

Current Status and Prospects of Research on English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of Active Learning in China—A Review and Analysis of Relevant Literature from 2016 to 2026

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Abstract: This study selects research literature published in Chinese journals over the past decade on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning and conducts a systematic review using content analysis from three dimensions: development trends, research themes, and research methods. The findings show that, based on annual publication statistics and keyword co-occurrence knowledge-map analysis, research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning in China has generally evolved from steady development toward rapid concentration of scholarly attention. Research themes mainly focus on teaching approaches and strategies, classroom practice and case applications, theoretical foundations and value, and teacher roles and learning responsibility. In terms of research methods, non-empirical studies, particularly experience summaries and theoretical analyses, predominate. Future research may further integrate curriculum reform requirements with the practical needs of English reading instruction, expand studies connecting active learning with reading assessment, learning-ability development, and artificial intelligence, deepen inquiry into such topics as student-generated questioning, meaning construction, classroom interaction, and the transfer of learning responsibility, and strengthen the use of empirical methods including classroom observation, questionnaire surveys, experimental research, and mixed-methods research.

Keywords: Active Learning; English Reading Instruction; Development Trends; Research Themes; Research Methods

1. Introduction

Active learning refers to a learning process in which, under teachers' guidance, students gradually learn to generate questions independently, actively construct meaning, actively use what they have learned to establish connections with the text, the author, the world, and the self, and further express new ideas ^[1]. The Chinese Students' Development Core Competencies, issued in 2016, incorporated "learning to learn" into the core competencies for student development and emphasized qualities such as willingness and ability to learn, reflection, and information awareness ^[2]. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) state that students should develop the awareness and ability to actively apply and adapt English-learning strategies, broaden channels for learning English, and strive to improve learning efficiency ^[3]. The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, revised in 2020) explicitly require teachers to actively encourage autonomous, cooperative, and inquiry-based learning ^[4]. The routinely revised General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, revised in 2025) further emphasize that teachers should create favorable conditions and guide students to learn how to learn through experiences of autonomous, cooperative, and inquiry-based learning ^[5]. Active learning thus embodies the English curriculum's educational requirement for transforming the ways in which students learn.

Reading instruction is an important component of the English curriculum that connects language, culture, and thinking. Wang Qiang argues that English reading instruction under the framework of core competencies should guide students to understand textual meaning, explore the cultural values carried by discourse, and develop reading strategies and reading competence ^[6]. Ge Bingfang and Yin Jiahuan propose that teachers should create contexts that attract students' perceptual attention, encourage them to raise authentic questions, and enable them to understand discourse and perceive, learn, and use

language while solving problems ^[7]. Active learning therefore provides an important theoretical perspective for reading instruction and contributes to the development of students' autonomous inquiry and learning ability.

To gain a clearer understanding of the current research status and practical value of active learning in English reading instruction, this study reviews relevant literature from the past decade, with the aim of providing references for English reading teaching practice and for the selection of topics and research methods in future studies.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What development trends have characterized research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning in China over the past decade? (2) What major themes have been addressed in this body of research? (3) What research methods have been employed?

2.2 Literature Retrieval

The China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) academic journal database was used as the retrieval platform. Core Chinese journals, including Foreign Language Teaching in Schools (Primary School Edition), Foreign Language Teaching in Schools (Secondary School Edition), English Teaching and Research for Primary and Secondary Schools, Primary School English Teaching and Learning, Secondary School Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, Teaching Monthly: Secondary School Edition (Foreign Language Teaching), and Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method, were selected as literature sources. The retrieval period was set from January 1, 2016 to June 30, 2026. In accordance with the research topic, subject searches were conducted using combinations of the core terms "active learning," "English reading," and "reading instruction." Because Chinese studies related to active learning in English reading instruction often explore students' active participation in reading from perspectives such as "autonomous reading," "student-generated questioning," and "meaning construction," these related terms were also incorporated into the search to ensure comprehensiveness. Multiple combinations of keywords were used to identify studies relevant to the concept of active learning.

The initial search results were screened according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were: (1) the study focused on active learning or English reading instruction closely related to active learning; (2) the research participants or context involved English reading instruction in primary or secondary schools; (3) the document was a publicly published academic journal article; and (4) the article contained explicit theoretical analysis, teaching practice, or empirical research. Studies with low thematic relevance, studies outside the field of English reading instruction, duplicate publications, and non-academic papers were excluded. After multiple rounds of screening, 42 representative articles were ultimately included as the analytical sample.

2.3 Literature Coding

Content analysis was employed to classify and organize the 42 included articles. In line with the research purposes, an analytical framework comprising three dimensions—development trends, research themes, and research methods—was established.

For the development-trend dimension, the formal publication year of each article was used to calculate the annual number of publications and reveal changes in the scale of research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning. Meanwhile, keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted on the keyword data of the 42 articles to construct a keyword co-occurrence knowledge map and reveal the distribution and evolution of research hot spots. The overall development trend of the field was then analyzed by combining annual publication changes with the keyword co-occurrence map.

For the research-theme dimension, the literature was coded and categorized according to its content. The core research objects, research questions, and practical concerns of each of the 42 articles were first extracted, after which thematic coding was conducted according to the primary focus of each

study. Studies focusing on implementation pathways, teaching strategies, and activity design in active-learning-oriented English reading classrooms were coded as “research on teaching approaches and strategies”; studies focusing on specific classroom practices, teaching cases, or application effects were coded as “classroom practice and case applications”; studies addressing the meaning, theoretical foundations, and value of active learning were coded as “theoretical foundations and value research”; and studies examining changes in teacher roles, students’ subject status, and learning responsibility were coded as “teacher roles and learning responsibility research.” The number of articles in each category was then calculated to establish the distribution of research themes.

For the research-method dimension, coding was based on the sources of research data, research procedures, and analytical approaches used in each article. Studies were first divided into non-empirical and empirical research according to whether they employed systematic processes of data collection, analysis, or verification. They were then further classified by purpose and implementation into theoretical analysis, experience summary, literature review, policy interpretation, case study, survey research, and experimental/quasi-experimental research.

3. Results and Analysis

Statistical analysis of the 42 articles shows that research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning is characterized by a generally steady yet rapidly rising development trend, an expanding range of research themes, and a predominance of non-empirical research methods. In terms of development, the field has experienced two stages: a period of steady development and a period of rapid development. In terms of themes, a multidimensional system has emerged in which teaching approaches and strategies constitute the main body of research, theoretical foundations and value provide support, and classroom practice is combined with research on teacher roles. Methodologically, experience summaries and theoretical interpretations remain dominant, while empirical research is seriously insufficient.

3.1 Development Trends

Statistics based on the publication years of the 42 articles, combined with keyword co-occurrence knowledge-map analysis, indicate that research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning has generally evolved from steady development toward rapid concentration of scholarly attention. It can be divided into two stages: a steady-development period and a rapid-development period (see Figures 1 and 2). Annual publication volume mainly reflects changes in the scale of research in the field, whereas the keyword co-occurrence knowledge map further reveals the evolution of research hot spots and the relationships among themes at different stages.

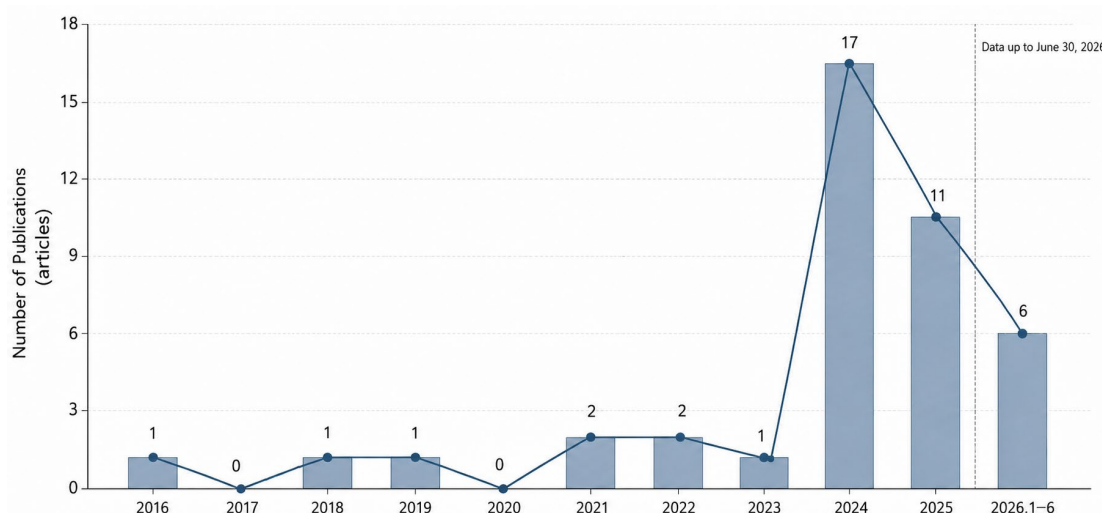


Figure 1: Annual Number of Relevant Publications from 2016 to June 2026

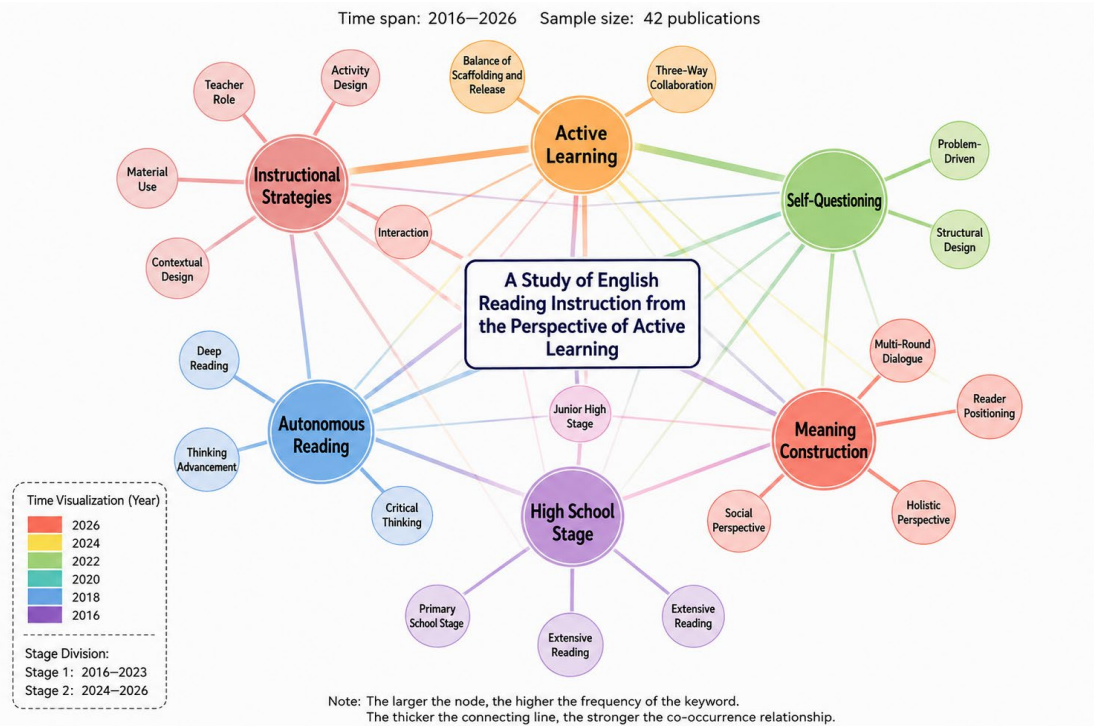


Figure 2: Keyword Co-occurrence Knowledge Map of Research on English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of Active Learning.

The first stage was the steady-development period (2016–2023). Eight relevant articles were retrieved during this period, accounting for 19.05% of the total. Annual publication volume generally remained between zero and two articles (see Figure 1), indicating a relatively stable research scale. As shown by the keyword co-occurrence knowledge map (Figure 2), keywords during this stage were relatively dispersed, and research hot spots mainly centered on “autonomous reading” and “student-generated questioning.” Autonomous reading was the most prominent hotspot and gradually became associated with deep reading, progression in thinking, critical thinking, and other dimensions of reading-ability development. Student-generated questioning mainly focused on developing questioning ability and designing classroom questions. Overall, research at this stage was grounded primarily in classroom teaching practice and emphasized students’ reading autonomy and awareness of active participation. Connections among research hot spots remained relatively weak, and an integrated research framework centered on active learning had not yet formed.

The second stage was the rapid-development period (2024–June 2026). Thirty-four relevant articles were retrieved, accounting for 80.95% of the total (see Figure 1), and annual publication volume increased markedly. The keyword co-occurrence map (Figure 2) shows an increase in the number of keyword nodes and closer connections among them. Research hot spots gradually expanded from individual concerns such as autonomous reading and student-generated questioning to multiple related areas including meaning construction and teaching strategies. “Student-generated questioning” remained an important keyword and became strongly associated with terms such as problem-driven learning and structuring, reflecting sustained attention to students’ active thinking and problem-solving abilities. “Meaning construction” emerged as an important associated node and became linked with reader stance, fourfold dialogue, integrated perspectives, and meaning structuring, indicating growing concern with the mechanisms through which meaning is generated during reading. At the same time, “teaching strategies” became associated with teacher roles, contextual design, textbook use, and interaction, suggesting that researchers had begun to examine classroom support conditions conducive to active learning. The emergence of terms such as “three-chain coordination” and “fourfold dialogue” further indicates that research was expanding from concrete classroom exploration toward theoretical framework construction, with research hot spots developing from isolated concerns toward multidimensional integration.

Taken together, changes in annual publication volume and the keyword co-occurrence knowledge map show that, over the past decade, research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning has evolved from steady development toward rapid concentration. From 2016 to 2023,

the number of publications was relatively small but developed steadily, with studies mainly addressing classroom practices such as autonomous reading and student-generated questioning and emphasizing students' reading autonomy and active participation. As the concept of active learning became further integrated into English reading instruction, publication volume increased significantly from 2024 onward, connections among research hot spots strengthened, and research gradually expanded to meaning construction, teaching strategies, teacher roles, textbook use, and other areas. Representative theoretical explorations such as "fourfold dialogue" and "three-chain coordination" also emerged. Overall, the field is shifting from a primary emphasis on classroom-practice exploration toward the parallel advancement of theoretical construction and practical innovation.

3.2 Classification of Research Themes

According to the thematic coding criteria, the 42 articles were analyzed and categorized individually, and the number of articles in each category was calculated. The findings show that research themes are relatively diverse and mainly fall into four categories: theoretical foundations and value research, research on teaching approaches and strategies, classroom practice and case applications, and research on teacher roles and learning responsibility (see Figure 3).

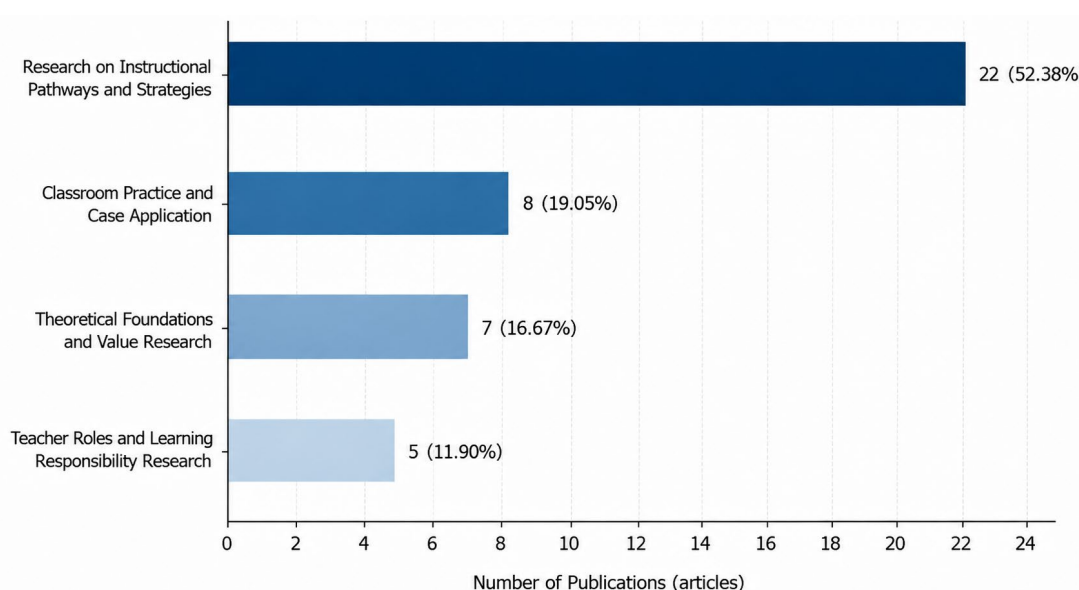


Figure 3: Distribution of Research Themes in English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of Active Learning.

First, research on teaching approaches and strategies was the largest category, comprising 22 articles (52.38%). These studies mainly examined implementation pathways and key teaching strategies for applying active learning in English reading classrooms, with particular attention to how instructional design can promote students' active participation, active thinking, and active construction of meaning. Topics included student-generated questioning, driving questions, interactive learning, meaning construction, multiple-text reading, and contextual design. For example, Hong Yanru proposed an interactive reading approach that promotes meaning construction and active learning through student-text, student-teacher, student-student, and student-self interaction [8]. Wang Xianghua and Su Yindan constructed a reading-instruction pathway characterized by "teacher guidance and student agency," guiding students through the initial construction, construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of meaning [9]. Zhang Nanxi designed contexts across pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages to promote active questioning, active construction, and active expression [10]. Xing Yusi proposed a "context-interaction-structuring" teaching strategy to facilitate students' transition from passive reception to active construction [11].

Second, classroom practice and case applications comprised eight articles (19.05%). These studies relied mainly on specific teaching practices, classroom cases, or empirical research and focused on the concrete implementation and effects of active learning in English reading instruction. Wang Juan conducted an empirical study of senior high school students' autonomous extracurricular English reading based on autonomous-learning theory and demonstrated, through a 14-week reading program, the positive effect of extracurricular autonomous reading on students' reading competence [12]. Ao

Guihua explored practical approaches to developing primary school students' autonomous English reading ability through the integration of reading resources, activity design, and habit formation^[13]. Song Xiaoyan conducted autonomous reading instruction in senior high school from a social perspective and enhanced classroom participation and autonomous-learning ability through group cooperation, student-generated questioning, independent problem solving, and self-evaluation^[14]. Xu Shichao explored a teaching process of "initiating thinking–constructing thinking–reflecting," using pre-reading student-generated questions, structured while-reading activities, and post-reading reflection and transfer to promote critical-thinking development^[15]. Xie Tingting and Huang Ying incorporated the Question–Answer Relationship (QAR) model into whole-book reading in junior high school English and developed students' awareness and ability to generate questions through questioning scaffolds, group cooperation, and multidimensional assessment^[16].

Third, theoretical foundations and value research comprised seven articles (16.67%). These studies focused on the theoretical connotations, value positioning, and mechanisms of active learning and addressed fundamental questions such as what active learning is, why it matters, and how it can promote transformation in English reading instruction. Starting from the connotation of active learning, Ge Bingfang argued that English reading instruction should guide students from passive to active learning through meaning processing, cooperative interaction, and the transfer of learning responsibility^[1]. Based on constructivist theory, Yin Jiahuan further explained the intrinsic relationship between active learning and meaning construction^[17]. On this basis, Ge Bingfang and Li Jiayi analyzed strategies for meaning construction in active-learning-oriented English reading instruction from three dimensions: student-generated questioning, concept abstraction, and active expression^[18]. Ge Bingfang and Ma Shiyu revealed multidimensional interactions among students, texts, authors, the world, and the self from the perspective of "fourfold dialogue"^[19], thereby enriching the theoretical connotations of active learning. Wang Xianghua explained the mechanism of active learning from the perspective of meaning structuring and emphasized activating prior knowledge, integrating information, constructing structures, and transferring and applying learning to achieve added value in meaning^[20]. Ge Bingfang argued, from the perspective of a paradigm shift in basic-education English reading instruction, that reading teaching is moving from "understanding texts" to "constructing meaning" and from "passive reception" to "active learning"^[21]. In addition, Ge proposed a textbook-use framework based on the coordination of three chains—"meaning–activity–learning"^[22]—extending the application of active learning to textbook interpretation and instructional design.

Fourth, research on teacher roles and learning responsibility comprised five articles (11.90%). These studies mainly focused on changes in teacher roles, the enhancement of students' agency, and the gradual transfer of learning responsibility in active-learning classrooms, thereby examining adjustments in teacher–student relationships under the active-learning approach. Cai Hong argued that teachers in active-learning classrooms should shift from knowledge transmitters to negotiators of textual meaning, organizers of instructional activities, and motivators of learning, promoting active learning through student-generated questioning, active reading, and active expression^[23]. From the perspective of reader stance, Lu Zhouhuan and Zhang Xiaodong emphasized that reading is a process in which students actively construct meaning; students should construct textual, thematic, and reader meanings through multiple interactions with texts, the self, and the world and through shifts among different reading stances^[24]. Based on four types of reader stance, Dai Junrong developed a practical framework for advancing thinking in autonomous reading, guiding students from surface-level information processing toward deep cognitive construction through tiered objectives, key activities, and questioning perspectives^[25]. Drawing on the Gradual Release of Responsibility framework, Shen Jianlei proposed an orderly transfer of learning responsibility through four stages: teacher modeling, teacher-guided practice, peer collaboration, and independent performance^[26]. Chu Xiaoming, from the perspective of scaffolded teaching that balances support and release, emphasized teachers' roles as demonstrators, facilitators, and feedback providers and promoted students' autonomous reading ability through student-generated questioning, peer collaboration, and independent performance^[27].

Overall, research themes in English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning demonstrate a developmental pattern in which practical exploration and theoretical construction mutually reinforce each other while expanding across multiple dimensions. In terms of quantity, teaching approaches and strategies occupy the dominant position, indicating that current research remains focused on how to translate the concept of active learning into concrete classroom practice through student-generated questioning, meaning construction, contextual design, interaction, and other strategies that promote active participation and deep learning. Research on classroom practice and case applications further implements these ideas in specific teaching contexts and examines the value of active learning across different educational stages and reading tasks through lesson cases and empirical

research, providing practical evidence for optimizing teaching strategies. Meanwhile, although theoretical foundations and value research account for a relatively smaller proportion, they provide important theoretical support for the development of active-learning-oriented English reading instruction. Studies have gradually moved beyond individual teaching strategies to investigate the internal mechanisms of active learning through meaning construction, fourfold dialogue, meaning structuring, and textbook-use frameworks, thus advancing research from experience summary toward deeper theoretical development. Research on teacher roles and learning responsibility further reveals the agentive conditions underlying active-learning classrooms, emphasizing the relationships among changes in teacher roles, enhanced student agency, and the release of learning responsibility, and reflecting growing attention to the reconstruction of classroom ecology. The four categories are not isolated; rather, they form a progressively unfolding research system of “theoretical interpretation–strategy construction–classroom practice–role support.” Theoretical research provides direction for teaching practice, strategy research facilitates the implementation of ideas, classroom-practice research examines implementation effects, and research on teacher roles and learning responsibility provides support for the sustainable development of active-learning classrooms. Thus, research in this field increasingly integrates theoretical inquiry, practical innovation, and the reconstruction of classroom ecology.

3.3 Research Methods

In terms of research methods, the 42 articles mainly employed non-empirical approaches, with only a small number using empirical methods. Overall, existing studies primarily take the form of experience summaries and theoretical analyses, showing a strong practical orientation and an emphasis on theoretical construction. Nevertheless, the methodological repertoire remains relatively limited, and the proportion of empirical research is low (see Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Research Methods in English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of Active Learning.

Research Type	Method Category	Number	Percentage	Methodological Characteristics
Non-empirical	Theoretical analysis	8	19.05%	Conceptual interpretation, theoretical analysis, logical reasoning, or framework construction based on relevant theories, emphasizing the proposal and development of theoretical perspectives.
Non-empirical	Experience summary	31	73.81%	Summarization, induction, and refinement based mainly on teaching experience, classroom cases, or instructional activity design.
Non-empirical	Literature review	1	2.38%	Systematic review, synthesis, and comparison of existing research in a field, with analysis of the current status and development trends.
Non-empirical	Policy interpretation	1	2.38%	Analysis based on curriculum standards, policy documents, or educational-reform requirements to explain the requirements and significance of relevant concepts for teaching practice.
Empirical	Case study	0	0	In-depth analysis of specific research participants or typical cases through sustained observation, classroom records, and related methods.
Empirical	Survey research	0	0	Collection of data through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and related methods to analyze current conditions,

				characteristics, or influencing factors.
Empirical	Experimental/quasi-experimental research	1	2.38%	Instructional intervention through experimental design, with pre-/post-tests or control-group comparisons used to examine teaching effects.
Total	—	42	100%	—

Regarding the composition of research methods, 41 of the 42 articles were non-empirical, accounting for 97.62%, while only one article (2.38%) was empirical.

Among the non-empirical studies, experience summaries were the most numerous, with 31 articles (73.81%), making this the dominant approach in current research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning. Eight articles (19.05%) employed theoretical analysis, also representing a notable proportion. Literature reviews and policy interpretations were much less common, with only one article each (2.38%). Overall, existing research mainly centers on teaching practice and theoretical interpretation, reflecting researchers' concern with improving classroom practice and constructing theoretical frameworks.

By contrast, empirical research accounted for only a very small proportion of the literature. Only one study used an experimental/quasi-experimental method to examine instructional effects, and no relevant studies based on survey research or case studies were identified. This suggests that although the field has accumulated relatively rich practical experience and theoretical achievements, there remains considerable room to improve methodological diversity and strengthen the empirical support for research conclusions.

4. Research Prospects

The findings above show that research on English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning has attracted increasing attention in recent years and has generated a relatively rich body of work concerning development trends, research themes, and research methods. Future studies may further respond to curriculum-reform requirements and the practical needs of English reading instruction by deepening research in terms of development trends, thematic expansion, and methodological improvement, thereby promoting greater systematization and depth in the field.

4.1 Responding to Development Trends and Continuously Deepening Research on Active Learning

From the perspective of development trends, attention to English reading instruction from the perspective of active learning has continued to increase in recent years. In particular, the significant growth in relevant publications since 2024 indicates that active learning has gradually become an important direction in English reading research. At the same time, research hotspots have expanded from classroom practices such as autonomous reading and student-generated questioning to meaning construction, teaching strategies, teacher roles, textbook use, and other areas, while representative theoretical explorations such as “fourfold dialogue” and “three-chain coordination” have emerged. Future research may continue to follow this development trend and deepen the integration of active learning with English reading instruction on the basis of existing theory and practice. On the one hand, in response to core-competency-oriented curriculum reform, greater attention may be paid to the value of active learning in reading assessment, learning-ability development, and classroom reform. On the other hand, researchers may actively explore innovative applications of active learning in English reading instruction in the context of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, thereby broadening research perspectives and promoting more systematic and in-depth development of the field.

4.2 Expanding Research Themes and Promoting Coordinated Development of Theory and Practice

In terms of thematic distribution, current research has formed multiple strands, including teaching approaches and strategies, theoretical foundations and value, classroom practice and case applications, and teacher roles and learning responsibility. However, there remains room to deepen the connections and integration among these themes. Future research can build on existing classroom explorations by strengthening interaction among theoretical inquiry, classroom practice, and teacher support and by

further investigating concrete pathways for implementing active learning in different instructional contexts. For example, researchers may examine more deeply the relationships among student-generated questioning, meaning construction, classroom interaction, and the transfer of learning responsibility, while strengthening the integration of active learning with reading assessment, critical-thinking development, and teacher professional development. Such work can help move the field from strategy exploration toward deeper theoretical development and practical innovation and enhance the explanatory power and applicability of research findings.

4.3 Enriching the Methodological System and Strengthening Empirical Evidence

Existing research mainly employs non-empirical methods such as experience summaries and theoretical analyses, while empirical studies based on classroom observation, questionnaire surveys, and experimental research remain relatively insufficient. Future research should further diversify its methodological system. While maintaining ecological validity in classroom contexts, researchers can strengthen the integrated use of classroom observation, interviews, questionnaires, experiments, and mixed methods and employ multidimensional data collection and analysis to examine more objectively the effects and mechanisms of active-learning strategies. Cross-regional and cross-school collaborative research can also be strengthened to improve the reliability and generalizability of findings and provide more substantial evidence for the development of active-learning theory and the practice of English reading instruction.

5. Conclusion

Against the background of core-competency-oriented English curriculum reform, active learning provides an important perspective for English reading instruction to focus on students' development as active agents and to promote changes in learning approaches. English reading instruction should not only help students acquire language knowledge and understand discourse meaning but also attend to their active thinking, meaning construction, and ability development during the reading process. In the future, as curriculum reform continues and educational environments evolve, English reading instruction needs to give greater attention to student agency, explore teaching approaches that better accord with the laws of learning, and promote students' transformation from recipients of knowledge into constructors of meaning. The concept of active learning will continue to play an important role in both the practice and theoretical exploration of English reading instruction, providing strong support for optimizing English classroom teaching, promoting students' autonomous development, and implementing the cultivation of English subject core competencies.

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