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Teacher Scaffolding of Higher-Order Thinking in Senior High School EFL Reading Lessons: A Multiple-Case Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Higher-order thinking is an important goal of senior high school English reading instruction, but cognitively demanding questions alone do not necessarily sustain student reasoning. This qualitative multiple-case discourse analysis examines selected teacher–student exchanges from four publicly available demonstration lessons in China. The source materials comprise approximately 222 minutes of classroom transcripts and 17,500 English word tokens. Selected episodes were analyzed using the revised taxonomy of educational objectives and six scaffolding functions, with attention to changes in support and interpretive responsibility. The results reveal three patterns. First, teachers supported analysis by marking textual contrasts and externalizing conceptual structures. Second, probing, requests for evidence, and revoicing extended student responses from identification toward evidence-based interpretation and evaluation. Third, task decomposition and procedural models enabled students to transfer textual understanding to new problems and products. Support shifted from explicit structuring to less directive prompting after students produced more developed responses. However, teachers sometimes resumed control by reformulating contributions or supplying final conceptual summaries, so fading remained partial. Overall, scaffolding sustained higher-order participation when it organized evidence and procedures without removing the central interpretive decision and when students retained responsibility for justification, transfer, and production.

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1. Introduction

The Chinese senior high school English curriculum identifies thinking quality as a core competence and expects students to interpret relationships, evaluate ideas, and apply knowledge in new situations (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). Research on reading instruction accordingly recommends attention to textual structure, inference, judgment, and problem solving (Hu, 2022). These recommendations specify valued outcomes but give less attention to the exchanges through which students reach them.

Teacher talk is central to this process. After a partial answer, a teacher may evaluate immediately, request evidence, narrow the task, or reformulate the contribution. Each response assigns a different share of the interpretive work to the student. Walsh therefore argues that teacher talk may construct or restrict opportunities for participation according to its fit with the pedagogical goal.

This study treats higher-order thinking as an opportunity observable in classroom discourse rather than a stable student attribute. It examines four publicly available demonstration lessons to answer two questions:

1. What discourse moves support opportunities for analysis, evaluation, and creation in senior high school EFL reading lessons?
2. How does teacher support change within an episode, and what evidence indicates a change in students' interpretive responsibility?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Higher-Order Thinking in EFL Reading

The revised taxonomy defines analyzing as differentiating, organizing, or attributing; evaluating as checking or critiquing against criteria; and creating as generating, planning, or producing (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In reading lessons, these processes may appear when students identify a textual contrast, justify an interpretation, compare perspectives, or transfer a procedure. The wording of a question is insufficient evidence: a *why* question may elicit recall, while a constrained task may still require a new judgment. Cognitive demand must therefore be interpreted from the task, available evidence, and student response.

Chinese studies associate higher-order reading with structural analysis, authorial intention, sequenced prompts, and open inquiry (Cao, 2019). The interactional issue is how much information a teacher supplies and what reasoning remains for students.

2.2 Scaffolding and Teacher Talk

Wood et al. describe six scaffolding functions: recruitment, reduction in degrees of freedom, direction maintenance, marking critical features, frustration control, and demonstration. Effective support should also respond to displayed need, fade after successful performance, and transfer responsibility to the learner (van de Pol et al., 2010). Fading is therefore a change across turns, not simply a reduction in teacher talk.

In EFL classrooms, repetition, hints, and reformulation may either extend a contribution or replace it. Chinese classroom research reports negotiated and indirect scaffolding (Ou, 2019), while Ying and Xie show that speech works with gesture, gaze, and posture. Transcript analysis captures only the verbal part of this process. Teachers may also resume direct support when a response remains incomplete (Kardoust, 2024). These studies justify examining the sequence of task, learner response, adjusted assistance, and renewed performance.

3. Research Method

3.1 Design and Data Sources

The study used a qualitative multiple-case discourse-analytic design. The source corpus comprised secondary transcripts from four publicly circulated senior high school EFL reading lessons. The lessons were selected as information-rich cases containing extended exchanges and tasks beyond factual retrieval. A fifth case in the original course paper was excluded because only an edited summary was available and its public source could not be verified.

Table 1

Included Lesson Cases and Source Records

	Reading Text and Instructional Focus	Duration	English Words (Approx.)	Public Record
A	*From Problems to Solutions*: cultural heritage and problem solving	90 min	7,736	Ming Shi Club post (2025) and linked video

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	Reading Text and Instructional Focus	Duration	English Words (Approx.)	Public Record
B	*Fascinating Parks*: structure, perspective, and human-nature relations	46 min 37 s	4,125	Sohu event report (2025)
C	*A Few Simple Forms of English Poems*: poetic form and composition	44 min 57 s	2,963	Ming Shi Club post (2025) and linked video
D	*Science Fiction Reading and Thinking*: character relations and human-robot ethics	40 min 2 s	2,673	Ming Shi Club post (2025) and linked video

The four records total approximately 222 minutes and 17,500 English word tokens. Case A, Case C and Case D was documented in a lesson description with a linked recording (Ming Shi Club, 2025), Case B in a public event report (Sohu, 2025). The records and supplied transcripts were accessed on 9 October 2026. The lessons were not re-transcribed from the complete recordings. Three transcripts contained timestamps for most turns; Case A contained periodic time markers.

3.2 Analytical Framework and Procedure

The unit of analysis was a scaffolded episode: a sequence initiated by a reading task that required students to connect information, infer a perspective, justify a judgment, plan a response, or create a product. Analysis was purposive rather than exhaustive. Passages identified during preparation of the course paper were revisited in their available transcript context; routine management and isolated factual recall were excluded.

Table 2
Coding Framework

Dimension	Transcript Indicator	Illustrative Teacher Move
Analysis	Relating or organizing textual elements	Mark a contrast; request categorization
Evaluation	Supporting a judgment with evidence or criteria	Ask why; request grounds; invite comparison
Creation	Planning or producing a new response	Decompose a task; provide a procedural frame
Contingent adjustment	Support changes after difficulty or elaboration	Narrow or reopen a prompt
Partial fading	Teacher re-enters after less directive support	Open prompt, student proposal, teacher summary

Episodes were first classified by their dominant cognitive opportunity and then coded for the relevant scaffolding function. The next turns were examined to determine whether support changed after displayed difficulty, success, or elaboration. Fading was recorded only when students assumed more responsibility for interpretation, justification, planning, or

production. Source wording was retained in quoted extracts apart from spacing and punctuation.

One analyst completed the coding, and no independent coder was available. The corpus totals in Table 1 describe the available source records, not a comprehensively coded dataset; no frequency or inter-rater reliability claim is made. The analysis used short excerpts from public materials, omitted teacher and student names, and collected no private information. Public availability does not remove all ethical concerns, particularly where minors appear. The findings are therefore limited to the verbal record and do not assess teacher quality or establish improvement in students' thinking.

4. Discussion

Table 3 presents one sequence from each case. Ellipses mark omitted turns. The final column records what the teacher move made possible in the next substantive student contribution.

Table 3

Illustrative discourse evidence

Case and Location	Selected Exchange	Interpretation
A, 43 min	T: “I highlighted every subject. Can we group them?” S25: “From small to big: citizens ... experts ... countries ... international organizations.”	Marking subjects supported a differentiated account of participation.
B, 31:51–42:36	T: “Is it necessary to build a national park like Sarek and why?” S24 contrasted “a remote wilderness” with “an urban oasis” and proposed “a balance between the natural world and human life.”	A role-based prompt supported a comparative criterion.
C, 19:40–24:24	S11: “I think the poem is Cinquain.” T: “What is your reason?” S11: “Because it has 5 lines.”	A request for grounds elicited formal evidence.
D, 21:02–28:17	T: “Is the love true? Use evidence ... from our text.” S19: “Dependence does not mean true love ... They are more like father and daughter.”	An evidence requirement opened competing evaluations.

4.1 Structuring Analysis without Supplying the Inference

In Case A, the teacher organized expressions from the text into “the old” and “the new” and asked students to add relevant words. The visual contrast reduced a dense paragraph to two categories, but students still had to select evidence and infer the underlying problem of balancing development and heritage protection. Later, the teacher highlighted the grammatical subjects in sentences describing the Aswan Dam project. The move redirected attention from the broad answer “different countries” to a layered account involving citizens, experts, governments, and international organizations. The assistance marked critical features rather than supplying the classification (Ou, 2019).

Cases B, C, and D used related structures. A five-senses frame in Case B organized details in a travel narrative before students considered the writer's attitude. A table of poetic forms in Case C supported the classification of unfamiliar poems. An emotion timeline in

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Case D helped students relate events to changes in Claire's view of the robot Tony. Such devices supported analysis when they organized evidence but left the relation among the elements for students to establish.

The boundary was visible when the teacher named the relation immediately after displaying a structure. At that point, the representation became an explanation rather than a scaffold for inference. The relevant question is therefore not whether a graphic organizer was present, but what intellectual decision remained with students after it was introduced.

4.2 Probing and Requests for Grounds

Evaluation developed when teachers treated an initial answer as a basis for further inquiry. In Case C, questions such as “What is your reason?” and “Why are you sure?” required students to connect a label with line number, repetition, or another formal feature. The question opened evaluative work only when the teacher waited for and used the explanation. When the teacher supplied an interpretation after a brief response, the sequence closed.

Case D used textual evidence to structure disagreement. Students considered whether Claire's attachment to Tony represented love, dependence, or a familial relationship. The task had no answer stated directly in the text; students had to combine details with a criterion for judging the relationship. Revoicing helped when it clarified a contribution and returned it for confirmation, extension, or challenge. It restricted participation when the reformulation became the authorized meaning (Walsh, 2002).

Case B broadened evaluation through assigned perspectives. Students discussed Sarek National Park as government representatives, Sami people, travelers, or readers comparing parks. The roles limited the range of relevant considerations while preserving the judgment. One response connected national and urban parks through the need to balance nature and human life. The teacher's follow-up requested a more precise account of what required balance. Here, narrowing the task enabled a reasoned comparison instead of reducing it to recall.

Affective support accompanied several probes. Expressions such as “Don't worry” and “Just share your ideas” maintained participation, while “Why?” and “Could you explain more?” preserved the requirement to elaborate. Frustration control supported higher-order talk when reassurance did not lower the evidential demand.

4.3 Transfer and Partial Fading

Creation was most visible when a scaffold constrained the procedure but not the final decision. In Case A, students abstracted a problem-solving sequence from the Aswan Dam project and applied it to traffic congestion near the Xi'an city wall. The new task preserved the conflict between development and protection while changing the setting. The procedure therefore functioned as a planning resource rather than a model answer.

Case C provided formal constraints for writing a poem. Students worked within the features of cinquain, haiku, nursery rhyme, list poem, or Tang poetry but selected the topic, words, imagery, and emotional position. Case D supplied broad criteria such as safety, function, and emotion for groups drafting rules for household robots. These criteria reduced the number of decisions without determining the proposed laws. In both cases, demonstration made production manageable, although a single lesson could not show whether students would later perform without the frame.

Across the selected episodes, support moved from explicit categories, models, or roles to probes and student production. This shift gave students more responsibility for choosing evidence and proposing interpretations. The exchanges discussed did not show complete

withdrawal: teachers returned after a developed response to repair language, select a preferred term, or summarize the lesson concept. In Case B, for example, several verbs were proposed for the relationship between humans and nature before the teacher stabilized *respect nature* as the final formulation.

These sequences show partial fading rather than a simple transfer from teacher to student. Continued support may be necessary when learners express complex reasoning in an additional language. Its value depends on whether the teacher's completion responds to visible need and whether students subsequently use the formulation themselves. This interpretation accords with Kardoust's (2024, pp. 649–668) finding that the timing and amount of fading vary across classroom exchanges.

The cases suggest two practical principles. Teachers can externalize a contrast, timeline, role, or procedure while leaving the central inference to students. They can also plan a second opportunity for students to use the scaffolded reasoning after a teacher reformulation. These principles concern discourse design; the present data do not demonstrate durable cognitive development.

5. Conclusion

The selected episodes show three ways in which teacher talk supported higher-order participation in senior high school EFL reading. Teachers marked critical features and organized textual relations, requested evidence for interpretations, and provided procedural constraints for transfer or production. These moves preserved cognitive demand when students retained responsibility for the substantive judgment.

Support became less directive after some elaborated responses, but teachers returned in the analyzed sequences to formulate the final concept. Fading was therefore partial and must be judged across a sequence rather than from an isolated question. The study is limited by purposive episode selection, public demonstration lessons, secondary transcripts, and single-analyst coding. Its findings identify interactional possibilities, not frequencies, causal effects, or general classroom practice. Further research should use original video, transparent episode inventories, multiple analysts, and repeated student tasks.

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