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Why Can Literature Teaching Be Adapted to Low-Starting-Point Learners? — An Action Research on Cooperative Learning Facilitating Tier Mobility Among Rural Senior High School English Struggling Learners

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Abstract: ***Addressing English learning difficulties in rural senior high schools is critical to advancing equity in basic education. Existing interventions, however, remain largely confined to remedial training, failing to embed language learning within thematic contexts and neglecting the operational mechanisms of cooperative learning. This study involved 48 Grade 10 English struggling learners in western Guangdong, used classic literary excerpts as instructional materials, and employed cooperative learning as the core mechanism in a one-semester action research project. A questionnaire survey diagnosed the roots of learning difficulties, informing the construction of a four-dimensional model integrating theme-based instruction, differentiated adaptation, cooperative learning, and monitoring follow-up. Findings indicate that the roots of learning difficulties constitute a three-layer nested structure: foundational deficits, methodological deficits, and motivational deficits, with the latter being the most deep-seated. Cooperative learning, implemented through five cooperative structures, facilitated tier mobility among students of varying proficiency levels. Improvement rates for the two classes reached 50% and 54.17%, respectively. These findings provide empirical support for adapting literature teaching to low-proficiency learners.***

Keywords: Literature teaching, Low-starting-point adaptive instruction, Cooperative learning, Tier mobility, Action research.

1. Introduction

English learning difficulties are particularly pronounced in rural senior high schools. The urban-rural gap in English education manifests not only in teacher allocation and infrastructure but, more fundamentally, in the misalignment between classroom instruction and students' actual proficiency. According to a May 2026 report in *Zhanjiang Daily*, rural English education in western Guangdong faces constraints including scarce resources and insufficient teaching staff; rural students rarely encounter English in daily life, and English learning has long lacked authentic contextual support. At the classroom level, this dilemma manifests directly when textbook difficulty far exceeds students' proficiency: instruction becomes a one-way transmission, and struggling learners can neither comprehend language knowledge nor experience success.

Research on struggling learners has proceeded along three lines—affective, methodological, and structural—proposing strategies such as low starting point, small gradient, multiple repetitions, and strong encouragement. Two fundamental limitations nonetheless persist. First, support is treated as a thematically detached remedial activity, so struggling learners never enter meaningful language-use situations, and motivational activation lacks a sustained carrier. Second, cooperative learning remains largely at the formal level of group discussion, failing to function as a systematic mechanism supporting tier mobility; this easily produces an ability fossilization pattern in which foundational-tier students fall silent while advanced-tier students monopolize discourse.

Meanwhile, international research on literature in foreign language teaching is undergoing a revival. Lazar (1993) distinguished between the study of literature and the use of literature, proposing three approaches: language-based, content-based, and reader-response. Bekteshi and Avdiu (2024) demonstrated experimentally that integrating literary texts into EFL instruction stimulates critical thinking. Sun (2023) found that Chinese secondary English teachers face dual difficulties of scarce materials and insufficient training when implementing literature teaching. Existing research, however, has largely targeted intermediate-to-advanced learners; whether literature teaching can be adapted to low-proficiency learners—particularly English struggling learners in rural senior high schools—remains empirically underexplored in Chinese rural contexts.

This study addresses two progressive questions. The first is foundational: Can literature teaching be adapted to low-proficiency language learners, specifically English struggling learners in rural senior high schools? Existing research (Nuttall, 1996; Lazar, 1994) indicates that adapting literary texts for low-proficiency learners requires careful design, yet empirical evidence on whether adapted texts can be effectively implemented in real classrooms remains scarce. The second question is mechanism-oriented: If literature teaching can be adapted, what is the key operational mechanism? This study proposes that cooperative learning serves as the core mechanism for achieving low-starting-point adaptation, expanding the teacher's centralized scaffolding into distributed scaffolding jointly provided by the teacher and peers, thereby enabling tier mobility within a shared thematic inquiry.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 International Advances in Research on Low-Proficiency EFL Learners

International research on low-proficiency language learners is shifting from a deficit orientation to an adaptation orientation. Early research attributed low proficiency to learners' cognitive or motivational deficits, with interventions focused on repairing deficits; recent research emphasizes the misalignment between instructional systems and learners' proficiency levels.

Benaicha et al.'s (2026) action research on low-proficiency EFL writing in Algeria demonstrated that combining CEFR can-do descriptors with genre-based scaffolds helped such learners re-engage with higher-level EFL contexts. Although consistent with the present study in population, method, and intervention, that study focused on writing skill development, did not embed language learning within thematic inquiry, and did not design cooperative learning as distributed scaffolding—a gap the present study addresses.

2.2 Research on Literature in Foreign Language Teaching

Lazar's (1993) Literature and Language Teaching laid the theoretical foundation for the revival of literature teaching. Lazar distinguished between literature as learning object and literature as teaching resource, proposing three approaches: the language-based approach treats literary texts as material for language activities, focusing on vocabulary, syntax, and style; the content-based approach treats literary texts as carriers of cultural information, focusing on thematic and cultural understanding; the reader-response approach treats literary texts as media for stimulating personal experience and emotional response, focusing on readers' active meaning construction. These approaches can be combined in classroom practice.

For low-proficiency learners, Lazar (1994) further argued that teachers should prioritize the use of literature over the study of literature, carefully designing or adapting texts to suit students' abilities while maintaining thematic cognitive challenge. This provides direct theoretical justification for the present study: the core of low-starting-point adaptive instruction lies not in lowering standards but in providing pathways to standards. The instructional sequence in this study—vocabulary input, text comprehension, task output, reflective sharing—concretizes this integrated approach.

Bekteshi and Avdiu's (2024) experimental study in university EFL classrooms in Kosovo showed that the experimental group ($n = 32$) significantly outperformed the control group ($n = 31$) in language proficiency improvement, and contemporary social themes in literary texts stimulated more classroom discussion and critical thinking. However, their participants were higher education students whose proficiency far exceeded the rural senior high school struggling learners in this study. Sun's (2023) case study of four Chinese secondary schools found that teachers mainly used the language approach and reader approach, with the cultural approach and personal growth approach relatively weak, and faced dual difficulties of scarce materials and insufficient training. Sun's research directly points to the question this study attempts to answer: In resource-poor rural schools, how can teachers select and adapt literary materials for struggling learners?

Anggraini and Yanto (2025) combined Literature Circles with the Teaching and Learning Cycle in Indonesian junior high EFL classrooms, through four stages—building field knowledge, text modeling, joint construction, and independent construction—helping students transition from supported participation to independent analysis. Students improved in vocabulary noticing, inferential ability, and critical response. This design parallels the cooperative learning logic of the present study; the difference is that Anggraini and Yanto's design emphasizes peer-led literature circle roles, while the present study emphasizes the combination of teacher-led scaffold provision and peer interaction—a difference related to the weaker autonomous learning ability of rural senior high school struggling learners.

Tsang, Paran, and Lau (2023), from the learner's perspective, found that learners gained not only vocabulary and expression benefits from literary reading, but also significant gains in non-language dimensions such as emotional resonance, cultural understanding, and self-reflection. This supports a core hypothesis of the present study: the non-language benefits of literary texts may be the key mechanism for activating struggling learners' motivation—when students discover that English can express genuine emotions and thoughts, learning ceases to be learning for exams.

2.3 Theoretical Context of Cooperative Learning in Language Classrooms

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory posits that learners, when interacting with more capable peers, can develop between their actual level of independent problem-solving and their potential level with adult or peer assistance. This provides the most fundamental rationale for cooperative learning: peer interaction is not an auxiliary means of teaching but a necessary mediator for learners to cross the Zone of Proximal Development.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) systematically articulated five basic elements of cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing. In struggling-learner classrooms, without individual accountability design, cooperative learning can easily degenerate into capable students doing everything while less capable students watch; without explicit teaching of social skills, struggling learners may refuse to participate for fear of making mistakes. Slavin (1995), from a motivational perspective, emphasized that combining group rewards with individual accountability can stimulate intrinsic motivation, echoing Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System theory: cooperative learning, by providing positive L2 learning experiences, can help reconstruct struggling learners' vague or even absent ideal L2 self.

In language classrooms, the classic form of cooperative learning is Literature Circles. Daniels (2002) assigned

specific roles to each group member (discussion director, vocabulary enricher, passage summarizer, life connector, etc.), ensuring everyone participates through role division. This model has important implications for low-starting-point adaptive instruction: role division can transform language ability differences into task function differences, enabling foundational-tier students to find non-language-ability contributions in groups (such as timekeeper, recorder), thereby reducing participation anxiety.

However, existing cooperative learning research has mostly targeted intermediate-and-above learners, with insufficient research on the applicability and operational mechanisms of cooperative learning in struggling-learner classrooms. When cooperative learning is combined with differentiated instruction, how to avoid label fossilization caused by ability grouping and how to enable students at different tiers to achieve tier mobility still lacks systematic theoretical explanation and empirical verification. This study is precisely a response to this gap.

2.4 Theme-Based Instruction and Instructional Adaptation for Low-Proficiency Learners

The theoretical foundation of Theme-Based Instruction can be traced to Content-Based Instruction and the CLIL framework. The CLIL 4Cs framework proposed by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010)—Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture—emphasizes the integration of language learning and content learning, consistent with the core proposition of theme-based teaching. However, existing theme-based instruction research has mostly targeted intermediate-to-advanced learners, with relatively weak research on low-proficiency learners. For low-proficiency learners, theme-based instruction faces a special challenge: there is tension between thematic depth and linguistic accessibility—the deeper the theme, the higher the language proficiency required; if the theme is simplified to accommodate language proficiency, it easily leads to hollowing out of content.

This study's strategy for responding to this tension is: using literary excerpts rather than full-text reading as the basic unit of material selection. By selecting 200–300 word core excerpts from classic works, the thematic depth and emotional power of the works are preserved, while linguistic accessibility is ensured through simplified syntax and controlled vocabulary density. The theoretical basis for this strategy comes from Cummins's (2000) BICS/CALP distinction: the adaptation of literary excerpts should maintain the cognitive challenge at the CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) level while lowering the language threshold at the BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) level. In other words, students use simple English to think about complex questions.

2.5 International Academic Context of Rural English Education Research in China

Shi and Ma's (2025) study, using mixed methods, examined the implementation of place-based education in rural English teaching in China, finding that rural English education faces three core challenges: disconnection between English education and local culture, absence of indigenous knowledge in textbooks, and lack of professional training for rural teachers. The Dual-Core approach proposed by the study—optimizing the decision-making process of the educational team and enhancing teachers' and students' awareness of local culture—provides a systematic framework for improving rural English education. Sun and Shi's (2024) study focused on the motivation of rural primary school English teachers, revealing structural obstacles rural areas face in providing high-quality language teaching: generalist teachers lack EFL professional training, and understanding these teachers' motivation for teaching EFL is crucial for formulating effective support policies. These studies collectively paint a complex picture of rural English education in China: the problem is not merely resource scarcity but systemic misalignment between resources and needs.

This study's position is: it does not attempt to solve the macro-structural dilemmas of rural English education but focuses on a micro but critical issue—under existing resource conditions, how can teachers achieve effective alignment between instruction and struggling learners' actual proficiency at the classroom level? Literary excerpts as a low-cost, high-cultural-density material choice, and cooperative learning as a low-threshold, high-participation organizational form, may provide a feasible path for addressing this issue.

2.6 Integration of the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study consists of four layers.

First layer: Theme-based integration principle. Teaching content and task design revolve around the semester's core theme, aligned with the unit themes of the PEP high school English textbook, ensuring consistency between classroom teaching and textbook use. The function of the theme is not merely organizing teaching content but activating learning motivation—only when language learning is combined with meaningful thematic inquiry can struggling learners' learning motivation be continuously activated. (Liu, 2024)

Second layer: Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding theory. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that teaching should focus on students' potential developmental level. The concept of scaffolding proposed by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) further clarifies the operational path: teachers provide graduated prompts from implicit to explicit, helping students complete tasks they cannot complete independently, and gradually withdrawing scaffolds as students' abilities improve. The concept of low-starting-point adaptation in this study is precisely the practical application of this theory: adaptation is not simply lowering difficulty but through precise diagnostic assessment and structured scaffold design, keeping instructional tasks always at the edge of students' Zone of Proximal Development.

Third layer: Cooperative learning as distributed scaffolding. This study positions cooperative learning as a distributed scaffolding system: scaffolding provided by the teacher is centralized, limited by teacher energy and classroom time; scaffolding provided by peers is distributed, enabling many-to-many support in group interaction. However, for cooperative learning to function as scaffolding,

three conditions must be met: structured role division (ensuring everyone participates), tiered task design (ensuring everyone can do something), and mobile tier mechanisms (ensuring everyone can advance).

Fourth layer: Three-layer nested structure of learning difficulty roots. Based on survey data, this study proposes that the roots of struggling learners' difficulties exhibit a foundational deficits—methodological deficits—motivational deficits three-layer nested structure. Foundational deficits (insufficient vocabulary, fragmented grammar) can be understood through Cummins's BICS/CALP distinction: struggling learners can barely cope at the BICS level but have significant deficits at the CALP level, while high school English teaching is oriented toward CALP. Methodological deficits can be explained through Oxford's (1990) language learning strategy classification system: struggling learners have systematic deficiencies in metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies, among which the lack of social strategies is precisely the dimension that cooperative learning can compensate for. Motivational deficits can be analyzed through Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System theory: struggling learners' ideal L2 self is vague or even absent, the ought-to L2 self is dominated by exam pressure, and the L2 learning experience remains negative for a long time. Cooperative learning, by providing positive peer interaction experiences, may improve the L2 learning experience, thereby driving the reconstruction of the ideal L2 self. This three-layer structure implies that effective intervention must simultaneously address all three layers, and the sequence of intervention entry is crucial—directly remediating foundations easily activates struggling learners' learned helplessness; a more effective path is to use the theme as an entry point, first activating interest at the experiential level, then providing strategies at the methodological level, and finally completing reinforcement at the knowledge level.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts action research methodology, following the plan–act–observe–reflect cycle proposed by Mertler (2020), conducting a one-semester instructional intervention in authentic classroom contexts. Action research was selected for two reasons. First, the goal is not to verify a predetermined hypothesis but to improve through action; the researcher is the practitioner, able to continuously adjust the plan based on student feedback. Second, struggling-learner support is itself a problem-solving process in specific contexts, and action research is highly consistent with this logic.

The study comprises three cycles. Cycle 1 (Weeks 4-8) focused on theme activation and emotional entry, with cooperative learning primarily in the form of desk-mate pairing. Cycle 2 (Weeks 9-12) focused on differentiated adaptation and scaffold optimization, with cooperative learning expanded to four-person groups and role division introduced. Cycle 3 (Weeks 13-15) focused on theme deepening and tier mobility, introducing cross-tier browsing and progress spokesperson mechanisms.

3.2 Research Participants

Student participants. Participants were English struggling learners from Grade 10 Classes 3 and 4 at Huguang senior high school in Zhanjiang (24 students per class, N = 48). Struggling learners were operationally defined as those with (a) an average English score below 60 on the three most recent examinations and (b) a senior high school entrance examination English score below 60. Both classes exhibited below-average overall English proficiency, with struggling learners accounting for nearly half of total enrollment, typical of rural senior high schools in western Guangdong.

Teacher participant. The researcher is the English teacher of both classes, with five years of rural senior high school English teaching experience. To reduce the risk of researcher bias, the following measures were taken: a colleague from the same teaching research group was invited as a critical friend to regularly observe classroom teaching and independently record student performance; in data analysis, data from both improved and non-improved students were presented to avoid selective reporting; the teacher's reflective journal explicitly required recording failed attempts and unexpected difficulties.

Research ethics. The research purpose and methods were explained to school administration and the parent committee, and consent was obtained; the questionnaire was anonymous, and score data were de-identified during analysis; students had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without affecting their normal academic evaluation.

3.3 Teaching Materials and Instruments

Literary excerpt comprehensive exercises. Based on the themes of the PEP high school English textbook, excerpts from five classic literary works were selected, with 3-5 comprehensive exercises designed for each work. Material selection followed three criteria: correspondence between the theme and the textbook unit theme, self-sufficiency of the excerpt, and linguistic accessibility (vocabulary density controlled within 5%). Each excerpt underwent a three-step adaptation process of simplification, annotation, and scaffold embedding.

Struggling learner root cause questionnaire. A self-designed questionnaire with 33 items, covering five dimensions: learning foundation, learning attitude and motivation, learning methods and habits, teaching and classroom factors, and environmental and external factors. Three English teaching experts conducted content validity assessment, and after pilot testing with 10 struggling learners, 6 items with unclear wording were revised. The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the semester; 90 valid responses were collected (including non-struggling learners from both classes), yielding a 100% valid response rate.

Score data. Midterm exam scores served as the pre-test, and final exam scores as the post-test. Both exam papers were uniformly set by the school, with basically consistent question types and difficulty.

Classroom observation records and teacher reflective journals. The critical friend conducted structured observations in each class using literary excerpt comprehensive exercises, focusing on student participation

behavior, task completion, and emotional response. The researcher wrote brief reflective journals after each class, recording the rationale for instructional adjustments.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation to examine the distribution characteristics of learning difficulty roots. Given that the intervention focused on improvement rates rather than mean score differences, quantitative analysis of score data employed descriptive statistics (number of improvers, improvement rate, distribution of improvement ranges), supplemented by qualitative evidence for triangulation.

Qualitative data. Classroom observation records and teacher reflective journals were coded using thematic analysis. The coding process had three steps: open coding (marking meaningful segments), axial coding (categorizing segments into themes such as student participation, emotional response, task adaptation, scaffold effectiveness, and peer interaction), and selective coding (distilling core categories such as cumulative effect of success experiences, emotional entry function of themes, and micro-mechanisms of tier mobility).

Data triangulation. Quantitative data (scores, questionnaire) and qualitative data (classroom observation, reflective journals) were mutually verified: when score data showed significant improvement in a certain type of student, the classroom observation records of that type of student's participation behavior changes were traced back; when qualitative data suggested a certain scaffold strategy was effective, changes in corresponding dimensions of score data were examined.

4. Diagnostic Analysis of Learning Difficulty Roots

It should be noted that the questionnaire was administered to all students in both classes, yielding 90 valid responses (including non-struggling learners). The following analysis presents distribution characteristics of the full sample, with particular attention to data patterns directly relevant to the 48 struggling learners. All percentages are based on the 90 valid responses.

4.1 Foundational Deficits: Systematic Fracture in Language Knowledge

Survey data show that struggling learners have severe structural deficiencies at the foundational language knowledge level. In terms of phonetic symbol mastery, only 20% of students basically master them and can independently spell words, 51.11% can read some phonetic symbols but pronounce inaccurately, 25.56% only recognize letters but cannot read phonetic symbols, and 3.33% cannot recognize letters at all. In terms of vocabulary, 34.44% can only recognize the most basic simple words from primary and middle school, and 32.22% can recognize most middle school core vocabulary but know almost none of the high school textbook vocabulary. The combination of these two data points means that more than two-thirds of students are in a state of functional illiteracy when facing high school textbook vocabulary. In terms of grammar, 18.89% completely do not understand, 35.56% only understand scattered middle school grammar and know no high school grammar at all, 42.22% can understand basic middle school grammar but are vaguely confused about high school grammar, and only 3.33% basically master middle and high school basic grammar and can apply it in simple exercises. In terms of translation ability, 13.33% cannot translate at all, 41.11% can only translate individual words but cannot organize sentences, 40% can translate simple sentences with many errors, and only 5.56% can basically translate simple sentences accurately.

Using Cummins's (2000) BICS/CALP framework to examine this situation: struggling learners' functioning at the BICS level is not completely lost—they can engage in the most basic daily English communication—but they have significant deficits at the CALP level (academic language ability, including expression of abstract concepts, logical argumentation, and academic reading). High school English teaching content and assessment are precisely oriented toward CALP. This BICS-retained-while-CALP-fractured situation means that low-starting-point adaptive instruction should not start from zero but should use students' existing BICS as a cognitive anchor to build a bridge to CALP.

4.2 Methodological Deficits: Systematic Deficiency in Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) divided language learning strategies into direct strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, social). Survey data show that struggling learners have systematic deficiencies in multiple strategy dimensions.

In terms of memory strategies, 48.89% rote memorize and repeatedly copy words, and 25.56% rarely specifically memorize words, with contextual memory (10%) and root-affix associative memory (15.56%) having extremely low usage rates. In terms of metacognitive strategies, 72.22% have vague goals but no specific plans, and 15.56% have no goals at all; 62.22% have no error notebook, and 28.89% have an error notebook but rarely review it.

Particularly noteworthy is the lack of social strategies. 25.56% have no study partners, and 52.22% have but rarely study together, totaling nearly 78%. 45.56% spend almost no time on extracurricular English learning daily, and 27.78% spend less than 15 minutes, totaling over 73%. Struggling learners face the dual dilemma of time poverty and strategy poverty, and cooperative learning is precisely a possible path to simultaneously alleviate both—it transforms extracurricular learning into in-class interaction and individual isolated learning into peer mutual assistance.

4.3 Motivational Deficits: Imbalance in the L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System theory decomposes L2 learning motivation into three dimensions: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. Survey data show alarming signals in all three dimensions.

In terms of the ideal L2 self, only 5.56% are very interested and actively willing to learn English, while 17.78% are completely uninterested and 33.33% are low interest, only to cope with exams. In terms of the ought-to L2 self, 41.11% of students' main motivation for learning English is to cope with exams and avoid dragging down the total score, and 11.11% is parental requirement—external pressure dominates learning motivation. In terms of the L2 learning experience, when scores are unsatisfactory, 25.56% don't care, accustomed to it (a manifestation of learned helplessness), and 22.22% feel depressed and inferior, feeling they cannot learn English well.

The largest proportion of students (43.33%) selected somewhat interested but easily affected by scores, indicating that most students are not completely averse to English learning, but their interest has been suppressed by continuous academic frustration. If students can gain success experiences in thematic tasks, the L2 learning experience may shift from negative to positive, thereby driving the reconstruction of the ideal L2 self; peer recognition plays a greater role here than teacher praise.

4.4 Theoretical Integration of the Three-Layer Nested Structure

Integrating the findings from the above three levels, a three-layer nested structure model of learning difficulty roots can be proposed (as shown in Figure 1). Foundational deficits (insufficient vocabulary, fragmented grammar) are the most surface-level manifestation and the most easily identified and intervened upon by teachers. Methodological deficits (lack of learning strategies, weak metacognitive ability, lack of social strategies) are the middle layer, explaining why students cannot effectively internalize language knowledge even when exposed to it. Motivational deficits (vague ideal L2 self, negative learning experience) are the deep structure, determining whether learning behavior is sustainable.

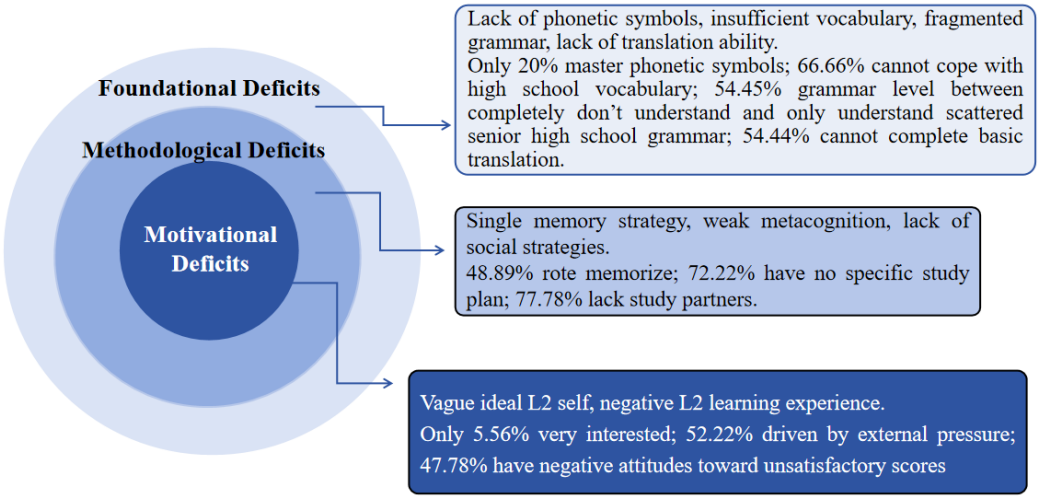


Figure 1 Three-layer nested structure of learning difficulty roots

The core implication of this structure for instructional intervention is: the sequence of intervention entry should be opposite to the nested sequence of the structure. Directly remediating foundations has limited effectiveness because it ignores motivational deficits—after experiencing three years of starting-from-zero frustration in senior high school, students harbor strong psychological resistance to any form of foundation remediation. A more effective path is: using the theme as an entry point, first activating positive feedback at the L2 learning experience level, then providing adaptive strategy scaffolds at the methodological level, and finally completing foundation reinforcement at the knowledge level. Cooperative learning runs through this path: it improves the L2 learning experience through peer interaction, compensates for lack of social strategies through role division, and achieves foundation reinforcement through tiered tasks.

5. Construction of the Low-Starting-Point Adaptive English Classroom Teaching Model

5.1 Four-Dimensional Framework of the Model and Cooperative Learning Mechanism

The framework of this model is theme-based integration—differentiated adaptation—cooperative learning—monitoring follow-up, with the four dimensions forming a closed loop. Cooperative learning is not a fifth dimension but the core operational mechanism running through differentiated adaptation and task-driven instruction.

Theme-based integration. Teaching content revolves around the semester's core theme. This study uses PEP High School English Compulsory 1 Unit 1 Teenage Life as the alignment unit, establishing Growth and Exploration of Youth as the semester's core theme, with five sub-themes: Friendship and Understanding, Family and Responsibility, Loneliness and Self, Life and Growth, and Humans and Nature, each aligned with an excerpt from a classic literary work. The function of the theme is not a decorative background but an engine of meaning production—the language students use in thematic inquiry has genuine communicative purposes, rather than pseudo-communication practiced for practice's sake.

Differentiated adaptation. Each task is designed at three tiers: foundational, advanced, and extension. The foundational tier corresponds to the BICS level as defined by Cummins (2000), focusing on information identification and simple expression; the advanced tier corresponds to the initial CALP level, focusing on information analysis and comparison; the extension tier corresponds to the advanced

CALP level, focusing on value judgment and creative expression. The design logic of differentiation is: enabling every student to complete explorations of different depths within the same thematic world, rather than ability segregation across different themes.

Cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is the operational mechanism of differentiated adaptation. Its core function is not having students complete tasks in groups but achieving three goals through structured peer interaction: expanding the centralized scaffolding provided by the teacher alone into distributed scaffolding jointly provided by the teacher and peers; compensating for struggling learners' lack of social strategies through role division; breaking the fossilized pattern of foundational-tier students always doing foundational tasks through tier mobility mechanisms.

Task-driven. The core segment of the class is students doing something in English. The authenticity of tasks is reflected in two aspects: authenticity of audience (students know who will hear their expression) and authenticity of purpose (students know what problem their expression is meant to solve). Under the low-starting-point adaptive framework, the authenticity of tasks does not require complete consistency with the real world—a task such as introducing a favorite festival custom to a peer may involve a simulated audience, yet the expressive purpose and emotion remain authentic.

Monitoring follow-up. Using classroom observation, task completion, and learning reflection cards as evidence sources, instructional adjustments are made every two weeks. The core of monitoring is not scoring but diagnosis—judging whether the current task difficulty is at the edge of students' Zone of Proximal Development, whether scaffold density is appropriate, and whether tier mobility is occurring in cooperative learning.

5.2 Tier Mobility Mechanisms of Cooperative Learning Within the Thematic Perspective

Cooperative learning in struggling-learner classrooms faces a fundamental challenge: if grouping is inappropriate, foundational-tier students may fall silent due to anxiety, advanced-tier students may monopolize discourse, and cooperation degenerates into a performance by a few. To avoid this dilemma, cooperative learning must complete a fundamental relational reversal: the theme is not the background of cooperative learning but the reason for cooperative learning; tiers are not students' labels but the dynamic coordinates of students' current position in thematic inquiry.

Theme as the source of cooperative demand. The necessity of cooperative learning should not come from the teacher needs students to cooperate but from thematic inquiry itself requires multiple perspectives. When the theme is designed as a problem domain with inherent tension, cooperation ceases to be an artificial organizational arrangement and becomes a natural need for meaning construction. Taking the sub-theme Confusion and Rebellion of Youth in The Catcher in the Rye as an example, when the theme is designed as "Is Holden's rebellion bravery or escape?" different students may develop sharply different positions based on their own life experiences. The necessity of cooperative learning thus arises: not because the teacher asked me to discuss but because I need to hear what others think.

Theme as the organizational logic of cooperation. The grouping logic shifts from ability complementarity to perspective dialogue. Under the theme Exploration and Persistence of Youth in *On the Road at Eighteen*, students' understandings of what the protagonist is actually looking for differ. Some believe he is looking for a concrete inn (security, belonging), while others believe he is looking for a state of being on the road (freedom, adventure). These understandings are not right or wrong but perspectives. If grouped by ability, foundational-tier students may lose the opportunity to express their unique understanding because they cannot explain clearly; if grouped by perspective, foundational-tier students can express their positions in simple language, while advanced-tier students are responsible for transforming positions into more complete arguments.

Theme as the output orientation of cooperation. The output of cooperative learning should point to deepening of thematic meaning, not merely a product. Taking the sub-theme Family Responsibility and Sacrifice in *The Metamorphosis* as an example, the group jointly completes a spectrum of family responsibility—the horizontal axis is objects of responsibility (parents, siblings, self), and the vertical axis is cost of responsibility (time, money, emotion). Each student marks their understanding (in English) on the spectrum, and the group discusses the relationships between these markings. The final output is a class-shared spectrum displayed on the classroom wall. Cooperative learning thus becomes a process tool for thematic meaning construction, rather than a summative performance.

Four mechanisms of tier mobility. First, **visibility of tiers**. Foundational-tier students cannot only do foundational-tier tasks without ever seeing what advanced-tier tasks look like. In the task output segment, after completing their own sentence imitation, foundational-tier students are invited to browse advanced-tier students' analysis cards. The teacher provides minimal browsing guidance: Is there a word in his analysis that you recognize? What component does his sentence have that yours doesn't? If you were to add a "because" to your sentence, what would you add? The starting point of tier advancement is not fully understanding the higher tier but noticing the existence of the higher tier.

Second, **permeability of tiers**. Tier gradients are set within the same task type, rather than different task types corresponding to different tiers. Taking opinion expression as an example, the foundational tier can be expressing the position in one word, the advanced tier can be expressing the position in one sentence with a reason, and the extension tier can be expressing position, reason, and possible counterarguments in three sentences. Tier advancement is no longer a qualitative leap of jumping from writing sentences to writing analysis but a quantitative change of moving from saying one word to one sentence to three sentences within the same task.

Third, **fluidity of roles**. Roles in cooperative learning—group leader, recorder, spokesperson, timekeeper—rotate weekly. In

the group presentation during the task output segment, the spokesperson is not the person with the best language but the person who made the greatest progress in this task. The teacher provides criteria for progress judgment: last time only wrote one word, this time wrote a sentence—progress; last time the sentence had no because, this time it does—progress; last time chose the foundational tier, this time chose the advanced tier—progress. Speaking rights are not a reward for ability but confirmation of growth.

Fourth, **traction of the theme**. The fundamental driving force of tier advancement comes from students' experience in thematic inquiry of being unable to fully express themselves with their current language proficiency. When a student has a unique understanding of Holden's rebellion but finds that their English can only say "He is brave", the impulse to say more that arises within them is the most genuine and enduring driving force for tier advancement. Cooperative learning provides language resources for saying more in this process: when foundational-tier students share their views in the group, advanced-tier or extension-tier students respond with richer language. Foundational-tier students may not immediately master the sentence, but they will remember the expression and may try to use it in a future task.

5.3 Adaptive Processing of Literary Excerpts

Transforming classic literary works into low-starting-point adaptive teaching materials requires three levels of adaptive processing.

Language simplification. Excerpt texts are controlled at 200–300 words, mainly simple and compound sentences, with vocabulary density controlled within 5%. Simplification follows the principle of preserving thematic depth and lowering language threshold, without changing the core emotion and thought of the original text, only adjusting syntactic complexity. For example, "I'm sick of just about everything in this school" from *The Catcher in the Rye* is retained (because the sentence structure is simple and the emotion is strong), while "All the boys here are only thinking about one thing" is broken down into "The boys here think about one thing only".

Task tiering. Taking the excerpt from *The Catcher in the Rye* as an example. Foundational-tier task: listening fill-in-the-blanks and simple sentence imitation. Advanced-tier task: completing a Holden's emotions—reasons analysis table, briefly explaining in English why Holden hates school. Extension-tier task: discussing "Is Holden's rebellion a sign of growth or an escape?" and requiring expression of opinion in English with at least one reason.

Scaffold embedding. All tasks provide Chinese prompts, sentence frames, and example references. Scaffold design follows the gradual withdrawal principle: when students perform well in two consecutive similar tasks, the teacher attempts to reduce scaffolds.

5.4 Five Key Segments of Classroom Implementation (Cooperative Learning Version)

Building on the model framework and tier mobility mechanisms described above, classroom implementation integrates five key segments. Each segment corresponds to a specific cooperative learning structure and serves a distinct adaptive function (see Table 1).

Table 1

Segment	Duration	Cooperative Structure	Core Adaptive Function
Theme activation	3 min	Opinion spectrum	Establish emotional connection, let foundational-tier students be heard
Vocabulary input	5 min	Semantic field co-construction	Increase repetition, consolidate chunks in context
Text comprehension	5 min	Perspective jigsaw	Train metacognitive strategies through explanatory dialogue
Task output	5 min	Multi-voice theme wall	Same-tier peer assessment + cross-tier display, differentiation without segregation
Reflective sharing	2 min	Tier growth narrative	Socialization of metacognition

6. Practice Process of Instructional Intervention

6.1 Cycle 1: Theme Activation and Emotional Entry (Weeks 4–8)

The core goal of Cycle 1 was to test whether literary excerpt materials could stimulate struggling learners' participation interest, with cooperative learning primarily in the form of desk-mate pairing. The selected material was an excerpt from *The Catcher in the Rye*, aligned with Unit 1 Teenage Life.

Classroom observation records show that in the vocabulary input segment, when the teacher presented the word phony, a struggling learner who normally never participated in class voluntarily raised his hand and said: Teacher, does this word mean fake? Sometimes I also feel some people are very fake. This was the student's first voluntary speech this semester. The critical friend recorded: This student's speech was not the result of being called on by the teacher, but a spontaneous expression after the thematic content resonated with personal experience.

In the task output segment, most foundational-tier students chose the sentence imitation task. One student voluntarily showed his sentence to a peer after completing it: I'm tired of my mom comparing me with my cousin because it makes me feel I'm not good enough. The critical friend recorded: The emotional authenticity of this sentence is very high; the student is not making a sentence but speaking.

The teacher's reflective journal recorded a noteworthy phenomenon: Today 3 students voluntarily asked me after class whether we would have that story class next week. This is the first time since I started teaching this class that students have voluntarily asked about English class content. This phenomenon suggests: the emotional entry function of the theme is taking effect—students participate not because English is interesting but because this topic is related to me.

6.2 Cycle 2: Differentiated Adaptation and Scaffold Optimization (Weeks 9–12)

After Cycle 1, the teacher discovered a problem: students'

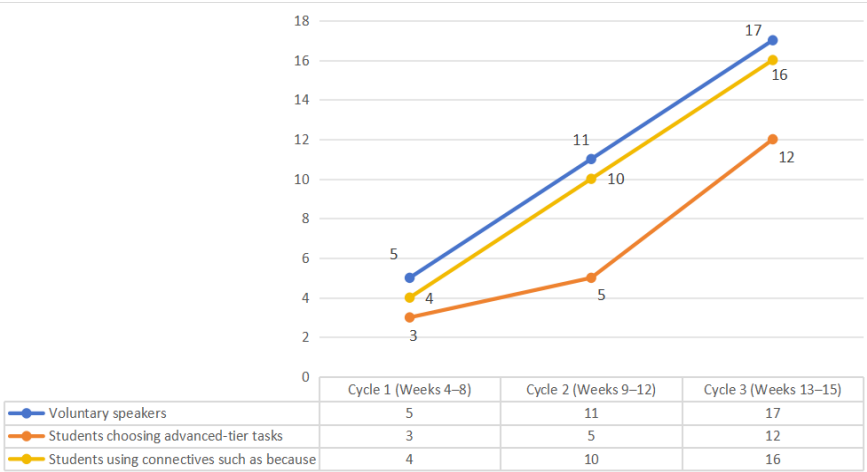
expressions in the life output segment were generally short, averaging only 1–2 sentences. The reason was not that students had no ideas but that they lacked sufficient output chunks to support richer expression. Therefore, the focus of Cycle 2 was adjusted to scaffold optimization, with cooperative learning expanded to four-person groups and role division introduced.

Adjustment measures included: increasing the vocabulary input segment from 5 to 7 minutes; adding a theme expression bank segment—organizing 5-6 high-frequency expression patterns under each theme; introducing a task upgrade mechanism—when students performed well in two consecutive foundational-tier tasks, the teacher encouraged them to challenge the advanced-tier task. In Cycle 2, 5 foundational-tier students completed at least one advanced-tier task. Four roles—group leader, recorder, spokesperson, timekeeper—were set in four-person groups, rotating weekly.

6.3 Cycle 3: Theme Deepening and Tier Mobility (Weeks 13–15)

The material selected for Cycle 3 was an excerpt from *The Call of the Wild*, aligned with Unit 4 Natural Disasters, with the sub-theme Adaptation and Growth. The key change in this cycle was: scaffold density significantly reduced, and cooperative learning introduced cross-tier browsing and progress spokesperson mechanisms.

Classroom observation records show that in the task output segment, a student who had previously always chosen foundational-tier tasks voluntarily chose an advanced-tier task and completed a brief analysis in English of Buck's adaptation to a new environment process. The critical friend recorded: When this student completed the advanced-tier task, although there were grammatical errors, the logic of expression was clear. He no longer avoided trying as before because he was afraid of making mistakes. In the reflective sharing segment, this student was selected by the group as progress spokesperson, and he said: I used to only write words, today I wrote a sentence.



	Cycle 1 (Weeks 4–8)	Cycle 2 (Weeks 9–12)	Cycle 3 (Weeks 13–15)
Voluntary speakers	5	11	17
Students choosing advanced-tier tasks	3	5	12
Students using connectives such as because	4	10	16

Figure 2 Changes in key participation behaviors across the three action research cycles

6.4 Analysis and Reflection on Non-Improved Students

Nearly half of the struggling learners in both classes did not achieve score improvement. Combining classroom observation and teacher reflective journals, the common characteristics of these students include: deeper foundational weakness (some students cannot even fully master the 26 letters and phonetic symbols), severely poor learning habits (never completed after-class micro-tasks), and extremely short attention span (effective participation time in class less than 5 minutes).

The teacher's reflective journal repeatedly mentioned a noteworthy phenomenon: Some students actually participated in class and showed interest, but completely did not review after class, and by the next class they had forgotten what was learned last time. This phenomenon suggests: classroom-level intervention has its boundaries. For students with severely lacking family support, coordinated intervention at the school and community levels is needed. This study's model can open a window, but sustained learning outside the window requires more systematic support.

7. Effectiveness Verification and Discussion

7.1 Quantitative Effectiveness

Score data from midterm to final show that among the 24 struggling learners in Grade 10 Class 3, 12 improved, an improvement rate of 50%; among the 24 struggling learners in Grade 10 Class 4, 13 improved, an improvement rate of 54.17%. A total of 25 students across both classes improved, with an overall improvement rate of 52.08%.

Improvement ranges showed clear class differences. Class 3's improvement range was concentrated between 2-17 points, with 6 students (50% of improved students) improving by 12 points or more, mainly in the mid-to-high range. Class 4's improvement range was concentrated between 2-19 points, with 7 students (53.85% of improved students) improving by 2-5 points, but also one case of a 19-point breakthrough. This difference can be explained from classroom observation: struggling learners in Class 3 were more inclined to choose advanced-tier tasks in the task output segment, while struggling learners in Class 4 remained more at the foundational tier. Peer effects may have played a role—Two struggling learners in Class 3 performed prominently after midterm, driving the overall willingness to challenge higher-tier tasks.

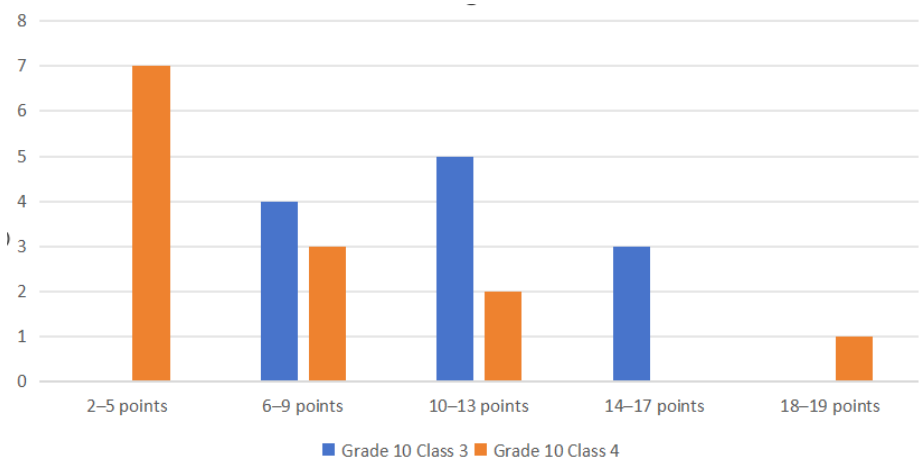


Figure 3 Distribution of score improvement ranges among struggling learners in the two classes

7.2 Cumulative Effect of Success Experiences and Tier Mobility in Qualitative Evidence

Thematic analysis distilled two core categories from teacher reflective journals.

Category 1: Cumulative effect of success experiences. This category contains three sub-themes. First, from not daring to do to willing to try: multiple students showed avoidance behavior toward any English task initially, but after Chinese prompts and sentence frames were provided, they completed tasks and showed reactions of surprised that they could do it. Second, from passive completion to active choice: in Cycle 2, students began to actively choose task tiers, marking a shift from an avoiding failure motivational pattern to a pursuing success motivational pattern. Third, from classroom participation to extracurricular extension: some students began to actively use expressions acquired in class after class. One student wrote in a weekly journal: I used to think English was just memorizing words, now I find English can also say my own things.

Category 2: Micro-mechanisms of tier mobility. Thematic analysis found that tier mobility does not occur at the moment a student jumps from a foundational-tier task to an advanced-tier task, but in three micro-processes. First, noticing the existence of the higher tier: foundational-tier students repeatedly saw in cross-tier browsing that advanced-tier students' sentences always have a "because", and subsequently unconsciously tried to add "because" in their own imitation. Second, generating expressive demand: when students had unique understandings of the theme but their existing language could not fully express them, cooperative peers provided language resources for saying more. Third, obtaining growth confirmation: when foundational-tier students were selected as progress spokesperson for their word-to-sentence progress, they gained not only a presentation opportunity, but an identity experience of "I can also stand higher".

7.3 Dialogue with Existing Research

Dialogue with Benaicha et al. (2026). Benaicha et al.'s study found that combining the CEFR framework with genre-based pedagogy can help low-proficiency students re-engage with higher-level EFL learning contexts. The present study's results support this finding but provide an important supplement: among low-proficiency learners, the premise of engagement is adaptation. If task difficulty far exceeds students' actual level, even with scaffolds, students cannot complete them. This study's differentiated adaptation principle is precisely a response to this issue: not lowering standards, but providing pathways to standards. Cooperative learning further expands the pathway from the teacher alone to joint provision by teacher and peers.

Dialogue with Sun (2023). Sun found that Chinese secondary English teachers face difficulties with scarce materials when implementing literature teaching. This study provides a response strategy: the adaptive processing of literary excerpts—language simplification, task tiering, scaffold embedding—can make literary texts suitable for low-proficiency learners without changing the core theme. Meanwhile, literature circle-style role division in cooperative learning provides organizational support for implementing literature teaching in low-proficiency classrooms.

Dialogue with Shi and Ma (2025). Shi and Ma's research pointed out that rural English education in China faces the problem of disconnection between English education and local culture. This study's practice shows that classic literary excerpts can to some extent play the role of cultural bridge: when students discuss the fragility and resilience of life through excerpts from *Tales of Hulan River*, and think about loneliness and growth through excerpts from *The Catcher in the Rye*, they are exposed not only to English language but also to a cross-cultural thematic dialogue.

Dialogue with cooperative learning research. The five elements of cooperative learning proposed by Johnson and Johnson (1999) were verified and contextualized in this study. Positive interdependence is embodied in jointly completing the theme wall, individual accountability in each person must complete their own task card, promotive interaction in same-tier peer assessment and cross-tier browsing, social skills in role rotation and the progress spokesperson mechanism, and group processing in tier growth narrative. Slavin's (1995) emphasis on combining group rewards with individual accountability is manifested in this study as groups recommending progress spokespersons rather than groups recommending the best—rewarding growth, not ability. This design avoids the fossilized pattern of the most capable

student always representing the group, giving every student the opportunity to receive peer and teacher recognition.

7.4 Applicable Conditions and Boundaries of the Model

The applicability of this model is not unconditional. Based on research practice, the following conditions have significant impact on the model's effectiveness.

First, teachers' deep understanding of the theme. The teaching effect of literary excerpts largely depends on whether teachers can guide students into the theme within limited time. Teachers need deep grasp of the work's theme to provide meaningful guidance when students have difficulty expressing themselves, rather than mechanically executing task procedures.

Second, class size control. The two classes in this study each had 24 struggling learners, but total class size was approximately 45 students. In the task output segment, teachers can provide one-on-one tutoring to struggling learners within one class period, provided total class size does not exceed 50. If class size is too large, implementation of differentiated adaptation and cooperative learning will face significant difficulties.

Third, explicit teaching of cooperative skills. Struggling learners are not naturally equipped with cooperative learning abilities. Before introducing cooperative learning, teachers need to explicitly teach social skills such as listening, responding, and helping. These skills can be gradually established through teacher demonstration—student imitation — classroom practice. Without this step, cooperative learning easily degenerates into free discussion.

Fourth, after-class micro-task completion rate. The after-class micro-task completion rate in this study was approximately 60%–70%. For students who did not complete micro-tasks, the effect of classroom intervention is easily offset by the forgetting curve. This means the model's effectiveness has some dependence on students' after-class participation.

8. Conclusion

This study took Grade 10 English struggling learners from a rural senior high school in western Guangdong as research participants, and through one semester of action research, constructed and practiced the Low-Starting-Point Adaptive English Classroom Teaching Model within the Thematic Perspective. The main conclusions are as follows.

First, the roots of English learning difficulties among rural senior high school students in western Guangdong exhibit a foundational deficits—methodological deficits—motivational deficits three-layer nested structure. Foundational deficits (insufficient vocabulary, fragmented grammar) are the most surface-level manifestation, but motivational deficits (vague ideal L2 self, negative learning experience) are the deep-seated factors constraining learning sustainability. The lack of social strategies in methodological deficits provides direct justification for the intervention of cooperative learning. Effective intervention must simultaneously address all three layers, and the sequence of intervention entry should prioritize activating experience over remediating foundations.

Second, cooperative learning within the thematic perspective, through five cooperative structures—opinion spectrum, semantic field co-construction, perspective jigsaw, multi-voice theme wall, and tier growth narrative—achieved tier mobility among students of different proficiency levels within the same theme.

Third, the classroom teaching model using classic literary excerpts as teaching materials, theme-based integration as the organizational principle, cooperative learning as the differentiated adaptation mechanism, and tiered tasks as the operational method can effectively improve struggling learners' academic performance. The improvement rates of the two classes were 50% and 54.17% respectively.

Fourth, the classroom operational principles of low starting point, small gradient, strong scaffolds, and progressive advancement, and the five-segment classroom process of theme activation—vocabulary input—text comprehension — task output—reflective sharing, constitute an operable and replicable struggling-learner support model in resource-poor rural schools.

The limitations of this study are: the research period was only one semester, unable to assess long-term effects of the intervention; research participants came from only one school, and the generalizability of conclusions needs verification; quantitative data used only midterm-to-final score changes as indicators, unable to fully control interference factors such as exam difficulty fluctuations. Future research can conduct multi-center verification on a larger scale and develop more refined measurement tools for learning motivation, learning strategies, and cooperative learning quality to more comprehensively evaluate the model's effectiveness.

Acknowledgments

Research and Practice on Senior High School English Teacher Education Based on Academic Quality Monitoring (Yue Jiao Gao Han [2023] No. 29), Research and Practice Project on New Normal Education Construction Promoting High-Quality Development of Basic Education; Research on the Adaptability of English Teachers in Western Guangdong to the New Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2023GXJK382), Guangdong Provincial Education Science Planning Project; Research on the Thresholds in Alice Munro's Works (ZW2021016), Humanities and Social Sciences Talent Program of Lingnan Normal University.

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