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Differentiated Design of Tiered Reading Strategies for English in Various Stages of Primary School

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Abstract: English reading in primary schools is a core component of developing students' language proficiency. There are significant differences in cognitive levels and language foundations among students in lower, middle, and upper grades, making uniform teaching methods inadequate to meet the needs of all students. This paper defines key concepts related to tiered reading, analyzes current challenges in English reading instruction, and designs targeted differentiated reading strategies based on the characteristics and reading needs of students at each stage. Grounded in practical classroom teaching, the study aims to accommodate the learning paces of students at different proficiency levels, stimulate their interest in reading, narrow achievement gaps, enhance the effectiveness of reading instruction, and cultivate students' English reading habits and core competencies.

Keywords: Primary School English; Tiered Reading; Grade-Level Differences; Differentiated Strategies

Introduction

The new curriculum standards emphasize the importance of respecting students' individual differences in English teaching and implementing the concept of tailored instruction. Currently, elementary school English reading instruction commonly adopts a uniform model with standardized content and requirements, neglecting the transition between grade levels and student diversity. This has led to a polarization in students' reading proficiency. Lower-grade students lack sufficient interest, middle-grade students lack effective methods, and upper-grade students face mismatched difficulty levels, significantly diminishing teaching effectiveness. In response, this paper integrates the learning characteristics of each grade level to

develop differentiated reading designs through tiered approaches. By using appropriate content and methods to guide students, every learner can make progress in reading and solidify their foundation in English reading.

1 Related Concepts of Differentiated Reading in Primary School English

Differentiated reading instruction is a teaching model that involves grouping students into different levels based on their reading proficiency, cognitive development characteristics, and varying reading interests. It sets differentiated teaching objectives for each level, selects appropriate reading materials, employs targeted teaching strategies, and implements diverse evaluation methods. The essence of differentiated reading lies in the practical application



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of the principle of teaching students according to their aptitude in reading instruction. Its core is to respect individual differences among students and provide appropriate reading learning support for students at different levels. Differentiated reading in elementary school English differs from that in middle school or adult education, exhibiting distinct stage-specific characteristics. The development of English reading ability in elementary school students follows a gradual progression: from initial curiosity and perception of English text, to understanding simple sentences with the aid of pictures, to independent reading of short passages, and finally to using multiple strategies to comprehend different types of texts. Lower-grade students are in the transition from the pre-operational stage to the concrete operational stage, requiring the support of visual imagery and physical actions for reading learning. Middle-grade students enter the concrete operational stage and are capable of preliminary logical reasoning, allowing for the gradual introduction of simple strategy guidance in reading instruction. Upper-grade students develop abstract logical thinking and possess a certain degree of self-monitoring ability, enabling them to learn and apply various reading strategies and reflect on their own reading process ^[1].

2 Main Problems in Primary School English Reading Instruction

2.1 Ambiguous Educational Stage Objectives

The current objectives for English reading instruction in primary schools lack clear differentiation across different grade levels. Lower-grade reading instruction often places premature emphasis on word recognition and sentence comprehension, neglecting the foundational role of interest cultivation and language sense development. Middle-grade reading instruction fails to effectively serve as a bridge between lower and upper grades, neither consolidating the reading interest developed in earlier years nor laying a solid foundation for strategy learning in higher grades. The objectives for upper-grade reading instruction show little distinction from those of middle grades, with insufficient attention paid to cultivating critical thinking and independent reading skills. This ambiguity in grade-level goals results in a lack of a clear developmental trajectory for reading instruction across

grades, making it difficult for teachers to identify the key teaching priorities at different stages.

2.2 Single Reading Material

Textbooks currently serve as the primary, if not the only, resource for English reading instruction in elementary schools. However, the reading materials in textbooks are limited in quantity and genre variety, making it difficult to meet the diverse reading needs of students at different proficiency levels. In lower grades, reading content mainly consists of short dialogues and nursery rhymes, lacking systematic support from graded readers. While the length of reading passages increases in middle and upper grades, the topics are often confined to daily life scenarios, with limited coverage of subjects such as science, history, and culture. The issue of monotonous reading materials becomes particularly pronounced in differentiated instruction. Teachers lack sufficiently diverse graded reading resources, making it challenging to provide appropriate content tailored to students' varying abilities. As a result, the implementation of differentiated instruction remains largely theoretical rather than practical.

2.3 Lack of Reading Strategy Guidance

Reading strategies are essential tools for enhancing reading efficiency, but strategy instruction is generally lacking in elementary school English classrooms. Teachers often equate reading instruction with text comprehension, guiding students to read texts aloud, translate sentences, and answer a few comprehension questions, while rarely systematically teaching strategies such as predicting, skimming, scanning, inferring word meanings, summarizing, and questioning. Lower-grade students, who should be learning basic strategies like using pictures to predict content or using actions to aid understanding, often miss out on such guidance ^[2]. Middle and upper-grade students need to learn and apply strategies to deepen comprehension, yet corresponding strategy training is scarce in the classroom. The absence of strategic guidance results in slow development of students' reading abilities and leaves them without effective methods to tackle unfamiliar texts.

2.4 Difficulties in Hierarchical Implementation

The concept of tiered teaching has long been proposed, but its genuine implementation in elementary school

English reading classes remains uncommon. Large class sizes and limited instructional hours are objective constraints, making it difficult for teachers to address the reading needs of students at multiple levels within the same classroom. Tiered reading requires teachers to design different learning objectives, select varied reading materials, and organize diverse instructional activities tailored to each student group, which places high demands on teachers' professional skills and lesson preparation time. The lack of a well-developed tiered evaluation system is another significant obstacle, as traditional assessments measure all students against uniform standards, leaving teachers uncertain about the effectiveness of tiered instruction. Additionally, some teachers hold misconceptions about tiered teaching, equating it with labeling students and worrying about potential negative impacts on slower learners.

3 Analysis of Student Characteristics and Reading Needs Across Different Educational Stages

3.1 Characteristics and Reading Needs of Lower-Grade Students

Lower-grade students are in the foundational stage of English learning, typically aged six to eight. At this stage, their thinking is primarily concrete and image-based, showing interest in intuitive, vivid, and brightly colored objects, while abstract logical reasoning skills have not yet developed. Their attention span is short, usually lasting around ten to fifteen minutes, and they are easily distracted by external stimuli. They exhibit strong curiosity, enjoy imitation, and are eager to participate in games and performance activities. Having just been introduced to English, lower-grade students have a limited vocabulary, generally ranging from 200 to 400 words. Their pronunciation and intonation are in the imitation phase, and their word recognition skills are weak, relying mainly on the combined use of auditory and visual cues to comprehend language. They have not yet developed phonetic decoding abilities, making it difficult for them to independently recognize unfamiliar words. Reading needs at this stage focus on cultivating interest and establishing habits. Students should be exposed to a wide range of illustrated books with repetitive sentence patterns and strong rhythmic qualities, allowing them to experience the joy of English reading in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere.

Reading content should be closely related to their daily life experiences to facilitate comprehension. Students require teacher-guided finger-pointing and echo reading to gradually establish the connection between written text and sound, while gaining an initial awareness of English writing conventions.

3.2 Characteristics and Reading Needs of Middle School Students

Middle school students, aged nine to ten, are in a transitional period from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage. Their logical thinking abilities begin to develop, enabling them to perform simple inductive and deductive reasoning. Their attention span extends to twenty to twenty-five minutes, and their learning self-discipline improves. The need for peer interaction increases, making cooperative learning an effective instructional approach. After approximately two years of study, students have mastered 600 to 800 commonly used words and can recognize high-frequency words. They possess basic phonetic decoding skills and can attempt to read unfamiliar words using phonetic rules. They can understand simple and compound sentences but still struggle with complex sentences. Their reading needs include expanding vocabulary, comprehending simple texts, and learning basic reading strategies. Students require access to illustrated bridge books, where text length increases compared to picture books and sentence structures become more varied ^[3]. Reading materials should feature narrative texts closely related to students' lives, with simple plots and clear storylines. Students need to learn fundamental reading strategies, such as using pictures and context to infer word meanings and extract main ideas from texts, gradually shifting from relying on teacher guidance to attempting independent reading.

3.3 Characteristics and Reading Needs of Upper-Grade Students

Students in the upper grades, aged eleven to twelve, experience further development in abstract logical thinking, enabling them to understand cause-and-effect relationships and engage in reasoning and judgment. Metacognitive abilities begin to form, allowing them to plan, monitor, and reflect on their own learning processes. Their learning autonomy increases, and they possess a certain level of self-management

skills. In terms of language foundation, students have accumulated a vocabulary of 800 to 1,200 words and can recognize and read relatively complex words. They have mastered basic sentence structures and can understand complex sentences containing clauses. Reading speed has improved, enabling them to read medium-length texts. Their reading needs are reflected in enhancing reading comprehension depth, developing reading strategies, and fostering independent reading abilities. Students need to read chapter books and texts of various genres, including stories, science articles, biographies, and expository texts. The reading content should possess a certain degree of intellectual depth and knowledge content, capable of stimulating students' thinking and inquiry. Students need to learn strategies such as predicting, skimming, scanning, summarizing, questioning, and critical reading, enabling them to apply these strategies to different types of reading tasks and gradually achieve independent reading.

4 Differentiated Design of Tiered Reading Strategies for English in Various Stages of Elementary School

4.1 Design of Tiered Reading Strategies for Lower Grade Levels

Lower-grade leveled reading focuses on stimulating interest and building confidence as core objectives. In terms of goal stratification, students at the basic level should be able to follow along with reading while pointing, understand pictures and simple words; students at the developing level should recognize high-frequency words and comprehend simple sentences; students at the advanced level should attempt to read simple sentences aloud and retell the main idea of stories. Leveling should not be overly complex and should be flexibly organized in small groups. Content differentiation relies on graded picture book resources: basic-level students use books with fewer words, repetitive sentence structures, and rich pictorial information, such as one-sentence-per-page readers. Developing-level students use books with slightly more sentences and simple plots, spanning eight to twelve pages. Advanced-level students use storybooks with simple plots, which may include a small number of new words and appropriately increased length. Strategy differentiation emphasizes visual and playful approaches: the basic level focuses

on using picture prediction, following along while pointing, and actions to aid comprehension, with teachers guiding students to observe pictures and guess content while pointing to words and reading aloud word by word. The developing level introduces strategies such as sentence pattern imitation, matching text with images, and circling keywords to help students establish connections between words and meaning. The advanced level attempts activities like role-playing, simple retelling, and sequencing events, applying learned language through performance and games. Evaluation is primarily encouraging: basic-level assessment observes students' enthusiasm in participating in classroom activities and the accuracy of their pointing while reading. Developing-level evaluation is conducted through word recognition checks and picture-text matching exercises. Advanced-level evaluation focuses on reading fluency and the completeness of retelling. Evaluation results are not used for comparing students but serve as a basis for adjusting instructional arrangements.

4.2 Design of Tiered Reading Strategies for Middle School Segments

Middle school tiered reading focuses on mastering methods and enhancing comprehension as its core objectives. In terms of goal stratification, the basic level aims to understand the general meaning of the text and extract key information; the developing level aims to analyze the text structure and comprehend simple logical relationships; the expanding level aims to make simple inferences and express personal opinions. For the basic level, short passages with standard sentence structures, concise length, and everyday topics are selected, typically around 100 words. The developing level uses simple narrative texts or intermediate graded readers, approximately 150 words long. The expanding level employs short passages of various genres, such as diaries, letters, and short stories, around 200 words, which may include a limited number of unfamiliar words. At the basic level, students learn scanning strategies to quickly locate key information; they use images to aid comprehension by matching text with pictures. At the developing level, students learn skimming to grasp the main idea and identify the text's purpose through opening and closing sentences; they practice predicting subsequent content and inferring

story developments based on given information. At the expanding level, students learn to guess word meanings from context, use mind maps to outline text structures, and begin learning questioning strategies. Basic level assessments involve information extraction tasks, such as multiple-choice questions and true/false exercises. Developing level assessments include information summarization tasks, like completing tables or sequencing activities. Expanding level assessments focus on information application tasks, such as answering open-ended questions and simple written expressions. Within the same class, students at different levels complete assessment tasks of varying difficulty to ensure each student achieves a sense of accomplishment^[4].

4.3 High-Grade Stratified Reading Strategy Design

Higher-grade leveled reading focuses on strategy application and independent reading as core objectives. In terms of goal stratification, the basic level aims for students to comprehend the main content of a text and grasp key details; the developing level aims for students to analyze text structure and understand the author's intent; the advanced level aims for students to engage in critical reading and synthesize their expressions. Content stratification involves the use of chapter books and texts of various genres: the basic level employs narrative texts or expository essays of moderate length, around 300 words, with new vocabulary kept within a reasonable range. The developing level uses excerpts from chapters or texts of different genres, including stories, popular science, and biographies, around 400 words in length. The advanced level employs simplified original readings or cross-disciplinary thematic reading materials, exceeding 500 words, with content of certain depth. Strategy stratification emphasizes comprehensive application and metacognitive development: the basic level applies segmented reading strategies, breaking long texts into parts for sequential understanding, and uses guided questions to grasp key information. The developing level learns to summarize paragraph main ideas, create text structure diagrams, and master questioning and answering strategies, enabling them to pose and respond to questions about the text. The advanced level attempts critical reading, evaluating the author's viewpoints, and participates in reading circle activities

where students take on different roles to discuss their reading insights. Evaluation stratification focuses on assessing comprehensive abilities: the basic level completes tasks such as paraphrasing information, like filling in blanks based on the text or creating simple information graphs. The developing level completes tasks related to structural organization, such as filling out story maps or summarizing sections of the text. The advanced level completes evaluative and reflective tasks, such as writing reading reflections or engaging in opinion debates. Beyond written assessments, evaluation formats may include oral reports, group presentations, and reading logs to comprehensively reflect students' reading proficiency development.

Conclusion

Differentiated design for tiered English reading in primary schools is a crucial measure to implement individualized instruction, aligning with the growth patterns of students at various educational stages and effectively addressing challenges in reading instruction. The lower grades focus on stimulating interest, the middle grades emphasize method cultivation, and the upper grades prioritize ability enhancement, progressing step by step with distinct emphases. Teaching should be grounded in student differences, with flexible strategy adjustments to avoid superficial tiering and ensure inclusivity for all students. Teachers must continuously refine instructional methods, diversify reading materials, and use multifaceted evaluations to motivate students, enabling every learner to improve reading skills and develop a love for English reading.

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