

A Study on Differentiated Instruction in Junior High School English Reading under the “Double Reduction” Policy

Li Zhixuan

[**Abstract**] Against the backdrop of the comprehensive implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy, how to reduce students’ academic burden while enhancing classroom teaching quality has become a central issue in basic education. As a primary channel for language input, junior high school English reading directly influences students’ overall language proficiency. However, significant individual differences exist among students in terms of their learning foundations, cognitive abilities, and interests; thus, the traditional one-size-fits-all teaching approach struggles to meet the diverse needs of learners at different levels. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in junior high school English reading classes. Conducted from February to May 2026 at a middle school in Chuzhou City, Anhui Province, the research involved 76 ninth-grade students and employed methods such as questionnaires, reading assessments, and interviews to collect data. The findings indicate that differentiated instruction significantly enhances students’ interest in English reading—particularly situational interest—improves their use of reading strategies, and boosts their reading performance. Notably, students across all ability levels benefited, including those in Level C, who started with weaker foundational skills, but showed the greatest progress. This study provides empirical evidence and practical guidelines for optimizing junior high school English reading instruction under the “Double Reduction” framework.

[**Key words**] “Double Reduction” policy; differentiated instruction; reading interest; reading strategies; reading achievement

[**About the author**] Li Zhixuan (2005—), male, from Chuzhou, Anhui, China, bachelor in English from the School of Foreign Languages, Anqing Normal University. Research interests: English language teaching methodology and applied linguistics.

[**DOI**] <https://doi.org/10.62662/kxwxy0308004>

[**Website**] www.oacj.net

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

With the implementation of the “Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and Off-campus Training Burdens of Students in the Compulsory Education Stage” (commonly known as the “Double Reduction” policy), junior high school English instruction is confronted with new challenges and opportunities. At the heart of the policy is the reinforcement of schools’ central role in education, the enhancement of teaching quality, and the assurance that students can learn sufficiently and effectively within the school setting. Within the junior high school English curriculum, reading not only serves as a core skill for developing students’ language proficiency but also functions as an important vehicle for fostering moral character and cultivating key competencies.

However, in actual classroom settings, junior high school students’ English proficiency is highly uneven. Within a single class, there are often substantial differences in vocabulary size, grammatical mastery, and reading comprehension skills. The traditional “one-size-fits-all” teaching approach—where teachers use the same lesson plan and assign tasks of uniform difficulty—frequently results in the awkward situation where high achieving students feel underchallenged while struggling students find the material too difficult to handle. This one-dimensional instructional method not only fails to spark all students’ interest in learning but may also exacerbate

academic polarization. Differentiated instruction, as a pedagogical approach that acknowledges and respects students' individual differences, advocates designing varied instructional objectives, processes, assignments, and assessments to meet the learning needs of students at different levels. Rooted in Confucius' educational principle of "teaching according to individual aptitudes", it seeks to foster each student's optimal development through differentiated teaching. Against the backdrop of the "Double Reduction" policy, how to enhance both quality and efficiency within limited classroom time through differentiated instruction has become an urgent issue that demands resolution.

1.2 Research objectives and significance

The primary objective of this study is to systematically examine the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in junior high school English reading instruction through empirical experimentation. Specifically, this research seeks to address the following three core questions:

What is the impact of differentiated instruction on junior high school students' interest in English reading? Which group of students benefits the most?

What impact does differentiated instruction have on junior high school students' English reading strategies, and which student group benefits the most?

What impact does differentiated instruction have on junior high school students' English reading scores? Which student group benefits the most?

The significance of this study lies in the following: at the theoretical level, it enriches the research on the application of differentiated instruction in junior high school English reading, particularly by integrating a multidimensional perspective that incorporates both reading interest and reading strategies; and at the practical level, it provides frontline teachers with actionable examples for implementing differentiated instruction, designing tiered assignments, and developing assessment systems under the "Double Reduction" policy, thereby helping to achieve the educational goal of reducing students' workload without compromising quality.

2 Research background

2.1 Definition and forms of differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction is a teaching model designed to address students' individual differences. Although the academic community has yet to establish a unified definition, its core principle lies in recognizing

Students differ in their learning readiness, interests, and learning styles; by adapting curricula, teaching methods, and resources, we can provide each student with the greatest possible opportunities for growth.

2.1.1 Definition of differentiated instruction

Foreign scholars such as Tomlinson (2001) argue that differentiated instruction involves teachers proactively adapting curricula, teaching methods, and resources to meet the needs of individual students or small groups. Adams and Pierce (2004) emphasize that its core lies in ensuring that each student learns at an appropriately challenging level. Smit and Humpert (2012), meanwhile, view it as a differentiated response to the diverse needs of learners.

In China, differentiated instruction originates from the tradition of "teaching according to individual aptitude". Gu Mingyuan (1990) pointed out that differentiated instruction requires teachers to take students' differences fully into account and to design and implement targeted guidance. Jiang Naiping and Hua Hongzhen (2004) emphasized grouping students for instruction based on their knowledge structures, competency levels, and potential. In summary, the consensus on differentiated instruction is that it acknowledges and respects individual differences and seeks to promote the holistic development of all students through differentiated instructional design.

2.1.2 Forms of differentiated instruction

The forms of differentiated instruction are mainly divided into inter-class differentiation and intra-class

differentiation.

Inter class streaming, also known as the “flexible class system”, allows students to transcend their original administrative class boundaries and move between classes of varying ability levels according to their subject specific competencies. While this approach is highly targeted, it can easily lead to students being labeled, which may generate psychological stress and even foster feelings of inferiority.

In-class stratification: Students are grouped within their original administrative classes. Depending on whether the grouping is made public, it can be further classified into explicit stratification (with publicly announced levels) and implicit stratification (where teachers maintain internal rankings without public disclosure). Implicit stratification effectively safeguards students’ self-esteem, prevents the labeling effect, and facilitates classroom management.

Given that junior high school students are relatively sensitive and in order to maintain the stability of their original classes, this study adopts an implicit stratification model within the classroom.

2.2 Implementation process of differentiated instruction

Implementing differentiated instruction is not merely “grouping” students; it is a systematic undertaking. Domestic scholars such as Mao Jinghuan (2000) and Xiao Junyu (2010) have proposed relatively mature implementation frameworks. Drawing on the characteristics of junior high school English reading instruction, this study summarizes the implementation process into the following five dimensions:

Student Grouping: Taking into account students’ reading scores, learning interests, study habits, and potential, students are categorized into three levels: A (high-achieving), B (average), and C (struggling learners).

Goal Differentiation: Based on the “zone of proximal development” of students at different levels, set instructional objectives of varying difficulty.

Process stratification: In classroom instruction, questions, exercises, and interactive activities are tailored to students at different ability levels, with varying degrees of difficulty.

Differentiated homework: Design basic, reinforcement, and extension type assignments to meet the consolidation and advanced learning needs of students at various ability levels.

Assessment stratification: A multi-criteria assessment approach is adopted, emphasizing students’ longitudinal progress rather than horizontal comparisons.

2.3 Theoretical framework

This study is primarily grounded in the following two major theories:

Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development” theory posits that instruction should precede development by guiding students toward their potential developmental level. Differentiated instruction achieves this by identifying each student’s ZPD and providing appropriate scaffolding, thereby helping students bridge the gap between their current independent problem-solving abilities and their potential developmental level.

Babanski’s theory of “optimization of the teaching process” emphasizes, under existing conditions, achieving the best possible instructional outcomes through scientifically designed teaching plans. Differentiated instruction, by aligning instructional objectives, content, methods, and assessment while respecting individual differences, seeks to optimize the teaching process.

3 Research design and methods

3.1 Research questions

This study specifically examines the following three issues:

The impact of differentiated instruction on junior high school students’ interest in English reading and the group that benefits most.

The impact of differentiated instruction on junior high school students' English reading strategies and the group that benefits the most.

The impact of differentiated instruction on junior high school students' English reading achievement and the group that benefits most.

3.2 Study subjects

This study was conducted from February to May 2026 at a middle school in Chuzhou, Anhui Province, with a total of 76 ninth-grade students from two parallel classes selected as the research participants.

Experimental class: Class 15, with a total of 38 students. Tiered instruction is implemented.

Control class: 16 students, totaling 38 students. It employs the traditional teaching model.

Both classes were taught by the same instructor, used the same textbook (People's Education Press's "Go for it"), and followed the same instructional pace. Based on their pre-test scores, reading-interest questionnaires, and learning attitudes, students in the experimental class were implicitly grouped into three levels—A, B, and C.

3.3 Research instruments and variables

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, with the primary instruments including:

Questionnaire Survey: The adapted Reading Interest Scale (based on Hidi & Renninger's four-stage model of interest development) and the Reading Strategy Scale (based on Mokhtari & Reichard's MARS scale) were used. Both scales were administered to the two classes before and after the experiment.

Reading Test: Pre-test and post-test papers are developed, with item types aligned to the junior high school entrance examination standards, covering aspects such as detailed comprehension, inference and judgment, and word meaning prediction, to assess reading proficiency. Performance changes.

Interviews: Following the experiment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from the experimental class across different ability levels to gain an in-depth understanding of their psychological experiences and learning perceptions.

Data Analysis: SPSS 27.0 was used to perform independent-samples t-tests and paired-samples t-tests to assess the statistical significance of observed differences.

3.4 Experimental procedure (14 weeks)

In the experimental class, differentiated instruction is implemented across the following five dimensions:

3.4.1 Student stratification (implicit)

Based on the results of the placement test and students' regular performance, teachers divide students into three levels:

Level C (Foundation Level): Weak English foundation, insufficient vocabulary, and lack of confidence in reading.

Level B (Advanced Level): Basic proficiency; able to understand simple texts but lacks in-depth thinking.

Level A (Excellent Level): Solid foundation and strong analytical and critical thinking skills.

3.4.2 Tiered instructional objectives

Take the reading lesson as an example, set objectives at different levels for the same text:

Level C objective: Understand the main idea, identify key information, and master core vocabulary.

Level B objective: Understand the structure of the text and make simple inferences and judgments.

Level A objective: Evaluate the author's viewpoint and engage in innovative expression by relating it to real-world contexts.

3.4.3 Tiered instructional process

Introduction and Questioning: Design a tiered set of questions. Students in Level C answer factual questions (e.g., What, Who); students in Level B address comprehension-based questions (e.g., Why, How); and

students in Level A tackle evaluative questions (e.g., What do you think of...).

Task Design: Level C focuses on foundational tasks such as fill-in-the-blanks and matching; Level A emphasizes higher-order thinking tasks like debate and continuation writing.

3.4.4 Tiered assignment distribution

Level C: Primarily focuses on copying key sentences, reading the text aloud, and completing basic exercises, with an emphasis on solidifying foundational skills.

Level B: Complete the after-class exercises, translate paragraphs, and accumulate useful words and sentences.

Level A: Engage in thematic extended reading, write book reviews, or complete challenging project-based assignments.

3.4.5 Tiered teaching evaluation

Establish growth portfolios, offering ample encouragement to C level students and focusing on their progress; for A level students, maintain high standards and rigorous expectations, emphasizing the depth of their thinking. Assessment methods include teacher evaluation, peer assessment within groups, and self-assessment.

4 Research results and analysis

4.1 The impact of differentiated instruction on reading interest

Experimental data indicate that the experimental class (EC) scored significantly higher than the control class (CC) on the total reading interest scale in the post-test. An independent-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference, with a value reaching the level of significance ($p < 0.05$).

A detailed analysis of the interest dimension. According to Hidi and Renninger's theory, reading interest is categorized into situational interest and individual interest.

Situational Interest Activation and Sustenance: Students in the experimental class showed significant improvements in responses to items such as "the tasks are engaging" and "I can enjoy reading". This indicates that the differentiated instruction, by providing tailored reading materials and tasks, has helped C level students overcome their fear of reading and A level students avoid boredom, thereby effectively sparking and sustaining students' situational interest.

Individual Interests: On items reflecting long-term preferences, such as "I am a person who enjoys reading", the differences did not reach statistical significance. This suggests that the formation of individual interests is a long-term process, and a short-term intervention of 12 weeks is unlikely to fundamentally alter students' deeply entrenched reading preferences.

The extent to which students at different proficiency levels benefited. The paired-samples t-test revealed that reading interest improved significantly across all three levels. Among them, Level C students showed the largest increase ($M_{\text{post}} - M_{\text{pre}} = 12.5$), followed by Level B, while Level A exhibited a relatively smaller improvement. In interviews, a Level C student remarked: "It used to be very frustrating not being able to understand texts, but now I can grasp the main ideas of the articles my teacher assigns, and I no longer find English reading so daunting."

4.2 The impact of differentiated instruction on reading strategies

After the experiment, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group in the use of reading strategies ($p < 0.01$).

Analysis of strategic dimensions: Metacognitive strategies and problem-solving strategies—students in the experimental class significantly increased their use of strategies such as "setting goals before reading", "guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from context", and "slowing down to reread when encountering passages they cannot understand". This improvement was facilitated by explicit strategy instruction provided by teachers in class, tailored to students' varying proficiency levels.

Supportive strategies: No significant changes were observed in habitual strategies such as “looking up words in a dictionary” and “taking notes”. This suggests that developing supportive strategies requires more sustained, deliberate practice over an extended period.

The extent to which students at different levels benefit. Students across all proficiency levels showed an enhanced awareness of learning strategies, with C level students reaping the greatest advantages. In traditional classrooms, teachers often lack the time to provide strategy instruction to C level learners; in contrast, under a differentiated instruction model, teachers specifically teach foundational strategies such as “scanning” and “skimming”, thereby addressing these students’ strategic gaps.

4.3 The impact of differentiated instruction on reading achievement

The comparison of reading test scores reveals that the experimental class’s post-test mean score improved significantly compared to its pre-test score, with an increase markedly greater than that of the control class. An independent-samples t-test indicates a significant difference between the two classes’ post-test scores.

An attribution analysis of academic performance improvement. The enhancement in academic achievement results from the combined effects of reading interest and reading strategies. Increased interest has led to greater time devoted to reading, while mastery of effective strategies has boosted reading efficiency; together, these factors have fostered improved reading comprehension.

The extent of progress among students at different levels. The data show that students in Level C experienced the largest improvement in scores, with an average increase of 15.2 points. This strongly demonstrates the significant potential of differentiated instruction in helping struggling learners. Students in Level B achieved steady gains by reinforcing foundational skills, while those in Level A, though starting from a higher absolute score, had more limited room for relative improvement due to their larger initial score base, resulting in the smallest overall progress.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Research conclusions

This study, through a 12-week empirical experiment, arrives at the following key conclusions:

Significantly enhanced reading interest: Differentiated instruction, by offering appropriately challenging tasks and activities, has markedly boosted students’ overall reading engagement, with particularly pronounced effects on situational interest—both in terms of its initiation and maintenance.

Effective improvement in strategy use: Differentiated instruction has enhanced students’ mastery of reading strategies, with a particularly significant increase in the frequency of using metacognitive and problem-solving strategies.

Significantly improved reading scores: In classes implementing differentiated instruction, the improvement in reading performance was markedly greater than in traditionally taught classes.

C level students benefit the most: Among the three dimensions mentioned above, C level students with weaker foundational skills show the most substantial improvement. This indicates that differentiated instruction is an effective approach for narrowing achievement gaps within a class and enhancing overall teaching quality.

5.2 Teaching recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed for junior high school English reading instruction:

Conduct thorough student assessment and implement implicit differentiation: Teachers should gain a comprehensive understanding of students’ knowledge base, abilities, and psychological characteristics, and adopt an approach of implicit differentiation to safeguard students’ self-esteem.

Design differentiated instructional activities:

Level C: Focuses on reinforcing foundational skills and building confidence, offering engaging, moderately challenging materials and teaching basic decoding strategies.

Level B: Focuses on enhancing abilities and strengthening logical thinking skills.

Level A: Emphasizes the development of higher-order thinking, offers enrichment reading materials, and encourages critical thinking.

Implement tiered assessment: establish a diversified evaluation system that focuses on each student's individual progress. Offer more praise to C level students and provide greater encouragement and challenges for A level students.

Cultivating habits over the long term: For variables that are difficult to change in the short term—such as individual interests and supportive strategies—teachers should develop long-term plans, such as organizing an English Reading Week or establishing a reading check-in system.

6 Final remarks

Although this study has confirmed the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in junior high school English reading, certain limitations remain. First, the sample is drawn from only two classes at a single school, resulting in a small sample size and an experimental period of just 12 weeks, which insufficiently captures the long-term effects on deeper variables such as individual interests. Second, the research focuses primarily on the improvement of students in C and B level groups, while the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills among A level students remains inadequate. Furthermore, data collection relies mainly on quantitative assessments, lacking in-depth qualitative evidence to substantiate findings.

In light of these limitations, future research could be expanded along the following lines: first, by broadening the sample scope and extending the experimental duration to evaluate the long-term impact of differentiated instruction; second, by paying closer attention to unlocking the potential of A level students and exploring more challenging instructional strategies; third, by incorporating qualitative methods such as classroom observations and interviews to enrich the data set; and fourth, by applying the differentiated instruction model to other language learning domains, including writing, listening, and speaking, thereby further assessing its generalizability and providing more comprehensive empirical support for English language teaching reform within the context of the “Double Reduction” policy.

References:

- [1] Adams, C. M., Pierce, R. L. Tiered Lessons: One Way to Differentiate Mathematics Instruction[J]. *Gifted Child Today*, 2004, 27(2): 50–65.
- [2] Duflo, E., Dupas, P., Kremer, M. Peer Effects, Teacher Incentives, and the Impact of Tracking[J]. *American Economic Review*, 2011, 101(5): 1739–1774.
- [3] Guo, Xiaofei. A Study on the Dynamic Tiered Teaching Model for College English Based on Information Technology[J]. *Foreign Language ElectroTeaching*, 2013(6): 71–75.
- [4] Hu, Zhongxiao, Liu, Xiufeng. A Study on Differentiated Instruction Based on the Flexible Class-assignment System[J]. *Educational Research and Teaching*, 2015, 29(5): 116–119.
- [5] Ji, Dekui, Zhu, Cong. Reflections on the Demands and Challenges of the “Flexible Class Scheduling” System in the Context of College Entrance Examination Reform [J]. *Curriculum, Textbooks, and Teaching Methods*, 2016, 36(10): 52–57.
- [6] Jiang, Zhi, Hua, Guodong. A Preliminary Discussion on the Essence of “Differentiated Instruction” [J]. *Chinese Journal of Education*, 2004(4): 52–55.
- [7] Li, Dongmei. An Exploration of the Application of Differentiated Instruction in Junior High School English

Reading Teaching[J]. *Test Questions and Research*, 2020(14): 106-107.

[8] Liu, Huijun. The Relationship Between Metacognitive Strategies and English Reading [J]. *Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching*, 2004(12): 24-26.

[9] Liu, Xiaotian. A Study on the Current Situation of English Reading and Attitudes Toward English Reading among Junior High School Students[J]. *Curriculum, Textbooks, and Teaching Methods*, 2012, 32(4): 81-85.

[10] Liu, Yutao. The Impact of Differentiated Instruction in High School English Reading on Students' English Reading Self-efficacy and Reading Achievement[D]. Chongqing: Southwest University, 2021.

[11] Lu, Shan, Jia, Qin, Wu, Yaowu. A Survey Study on the Current Status of College Students' English Reading Learning—From the Perspective of Tiered Prescription Teaching [J]. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 2016, 24(3): 72-75.

[12] Ma, Xiangwu. A Study on Differentiated Instruction in Senior High School English[D]. Shanghai: East China Normal University, 2011.

[13] Mao, Jinghuan. On Optimizing In-class Grouping and Tiered Instruction Strategies to Address Students' Individual Differences[J]. *Educational Theory and Practice*, 2000, 20(9): 40-45.

[14] Meng, Hongjie. A Study on the Current Status and Development of Middle School Students' English Reading Ability[J]. *Teaching and Management*, 2011(11): 141-142.

[15] Meng, Lingjun, Sui, Ligu. Reflections on Track-based Differentiated Instruction [J]. *Educational Science Research*, 2004(5): 22-23.

[16] Meng, Yue. Training in English Reading Strategies[J]. *Liaoning Educational Research*, 2003(10): 75-76.

[17] Meng, Yue. An Experimental Study on the Training of Reading Strategies in College English [J]. *Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching*, 2004(2): 24-27.

[18] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) [S]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2022.

[19] Mo, Shaoyun. The Application of Differentiated Instruction Strategies in Junior High School English Reading Teaching[J]. *Education and Teaching Forum*, 2015(11): 130.

[20] Vygotsky, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* [M]. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.

[21] Wang, Juan. An Attempt at Differentiated Instruction in Junior High School English Reading Classes [J]. *Teaching and Management*, 2011(4): 62-64.

[22] Wang, Xuming. A Theoretical and Practical Study on Differentiated Instruction in Middle School English [D]. Fuzhou: Fujian Normal University, 2002.

[23] Wigfield, A., Guthrie, J. T. Relations of Children's Motivation for Reading to the Amount and Breadth of Their Reading[J]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 1997, 89(3): 420-432.

[24] Yang, Yongjun. An Exploration of the "Tiered Guidance" Model in Senior High School English Reading Instruction[J]. *Foreign Language Teaching in Primary and Secondary Schools*, 2017, 40(8): 36-40.

[25] Zhang, Chen, Shao, Xiaoxia. Current Status, Issues, and Prospects of Research on Differentiated Instruction in High School English Reading[J]. *Educational and Teaching Research*, 2016, 30(12): 111-116.

[26] Zhang, Huiping. A Preliminary Exploration of Differentiated Instruction in English Reading Classes[J]. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 2002, 23(4): 85-88.