

# Literature Review of Junior High School English Textbooks Based on English Core Competencies



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**Abstract:** This study conducts a systematic literature review of junior high school English textbooks based on the framework of English core competencies, with a specific focus on the new edition published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. By integrating theories of holistic education and core competencies, the research analyzes textbook structure and content design through four key dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability. The findings reveal significant progress in thematic unit organization, progressive language skill development, and cultural content enrichment in current textbook development. However, persistent challenges include insufficient authentic language materials, disproportionate representation of Western culture, inadequate high-order thinking activities, and insufficient stimulation of learning motivation. To address these issues, this study proposes the following recommendations: teachers should shift from knowledge transmission to competency cultivation by incorporating authentic contextual tasks, cross-cultural comparative activities, critical thinking exercises, and adding student-centered engaging content to promote comprehensive competency development.

**Keywords:** core competencies, textbook analysis, language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, learning ability

## 1. Introduction

As the core carrier of teaching activities, textbooks directly affect teaching effectiveness and student development, and need to be continuously innovated in line with the needs of the times. Meanwhile, core competencies, as the key abilities and qualities that students should possess, have received extensive attention in the field of education. For this reason, this section introduces textbooks and their reform, as well as the research assumptions.

### 1.1 Textbook and their Reforms

Textbooks are important carriers of teaching activities. Generally, they are selected and used by schools. Domestic textbooks are mainly organized, compiled, distributed and used by national government departments. Grant (1987) proposed that textbooks are books used as educational tools,

serving as media for spreading ideas and knowledge, as well as for recording events and thoughts. Cheng and Sun (2011) believe that textbooks refer to all teaching materials used by teachers and students in a broad sense, including textbooks, exercise volumes, activity manuals, supplementary workbooks, tutoring materials, self-study manuals and audio tapes. Textbooks are not simply books used for teaching, but have broad and narrow meanings. In a broad sense, the concept of textbooks is not limited to bound books or officially published books, but any materials that increase learners' knowledge or develop their skills can be identified as textbooks. In a narrow sense, it refers to a bound or formally published book. English textbooks are the main materials for English education and teaching, and they serve as an important foundation and carrier for learners to receive English input and language output

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in practice (Zhang, 2021). The English textbooks used in this study are mainly the 2024 edition published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Within the junior high school English teaching system, textbooks are critically important instructional resources. They provide a fundamental framework and content basis for teachers' activities, while also serving as the primary material and pathway guidance for students' English learning. Textbooks are not only the main source and a crucial means for students' language input, cultural acquisition, and the formation of their worldview, philosophy of life, and value system (He, 2020). They not only convey English language knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures, but also act as vehicles for cultural transmission. Through a wealth of textual content, they present diverse cultures, helping to broaden students' international perspectives. Simultaneously, meticulously designed exercises and activities effectively train students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, cultivating their comprehensive language application abilities and laying the groundwork for the development of students' core English literacy. However, in the field of English textbook research, a disproportionate amount of focus is allocated to comprehensive English textbooks at the tertiary level, while studies on textbooks used in basic education remain under-addressed (Chang and Yang, 2023).

To meet the demands of English teaching and talent development in the new era, English textbooks have undergone reform. Overall, the new textbooks fully leverage the guiding role of core competencies, emphasize the central role of students, cater to their individualized and diverse learning and development needs, utilize themes to lead the selection and organization of course content, and construct a tiered curriculum structure (Xu, 2025). As one of the most widely used textbook series nationwide, the FLTRP (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press) junior high English textbooks directly impact the English learning outcomes of millions of students

through their underlying principles and teaching practices. The evolution of the FLTRP junior high English textbooks has gone through three revisions: from the 2012 edition, to the 2024 edition, and then to the 2025 edition. Their content and structure have been continuously optimized and adjusted, representing a shift from knowledge transmission toward a greater focus on cultivating competencies. Specifically, the 2012 edition of the FLTRP Grade 7, Volume 1 textbook contained a "Starter" section, 10 learning modules, and 2 review modules. Its content organization generally followed the cognitive development patterns of junior high students, beginning with everyday topics and progressively expanding language knowledge and skills. Following the publication of the 2022 Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards, the 2024 edition was introduced. In terms of content, the 2024 edition increased the diversity of text types and genres, featuring more authentic and vibrant language with moderate difficulty. Structurally, it optimized the module setup to some extent, making the logic of certain content arrangements more coherent to better align with curriculum standards. It also introduced a new "Reading for Writing" section, and its unit structure was highly unified with the senior high FLTRP edition, building a bridge for a continuous English teaching system. The 2025 edition made further refinements based on the strengths of the 2024 version. The overall difficulty was slightly reduced. Regarding unit content, for instance, the grammar focus in some units shifted from the "there be" structure to the simple present tense; the word lists underwent subtle adjustments, with the total vocabulary volume remaining largely the same but with some words being replaced; the text content and grammar remained mostly consistent, with only minor sentence-level alterations. These revisions were all implemented to better align with the goals of core competency development and to adapt to the new era's requirements for cultivating English language talent.

## 1.2 Research assumptions

This study intends to adopt the methods of

literature review and text analysis, integrate relevant theoretical and practical research results, and focus on the 2024 FLTRP junior high school English textbooks for Grade 7 (Volumes 1 and 2). It will explore the forms of embodiment of the four elements of English core competencies in terms of content arrangement, activity design, and values in the textbooks, analyze the proportion and integration of the four elements in the textbooks, further examine the possible deficiencies in the process of the textbooks fulfilling the goal of cultivating core competencies, and put forward targeted optimization suggestions. The purpose is to provide references for the improvement of textbooks and the effective implementation of core competencies in teaching practice.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

### 2.1 Holistic Education

Holistic Education, firstly proposed by American educator Ron Miller in the late 1970s, which emphasizes the cultivation of “whole persons”: individuals equipped with comprehensive knowledge, positive attitudes, sound character, and correct values. Miller (1997) noted that holistic education focuses on the regulation of the relationships between emotions and thoughts, spirit and body, knowledge across different fields, humans and society, humans and the world, as well as humans and themselves. He also pointed out that holistic education aims not only to impart knowledge and enhance learning ability but also to cultivate a complete and balanced personality. In this sense, holistic education enables a full play of every learner, emphasizing the process of experiential learning, rediscovering the role of teachers, and honoring learners’ free choices. In summary, holistic education adheres to the principle of achieving full human development.

Since the concept of holistic education was introduced, it has gradually exerted a broad influence on the global education field and promoted the development of related practices. Hare (2010) argues that holistic education prepares students for lifelong learning, shifting the focus of education toward the

life skills, attitudes, and self-awareness required in an increasingly complex world. Fonseca et al. (2022), through innovations in physical education curricula (such as traditional games, swimming therapy, etc.), demonstrated the role of physical activity in promoting ethical development and socio-emotional competencies, highlighting the value of holistic education in non-academic subjects. UNESCO’s “Education 2030” initiative emphasizes that the new vision for education should be comprehensive, ambitious, aspirational, and universal, inspired by an educational philosophy that transforms the lives of individuals, communities, and societies, leaving no one behind. This has injected new vitality into the contemporary development of holistic education. Since the late 20th century, the philosophy of holistic education has gradually permeated China’s educational landscape, and its people-oriented principles have increasingly appeared in both the theory and practice of Chinese education. Zhao (2021) suggests that students educated under the holistic approach possess ideals and convictions, a sense of social responsibility, autonomy, resilience, strong adaptability to their environment, psychological endurance, and well-rounded personalities. The Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024 - 2035) proposes the implementation of a new-era moral education initiative, further advancing quality-oriented education, improving the system for cultivating students in all aspects - moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education - strengthening scientific education, and enhancing the cultivation of core competencies. These efforts provide new means and pathways for the implementation of holistic education.

### 2.2 Core Competencies

Core competencies have been a universally concerned issue in educational research across countries since the 21st century. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) defines core competencies as the ability of humans to mobilize social resources (e.g., relevant attitudes and skills) to solve problems in specific contexts in response to complex needs. The Chinese

Core Competencies Research Group (2016) defines core competencies in its research as the core competencies for student development, that is, the essential character and key abilities that students should possess to adapt to lifelong development and social needs. The English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education (2022) states that English Core Competencies include language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability. The proposal of English core competencies marks a shift in English education from mere imparting of language as a tool to the cultivation of students' comprehensive humanistic literacy and key abilities. Its core lies in enabling students to not only proficiently use the language for communication through English learning, but also understand the connotations of different cultures, develop logical thinking skills, and form the awareness and methods of autonomous learning. Language ability is the basic element of core competencies; cultural awareness reflects the value orientation of core competencies; thinking quality embodies the mental characteristics of core competencies; and learning ability is the key element for the development of core competencies. These four aspects of core competencies permeate,

integrate, interact with, and develop in coordination with each other.

Drawing on the English curriculum standards for junior and senior high schools, the analytical dimensions of English textbooks' core competencies in this study are presented in Table 1. Language ability includes linguistic knowledge and language skills. Linguistic knowledge covers phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and pragmatics. Language skills consist of receptive skills and productive skills, among which listening, reading, and viewing are receptive skills, while speaking and writing are productive skills. Cultural awareness includes cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, and intercultural awareness. Thinking quality encompasses logical, critical, and innovative thinking. Learning ability includes learning motivation, learning strategies, and learning reflection. Among them, learning strategies include metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies, and affective strategies. The concepts and evaluation dimensions of English subject core competencies in this study mainly draw on the definitions in the two versions of the curriculum standards.

**Table 1 Dimensions of Core Competencies in English Subject**

| Item               | Sub-item                 |                          |           |  |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|--|
| Language ability   | Language knowledge       | Pronunciation            |           |  |
|                    |                          | Vocabulary               |           |  |
|                    |                          | Grammar                  |           |  |
|                    |                          | Discourse                |           |  |
|                    |                          | Pragmatics               |           |  |
|                    | Language skills          | Receptive skills         | Listening |  |
|                    |                          |                          | Reading   |  |
|                    |                          |                          | Viewing   |  |
|                    |                          | Productive skills        | Speaking  |  |
| Writing            |                          |                          |           |  |
| Cultural awareness | Cultural knowledge       |                          |           |  |
|                    | Cultural understanding   |                          |           |  |
|                    | Cross-cultural awareness |                          |           |  |
| Thinking capacity  | Logical thinking         |                          |           |  |
|                    | Critical thinking        |                          |           |  |
|                    | Creative thinking        |                          |           |  |
| Learning ability   | Learning motivation      |                          |           |  |
|                    | Learning strategies      | Metacognitive strategies |           |  |
|                    |                          | Cognitive strategies     |           |  |
|                    |                          | Communicative strategies |           |  |
|                    |                          | Affective strategies     |           |  |
|                    | Learning reflection      |                          |           |  |

English Core Competencies, covering aspects from knowledge and abilities to attitudes and strategies, embody the principles of holistic education. English learning requires not only cultivating students' language proficiency but also broadening their cultural horizons, nurturing their morality, and strengthening their rationality. Developing English Core Competencies helps students form balanced personalities and achieve all-around development. Therefore, holistic education and English Core Competencies are interrelated to some extent. This paper integrates relevant theories of English Core Competencies with holistic education to guide the analysis of core competency elements in teaching materials.

### 3. Review of Domestic and Foreign Research

This part mainly sorts out and summarizes the relevant research findings on core competencies and

textbook analysis, and points out the deficiencies of existing research.

#### 3.1 Research on Core Competencies

Research on core competency policies and frameworks helps us clarify the basis for textbook compilation and reform. In terms of core competency frameworks, international organizations (such as OECD and the European Union) and major countries have established distinctive competency systems. China has also constructed a localized framework centered on "the comprehensively developed person", laying the foundation for the establishment of core competencies in the English subject. In terms of core competency policies, countries like Finland and Singapore have integrated competency requirements into curriculum standards through systematic approaches. Since 2014, China has promoted the implementation of core competencies in basic education through a series of policy documents.

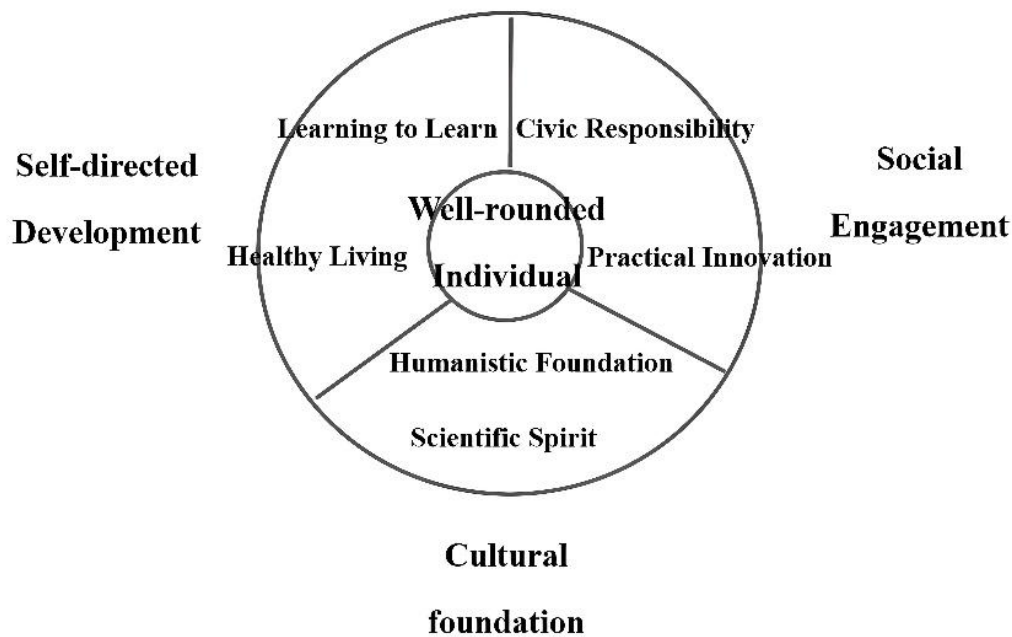
These studies provide theoretical guidance and policy basis for the development of textbooks based on core competencies.

### 3.1.1 Core Competency Framework

Scholars at home and abroad have extensively explored the connotation and framework of core competencies. In 1997, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched the transnational research project “Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)”, which ultimately formed the OECD core competency framework. Starting from analyzing social visions and individual life needs, it categorized core competencies into three types: “interactive use of tools, interaction in socially heterogeneous groups, and autonomous action”, aiming to achieve personal successful life and the development of a sound society. In 2002, the United States proposed the “Framework for 21st Century Learning”, which was further revised in 2007 to clarify and improve the content of “core competencies” and their framework. The P21 core competency framework in the U.S. includes three major categories: “Learning and Innovation Skills”, “Information, Media and Technology Skills”, and “Life and Career Skills”, each with specific requirements. This framework reflects the integration of the process and results of competency education and emphasizes the role of support systems in the 21st-century learning framework. In December 2006, the European Union Commission proposed eight key competencies in The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning: European Reference Framework: communication in mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematics and basic technology, digital literacy, learning to learn, social and civic literacy, entrepreneurship/spirit, and cultural awareness and expression. The document defines core competencies

as a series of transferable, multifunctional knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which are essential for individuals to achieve personal success, self-development, social integration, and job competence. These reflect the requirements for the development of individual qualities in the 21st century.

In China, Xin et al. (2016), building upon international consensus on core competencies and previous research, have established the theoretical framework for students’ core competencies in China. They posit that cultivating students’ core competencies should be grounded in the concept of “holistic human development”, forming an integrated system that interconnects three fundamental aspects: subjectivity, sociality, and cultural identity. This theoretical foundation culminated in the landmark publication of the “Chinese Students’ Core Competencies Framework”, which represents a seminal achievement in domestic core competencies research. The framework (see Figure 1) centers on developing “well-rounded individuals” and is structured around three key domains: cultural foundation, self-directed development, and social engagement. These domains encompass six core competencies: humanistic foundation, scientific spirit, learning to learn, healthy living, civic responsibility, and practical innovation. This comprehensive system embodies both distinctive Chinese characteristics and global perspectives. Guided by this overarching framework, discipline-specific core competencies research has progressively deepened. Each academic subject has refined its own competency dimensions based on this foundational structure, thereby providing clear direction for curriculum reform and textbook development.



**Figure 1 Framework of Core Competencies for Chinese Student Development**

### 3.1.2 Policy of Core Competencies

The policy implementation of core competencies has emerged as a global trend in education reform, with countries worldwide promoting their integration into curriculum systems through policy documents such as curriculum standards and syllabi. From an international perspective, nations including Finland, Singapore, and Canada were pioneers in incorporating core competencies into national education policies, developing systematic implementation approaches. For example, Finland's 2014 National Core Curriculum for Basic Education emphasized "Transversal Competencies" encompassing seven key areas: cultural literacy, ICT competence, social participation, among others, requiring all subjects to focus on developing these competencies. Similarly, Singapore's "21st Century Competencies" framework prioritizes critical thinking, innovation capability, and global awareness, implemented through coordinated textbook design, teacher training, and assessment systems. These international experiences demonstrate that effective core competency implementation necessitates top-level

governmental design coupled with integrated reforms across curriculum, teaching materials, instructional practices, and assessment frameworks.

China's research on core competencies started relatively late but has developed rapidly. In 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening Curriculum Reform to Implement the Fundamental Task of Moral Education, which formally introduced the concept of "core competencies" for the first time, focusing on the fundamental questions of "what kind of people to cultivate" and "how to cultivate them." This document established the policy foundation for subsequent research and practice. The opinion made core competencies a focal point in education circles. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education released the Chinese Students' Core Competencies Framework, which centers on cultivating well-rounded individuals. The framework consists of three dimensions - cultural foundation, self-directed development, and social engagement - further refined into six core competencies and eighteen key elements. To promote the implementation of core competencies across all stages of basic education, the Ministry of

Education simultaneously advanced the revision of compulsory education curriculum standards. For junior secondary education, each subject's standards clearly defined the specific connotations of its core competencies. Taking junior high school English as an example, the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) identifies two key competencies - language ability and learning capacity - along with two essential qualities - cultural awareness and thinking disposition.

### 3.2 Research on Textbook Analysis

Textbooks serve as crucial vehicles for implementing core competencies, with their structural design and content selection directly impacting the cultivation of English subject core competencies. The organization of English textbook structures follows established scientific principles and evolves in response to educational policies and curriculum standards. In China, mainstream junior high school English textbooks predominantly adopt a thematic unit approach, systematically progressing from language input to output activities in accordance with principles of increasing difficulty. Simultaneously, textbook content must be carefully selected to reflect contemporary characteristics and adapt to evolving societal needs.

#### 3.2.1 Textbook Structure Research

The structure of a textbook refers to its overall organizational form, division of sections, logical framework, and arrangement system. It serves as the "skeleton" of the textbook, addressing the question of "how the textbook is organized". In international research, high school English textbooks in Korea extract and present the key concept of each unit, under which the modules are organized according to two logical sequences: "from concept to practice" and "from micro to macro" (Zhou and Guo, 2023). Harmer (2007) suggests that thematic variations in textbooks should be organized chapter by chapter in a systematic sequence.

Changes in the structure of domestic English textbooks are influenced by shifts in educational policies and curriculum standards. Liu (2008) pointed out that although textbooks in the early 21st

century exhibited diversity, most aligned with the spirit of the curriculum standards and shared the following structural features: first, the majority were designed based on a "function-structure-topic-task" integrated approach; second, an evaluation mechanism was incorporated. Additionally, the quality of textbook layout and design significantly improved. The 2022 Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards introduced new requirements for textbook compilation. The new standards place greater emphasis on fostering virtue through education and cultivating students' core competencies. In response, new textbooks have innovated their structural systems by adopting a "theme-context-activity" unit-based arrangement (Luo, 2025). Mainstream domestic textbooks, such as those by the People's Education Press and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, generally employ a "theme-led" model in unit design, where each unit revolves around a core theme. This theme constructs the overarching framework of the unit. Deng and Wan (2025) noted that the new FLTRP textbooks break away from the previous emphasis on language functions by adopting a thematic progression as the unit architecture. This approach highlights the application of language in real communication and focuses on the holistic development of students as individuals. Specifically, the new FLTRP textbooks use a unit organizational framework consisting of "Starting out", "Understanding ideas", "Developing ideas", and "Presenting ideas". This structure ensures a gradual increase in knowledge difficulty and integrates language input and output into each section, aligning with students' cognitive development patterns. Additionally, the inclusion of sections such as "Think and share" and "Learning to learn" encourages students to reflect and master learning strategies, thereby enhancing their thinking quality and learning abilities. Furthermore, each unit logically arranges listening, reading, speaking, and writing sections to promote the development of students' core competencies.

### 3.2.2 Textbook Content Research

Textbook content refers to the specific materials and information carried within a textbook, serving as its “flesh and blood”. Cunningsworth (1995) proposed four criteria for evaluating textbooks: first, the textbook should meet the needs of learners; second, it should reflect the learners’ use of language (present or future); third, it should take into account students’ needs as learners and facilitate their learning process rather than imposing rigid methods dogmatically; and fourth, it should play a clear role as a support tool. Weninger (2018), in an analysis of English textbooks, regarded them as cultural products of the curriculum, arguing that these textbooks contribute to the meaningful communication of important cultural and contextual aspects, content, and design. Domestic research on textbook content primarily focuses on themes, cultural elements, and the ways in which core competencies are integrated.

The basic education stage is a critical period for the formation of students’ essential character, key competencies, and correct values. The selection of content, design format, and usage methods of textbooks play a vital role in shaping what kind of individuals students become, warranting increased attention from researchers (Yu, 2023). The 2022 New Curriculum Standards categorize the thematic contexts of English textbooks into three broad areas: man and self, man and society, and man and nature, with each category further divided into sub-themes. In terms of topic selection, earlier domestic textbooks predominantly focused on themes such as campus activities, social interactions, and family life - scenarios closely related to students’ daily experiences. While these themes were relatable, they were limited in their contemporaneity and depth. With the implementation of the 2022 New Curriculum Standards, the thematic scope of new English textbooks has significantly expanded to include timely topics such as friendship, animal and plant ecology, and technology, with increased thematic depth.

From the perspective of core English

competencies, domestic junior high English textbooks exhibit three main shortcomings in content: First, the authenticity and naturalness of language materials need improvement. Yin (2018), in an analysis of the Ren’ai edition English textbooks, pointed out issues such as limited variety and lack of authenticity in the language materials. Second, the presentation of cultural content shows a distinct “Western-centric” tendency, with Chinese culture occupying a relatively small proportion. The integration of Chinese culture into primary and secondary English teaching is not optimistic - different textbooks vary in their level of cultural integration, and the presentation is often repetitive and disorganized, lacking a progressive and difficulty-balanced approach (Wen, 2018). Third, the design of thinking skill activities is weak, with insufficient tasks focused on critical thinking and innovative thinking. In recent years, with the implementation of the new curriculum standards, textbook content has been undergoing positive changes. The new junior high English textbooks published in 2024 show the following improvement trends: a significant increase in content related to traditional Chinese culture; enhanced emphasis on thinking skills through new sections such as “Critical Reading” and “Creative Writing”; and improved language authenticity through the use of more materials from real communicative contexts. However, how to achieve the simultaneous development of language proficiency and core competencies through content design remains a topic requiring in-depth research.

### 4. Evaluation and Summary

Through systematic review of domestic and international research, significant progress has been made in developing core competency-based junior high English textbooks. In terms of textbook structure, existing studies have established solid theoretical and practical foundations, with modern textbooks predominantly adopting theme-based unit designs that sequence input activities before output tasks. This logical progression facilitates students’

transition from language input to output while gradually increasing knowledge difficulty to enhance absorption. Regarding content, new textbook editions demonstrate three positive developments: more diverse and contemporary theme selection expanding from traditional campus life to technological and ecological topics broadens students' modern perspectives; enriched cultural content with strengthened traditional Chinese elements boosts cultural confidence; and improved authenticity of language materials better reflects real communication scenarios. These enhancements significantly improve textbooks' effectiveness in cultivating core competencies.

Despite these advances, several challenges persist: insufficient authentic language materials for developing language skills; imbalanced cultural content with disproportionate Western representation and inadequate systematic integration of traditional Chinese culture; weak critical and innovative thinking components in activities; and limited motivational elements for autonomous learning. These limitations constrain textbooks' potential in fostering core competencies.

The findings yield important pedagogical implications. Teachers should shift from knowledge transmission to holistic competency development by: incorporating authentic materials and designing real-world tasks that integrate language use with thinking skills; deepening cultural instruction through systematic inclusion of traditional Chinese elements alongside Western culture, with comparative analysis activities to build cultural awareness; addressing thinking skill gaps through open-ended inquiry activities like debates and problem-solving tasks embedded in language learning; and enhancing motivation by localizing content using familiar contexts, multimedia resources, and differentiated tasks to boost engagement and self-directed learning.

In conclusion, developing competency-based English textbooks represents an ongoing process requiring continuous structural and content optimization alongside innovative teaching methods

to effectively cultivate core competencies and achieve fundamental educational goals. This demands collaborative efforts among researchers, policymakers, textbook developers, and practitioners to realize the full potential of competency-oriented English education.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in this work.

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