emphasized in curriculum reforms, particularly in junior middle school. The National Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (English) (2022) define the core competencies of English education as four key dimensions:

language proficiency, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. These competencies are not isolated but are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, forming a holistic framework for student development in English language learning.

In the context of English language education, the integration of core competencies has been explored in various studies. For instance, the concept of English core competence has been defined as the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students should acquire through English learning in Wang Shouren's paper (2022). This includes not only language proficiency but also critical thinking, cultural awareness, and communication skills. Research by Li (2008) has shown that the integration of core competencies into English instruction can enhance students' language learning motivation and engagement.

Classroom questioning is a fundamental pedagogical strategy that plays a crucial role in promoting student learning and engagement. Ellis R. (2003) has argued that effective questioning can stimulate higher-order thinking and encourage students to participate actively in class discussions, which has been proved by numerous studies. However, the effectiveness of questioning strategies in English reading instruction has been less extensively studied, particularly in the context of core competence-based approaches.

This study addresses the following research question: How does the use of core competence-based questioning in English reading lessons affect students' comprehension and engagement in junior middle school? The study is expected to contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies that support the holistic development of students in English language learning.

2. Literature Review

The concept of core competencies in education has evolved from a focus on knowledge transmission to a more holistic approach that emphasizes the development of students' essential skills and values. In China, the National Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (English) (2022) have formally introduced the framework of student development core competencies, which includes four key dimensions: language proficiency, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. These competencies are further refined into specific learning goals and assessment criteria to guide the development of education and curriculum design.

In the context of English language education, the integration of core competencies has been explored in various studies. For instance, the concept of English core competence has been defined as the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students should acquire through English learning. This includes not only language proficiency but also critical thinking, cultural awareness, and communication skills. Research by Kaiser and Presmeg (2019) has shown that the integration of core competencies into English instruction can enhance students' language learning motivation and engagement.

Classroom questioning is a fundamental pedagogical strategy that plays a crucial role in promoting student learning and engagement. Studies, for example, by Kübra Kanat and Zeynep Fulya Temel

(2025) have demonstrated that effective questioning can stimulate higher-order thinking and encourage students to participate actively in class discussions. However, the effectiveness of questioning strategies in English reading instruction has been less extensively studied, particularly in the context of core competence-based approaches.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of aligning questioning strategies with students' core competencies to maximize their learning outcomes. For example, Xiao Xia's study (2020) on core competence-based questioning in junior middle school English classes found that such an approach significantly improved students' reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Similarly, research on the use of questioning strategies in English language teaching has shown that well-designed questions can enhance students' language accuracy and fluency.

Despite these findings, there is a need for further research on the effectiveness of core competence-based questioning in junior middle school English reading lessons. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the impact of core competence-based questioning on students' learning outcomes and classroom engagement in junior middle school English reading instruction.

3. Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the concept of core competencies, particularly as outlined in the National Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (English) (2022). According to the 2022 English curriculum framework, the core competencies of English education include four key dimensions: language proficiency, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. These four aspects are not isolated but are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, forming a holistic framework for student development in English language learning.

Language proficiency is the foundational component of core competencies, referring to students' ability to understand and use language in specific contexts through the application of linguistic knowledge and strategies. It encompasses both receptive and productive language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The development of language proficiency is essential for students to engage effectively with English content and to communicate meaningfully in real-life situations.

Cultural awareness reflects the value orientation of core competencies, emphasizing students' understanding and respect for both Chinese and foreign cultures, as well as their ability to appreciate and integrate cultural elements into their language learning. Culturally responsive teaching is crucial for fostering students' global awareness and enhancing their intercultural communication skills.

Thinking quality represents the cognitive characteristics of core competencies, highlighting students' ability to think critically, analyze, compare, infer, evaluate, and create. This dimension encourages the development of logical, dialectical, and innovative thinking, which is essential for students to engage deeply with English texts and to form their own interpretations and judgments.

Learning ability is a key driver of core competency development, referring to students' capacity to

actively apply and adjust learning strategies, explore diverse learning resources, and continuously improve their English learning efficiency. The cultivation of learning ability supports students in developing independent and collaborative learning habits, which are essential for lifelong learning and academic success.

These four core competencies are integrated into classroom instruction, particularly in the form of questioning strategies, to promote a more comprehensive and student-centered approach to English learning. By aligning questioning techniques with the four core competencies, teachers can foster students' critical thinking, language application, and cultural understanding, thereby enhancing their overall learning experience and academic performance.

This theoretical foundation is further supported by the principles of systemic functional linguistics by M.A.K. Halliday (2004)[8], which emphasizes the role of language in social interaction and meaning-making. According to this theory, language is not merely a tool for communication but a system of meaning shaped by social and cultural contexts. The integration of core competencies into classroom questioning is therefore seen as a way to enhance students' ability to use language effectively in real-world contexts.

By grounding the study in the theoretical framework of core competencies and systemic functional linguistics, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of core competence-based questioning in junior middle school English reading instruction.

4. Analysis of the Current Situation of Core Competence-Oriented Questioning in Junior High School English Reading Classes

4.1 Neglect of the Cultivation of Language Communicative Competence in Junior High School Students

By utilizing questioning in English reading classes, teachers primarily cultivate language abilities in the language comprehension domain, to the detriment of developing communicative competence in junior high school students. Consequently, it is evident that in junior high school English reading instruction, teachers prioritize the transmission of linguistic knowledge and textual comprehension, enabling students to master information processing and input skills while neglecting to guide them in completing information output through communication and interaction. Furthermore, the cultivation of language abilities is characterized by formalized and routinized questioning, lacking integration of linguistic knowledge structures. The content of questioning in English reading classes emphasizes assessing students' language input and processing; that is, classroom questioning remains at the level of literal understanding and recognition, as well as comprehension of textbook knowledge, with an overall low level of difficulty. Based on the requirements of core competencies, it is justifiable for teachers to explore interactions with students through various forms of questioning to achieve curriculum objectives. However, most questions are designed solely for language information input and processing, training only one aspect of students' language abilities and failing to comprehensively cultivate students' language abilities in a progressive manner.

4.2 Lack of Attention to the Exploration the Inherent and Deeper Meanings of Texts

Insufficient questioning, or a lack of guiding questions, hinders students' ability to grasp and appreciate the spiritual and emotional core of the text, thereby preventing a deeper understanding of its essence. Teachers frequently shift to questions about linguistic knowledge and grammar after students grasp the main ideas and paragraph summaries, rarely prompting them to contemplate the spiritual and value-laden implications of the text. Furthermore, classroom questioning often overlooks cultural transmission. Most teachers primarily cultivate students' cultural awareness through cultural comparison and understanding in middle school English reading classes. They emphasize students' perception and acquisition of cultural information, but rarely address other aspects of cultural awareness through questioning. There is a need to strengthen the cultivation of correct values and positive emotional attitudes, fostering national identity and cultural confidence.

4.3 Failure to Cultivate of Thinking Skills in Junior High School Students

English teaching should not be limited to the acquisition of language proficiency; it must also foster the development of critical thinking skills in junior high school students. Reading comprehension in English serves as the optimal pathway for cultivating these skills. Teachers' questioning in English reading classes primarily assesses students' abilities in observation and comparison, as well as analysis and judgment, with limited emphasis on questions that engage inductive reasoning and construction, critical evaluation, and innovation. Cognition is often categorized into six dimensions: creation, evaluation, analysis, application, comprehension, and memory. In terms of cultivating cognitive qualities, there is a scarcity of questions in the classroom that address inductive reasoning, construction, critical evaluation, and innovation. It is evident that teachers' questioning primarily focuses on cultivating lower-order thinking skills in junior high school students, neglecting the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills.

This reflects the current situation of questioning in junior high school English reading classes, where teachers' questioning primarily emphasizes the development of lower-order thinking skills, with insufficient attention given to the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills. Furthermore, the cognitive difficulty of questioning in English reading classes lacks a clear gradient. Most questions posed by teachers in English reading classes are limited to "Yes or No" or "What is it?" questions. The questioning lacks a hierarchical structure, preventing students' thinking from being interconnected and progressive. The absence of questions that encourage independent thinking, such as "Why" and "How," not only hinders the improvement of students' cognitive qualities but also leads to a tendency for students to think superficially and passively when analyzing and solving problems in the future. This is detrimental to the enhancement of students' cognitive abilities and the cultivation of cognitive qualities over the long term.

4.4 Overlooking of Authentic and Situational Contexts

Over 76.7% of questions were decontextualized, devoid of real-world or hypothetical scenarios. Discussions about futuristic texts (e.g., "Will People Have Robots?") typically lacked immersive

contexts such as: “If you could collaborate with a robot on a community project, what problem would you solve, and what roles would each of you undertake?”. Abstract queries like “What are robots’ functions?” disengage learners and undermine linguistic application and cultural transfer competencies (Zhou, 2021). Authentic contexts bridge classroom learning and real-life communication, a core tenet of the Linguistic Ability competency.

4.5 Ineffective Feedback Mechanisms

Classroom evaluations often fail to achieve their intended purpose. Feedback remains predominantly evaluative rather than developmental. Positive evaluations include simple praise, repetition and praise, guiding responses. Liu (2022) reported that 44.6% of teacher responses were simplistic praise (e.g., “Good!”), while 16.1% involved mechanical repetition of student answers. Only 5.8% of feedback guided improvement through scaffolding (e.g., “Your answer identifies two causes—now consider how historical context influenced this character’s decision”) (Liu, 2022). This neglects the Learning Capacity competency, which requires teachers to “cultivate metacognitive strategies through reflective feedback”. When teachers do not provide correct and positive feedback after a student answers a question, but instead immediately declare the answer right or wrong, or when teachers do not allow sufficient time for students to think and communicate after posing a question, and then call on another student without any feedback, students gradually develop passive learning habits, becoming less inclined to think critically.

4.6 Imbalanced Focus on Core Competencies

Questions disproportionately target Linguistic Ability (91.2% of total questions), marginalizing other competencies. Cultural Awareness, Thinking Disposition (Deng, 2022), and Learning Capacity collectively received less than 9% of instructional focus, with cultural and learning competencies appearing predominantly in post-reading phases as “add-ons” rather than integrated objectives. For instance, while analyzing “The Difficult Search for American Products,” teachers emphasized vocabulary drills (“Translate ‘manufacture’”) but overlooked questions like: “How might ‘Made in China’ perceptions impact global trade ethics, and what strategies could promote fairer narratives?” This violates the integrated ethos of core competencies, where dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing (English) (2022).

5. Strategies for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Core Competence-based Questioning

5.1 Embrace of the Teaching Philosophy of the Subject Education

Firstly, educators are suggested to embrace the student-centered development philosophy (Liu, 2022). Grounded in humanistic and constructivist pedagogical theories, teachers should transform their educational perspectives, understand student needs, and foster respect and equality. This philosophy also emphasizes harmonious teacher-student relationships, where educators care for and connect with each student, acting as guides, supporters, and problem-solvers, thereby ensuring educational equity. In addition, it is imperative to transform from subject-based teaching to discipline-based cultivation. The

core of this shift lies in disciplinary thinking, the essence of subject teaching. Addressing the current overemphasis on “teaching” at the expense of “cultivation” is urgent. Teachers must enhance their ability to cultivate students through the curriculum, connecting knowledge with real-life experiences and creating opportunities for personal growth. This involves guiding students to deeply explore learning content, improving their learning capabilities, and promoting critical thinking through diverse activities. In the context of fostering overall qualities, discipline-based activities are increasingly vital, with disciplinary thinking serving as the core of subject teaching. Therefore, it is imperative to address the current overemphasis on “teaching” at the expense of “cultivation.” The key is for teachers to enhance their ability to cultivate students through the curriculum, connecting knowledge with life, and creating more opportunities for life experiences; guiding students to deeply explore learning content, improving their learning abilities; and carrying out various forms of activities to improve students' critical thinking abilities.

5.2 The Cultivation of Students' Cultural Awareness through Artful Questioning

Cultural awareness involves an understanding and appreciation of both Chinese and foreign cultures (English) (2022). The cultivation of cultural awareness aims not only to enable students to better adapt to and understand the diverse languages of the world, but, more importantly, to cultivate students' noble patriotic sentiments and strong cultural confidence. From ancient times to the present, cultural differences between China and the West are evident in different historical contexts, and these differences also serve as entry points for artistic questioning in reading classrooms (Deng et al., 2022). Teachers should strengthen the cultivation of cultural awareness in reading classes, using artistic questioning methods to enable students to understand the cultural connotations of different language countries, enhance and develop cross-cultural communication skills, and at the same time, pay attention to the penetration and output of Chinese culture in the design of classroom questions, guiding students to establish cultural confidence and actively become disseminators of Chinese culture.

5.3 The Improvement of Questioning about High-order Thinking Skills

In cultivating students' cognitive abilities, educators' questioning strategies in reading comprehension should prioritize higher-order thinking skills, rather than relying solely on lower-order questions. Language proficiency and cognitive development are mutually reinforcing; the enhancement of students' linguistic abilities is contingent upon the advancement of their cognitive skills, which, in turn, are predicated on their language proficiency (Huang, 2016). Research indicates that current middle school English teachers often overlook this critical aspect during classroom questioning. Specifically, many teachers employ a limited range of questions when interpreting reading texts, predominantly utilizing simple true/false questions and basic “Wh-” questions. Such lower-level cognitive questions fail to stimulate in-depth student analysis, thereby impeding the development of their cognitive skills and hindering the cultivation and implementation of core English language competencies.

Consequently, during reading class, once students have demonstrated comprehension of lower-order questions, educators should minimize their use. Instead, they should incorporate more analytical and

inferential higher-order questions, encouraging students to independently synthesize and integrate details from the reading material. Subsequently, students should be prompted to articulate their perspectives. Teachers should guide students to formulate problem-solving strategies based on their own experiences, followed by classroom discussions where students collaboratively develop feasible solutions. After these discussions, the teacher should offer their insights. This approach is essential for fostering students' critical thinking abilities and, by extension, enhancing their cognitive skills.

5.4 The Use of Questioning and the Expansion of Learning Channels

Learning ability includes the conscious and skillful application of English learning strategies, the broadening of English learning avenues, and the persistent effort to enhance learning efficiency (English) (2022). This ability underscores the active and strategic employment of learning techniques, fostering lifelong and autonomous learning skills. A robust learning ability is crucial for cultivating comprehensive competencies in secondary school students.

Educators should diversify learning channels, employing artful questioning to encourage active participation in various reading classroom activities, promoting collaborative engagement, and encouraging thoughtful exploration. Furthermore, teachers should guide students in adapting their learning approaches based on their progress, emphasizing learning strategies and the expansion of learning channels. This approach aims to fully engage students' initiative, stimulating their potential for discovery and enhancing their overall learning abilities.

5.5 Establishment of Problem Scenarios Contextualized within Authentic Life Situation

As the linguist, Krashen, assumed, effective foreign language instruction necessitates the creation of environments that afford students opportunities to utilize acquired linguistic resources. In the pedagogical process, the establishment of authentic contextual learning tasks serves to stimulate students' research interests and engagement.

Within the framework of core competency cultivation, linguistic proficiency constitutes the foundational prerequisite for students' development of English core competencies and the advancement of knowledge acquisition. The cultivation of students' linguistic abilities establishes a robust foundation for subsequent learning, thereby fostering the growth of students' cultural, cognitive, and learning-related core competencies. Consequently, in the design of classroom questioning, educators should prioritize the development of students' linguistic capabilities as the primary objective. The enhancement of students' linguistic proficiency hinges upon the accumulation of everyday linguistic elements and the experiential consolidation of language application. Educators, in the questioning phase, must comprehensively consider two educational objectives: firstly, the creation of instructional contexts, coupled with the formulation of cognitive classroom questions based on contextual information, primarily centered on the exploration of "what is it."

Particularly in English reading instruction, where certain textual materials may lack relevance to students' daily lives, educators must further construct a bridge connecting the text with students' practical experiences. This involves creating lifelike scenarios for students, guiding them to perceive

the text and actively engage in text-based learning, thereby more effectively reinforcing students' comprehension of linguistic knowledge and the text itself, as well as facilitating deeper understanding.

6. Conclusion

The essence of classroom teaching lies in its reliance on “questions” as a driving force. Classroom questioning, functioning as both a pedagogical technique and a performative art, is examined in this study. A well-crafted question not only piques students' interest and stimulates their thinking but also guides them through an in-depth exploration, thereby providing teachers with the satisfaction of “releasing creativity.” Grounded in the core competencies of English language education, this paper provides a detailed exploration of current issues in classroom instruction and proposes strategic solutions. In the context of ongoing curriculum reform, it is imperative for educators to proactively enhance their questioning techniques, design effective classroom inquiries, and cultivate students' linguistic abilities, fostering a profound understanding of language acquisition.

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