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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Organizational Management to Cognitive Scaffolding: A Comparative Case Study of Teacher Transitional Discourse in EFL Reading Lessons

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| ABSTRACT

In EFL classroom teaching, teacher transitional discourse serves as a crucial link connecting various activities and stages, playing a pivotal role in maintaining the flow of the entire lesson. Although it is frequently viewed merely as a procedural tool to connect instructional segments, its deeper pragmatic function as a cognitive scaffold to stimulate higher-order thinking at activity boundaries remains underexplored. This study aims to investigate the essential differences in the structural distribution and cognitive guiding strategies of transitional discourse between an exemplary and a routine senior high school EFL reading lesson. Adopting a comparative case study design, this research analyzes two lessons based on the same scientific reading text, "John Snow Defeats 'King Cholera'". Drawing upon Scaffolding Theory and Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, the study conducts a quantitative frequency comparison and a qualitative discourse analysis of the teachers' transitional moves. The findings reveal that despite a comparable total frequency of transitional talk, the two classrooms exhibited fundamentally different functional orientations. The routine lesson heavily relied on organizational transitions, with its cognitive prompts often falling into pseudo-open-ended questioning patterns dependent on predetermined answers. Conversely, the exemplary teacher made greater use of cognitive transitional discourse, particularly logical construction moves, which accounted for a larger proportion of her transitional talk by employing three core discursive strategies: externalizing causal logic, constructing progressive inductive scaffolding, and reconstructing deep semantic conflicts. The study concludes that the quality of transitional discourse will influence the development and construction of students' logical thinking in the classroom. It suggests that EFL teachers should enhance their classroom interactional competence by transforming mechanical procedural markers into evidence-based cognitive ladders, thereby potentially supporting deeper reading and meaning construction.

| KEYWORDS

Transitional discourse; cognitive scaffolding; EFL reading; comparative case study; Bloom's taxonomy

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the field of second language education, teacher classroom discourse serves not only as the primary medium for language input but also as a crucial mediational tool for promoting students' cognitive development and meaning construction. Teacher-student interaction in the classroom is typically composed of highly structured discourse sequences, such as the classic Initiation-Response-Feedback (I-R-F) model proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975).

However, the progression of these sequences is not seamlessly pieced together; the articulation between different discourse sequences inevitably requires linguistic transitions by the teacher. Within a single instructional phase, compact intra-activity shifts frequently occur between different discourse sequences or teaching items (Jacknick, 2011). That is to say, to logically connect isolated discourse sequences, teachers must rely on transitional discourse to conclude the preceding sequence and

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introduce the subsequent one, thereby achieving a smooth articulation between micro-sequences and maintaining students' cognitive focus.

Furthermore, authentic reading instruction is not merely a simple superimposition of these micro-discourse sequences; rather, it embeds different discourse sequences within macro-activities that have distinct pedagogical objectives. As instruction progresses, the classroom inevitably needs to move from one teaching activity to another, and such inter-activity shifts similarly require transitions (Jacknick, 2011). During this process, the pre-existing classroom interactional structure is broken. Markee (2004) defines this space at the boundaries of activities as "Zones of Interactional Transition" (ZITs). Teachers cross this zone and move from one pedagogical objective to another through transitional discourse. Teachers must utilize this transitional language to directly or indirectly announce the conclusion of the previous activity and the initiation of a new one, thereby renegotiating the students' participation framework and constructing new cognitive scaffolding (Lwin et al., 2012; Odo, 2026).

Therefore, whether within or between instructional activities, the significance of teacher transitional discourse cannot be ignored. Beyond these connective functions, teacher transitional discourse can also build cognitive scaffolding for students, which closely aligns with the core demands of current curriculum reform in the context of English language teaching in China. The *Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2020)* (MOE, 2020) explicitly lists thinking quality as an essential component of the core competencies in the English discipline, emphasizing the development of students' logical and critical thinking. It requires that instruction should avoid fragmentation and must guide students to establish connections between information and form new knowledge structures. Against this background, classroom transitional discourse is by no means merely a tool for connecting instructional procedures; it is a crucial scaffold helping students construct a logical system. High-quality transitional discourse can intuitively display the deep logical progression of a text, effectively resolving the issue of knowledge fragmentation. By utilizing logical transitional language, teachers can demonstrate to students how to analyze, reason, and evaluate, thereby subtly enhancing their thinking quality.

Consequently, classroom transitional discourse possesses an irreplaceable and unique value. As a key element bridging instructional stages, transitional discourse assumes not only an organizational function in maintaining classroom order and advancing teaching procedures but also a deeper cognitive construction function. In classroom teaching, "ingenious transitional language can often closely interlock old and new knowledge, as well as the internal layers of new knowledge, enabling students to successfully reach the destination of knowledge and enhancing classroom efficiency" (Hu, 2018). High-quality transitional discourse can fulfill its role as a cognitive scaffold. Relying on explicit logical connectives (e.g., causality, transition, progression) supplemented by heuristic guiding remarks, it clearly externalizes the deep logical framework of a text, erecting a solid scaffold for students' cognitive advancement. Particularly when dealing with logically rigorous and highly scientific expository narratives, precise transitional discourse by teachers can help students establish meaningful connections between scattered information points, "moving them from simply synthesized 'parallel connections' to genuinely integrated 'series connections'" (Wei, 2013), thereby facilitating a deep understanding of the article. Therefore, examining in depth the differences in the use of transitional discourse between exemplary and routine lessons holds significant research value for finding effective pathways to enhance students' thinking quality.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study aims to investigate the differential use of teacher transitional discourse between an exemplary and a routine senior high school EFL reading lesson, exploring its profound impact on cultivating students' thinking quality. The significance of this study lies in both theoretical and pedagogical dimensions.

Theoretically, while current literature on transitional discourse predominantly focuses on static descriptions of its organizational functions and formal classifications (e.g., frequency analysis of discourse markers), this study extends the analytical lens from superficial linguistic forms to deep cognitive functions. By exploring how transitional discourse serves as a cognitive scaffold for logical construction in scientific inquiry texts, this research not only broadens the scope of L2 classroom discourse analysis but also enriches the application of Scaffolding Theory in EFL reading instruction. It provides compelling empirical evidence for understanding how teachers can leverage transitional moves to guide students from shallow information extraction toward deep learning.

Pedagogically, this study offers frontline EFL teachers a reference paradigm for utilizing transitional discourse to build cognitive ladders. The transitional strategies extracted from the exemplary lesson provide concrete discursive models for addressing the prevalent problems of fragmented instruction and isolated knowledge points in current reading classrooms. These models can assist teachers in sequencing disjointed teaching activities into a logically coherent whole. Furthermore, by analyzing the

instructional process of a logically rigorous text ("John Snow Defeats 'King Cholera'"), this study provides practical pathways to help teachers shift their pedagogical focus from mere knowledge transmission to cognitive advancement, potentially supporting students' logical reasoning and critical thinking skills in regular reading classrooms.

1.3 Research Questions

Driven by these theoretical and pedagogical objectives, this comparative case study analyzes an exemplary and a routine senior high school EFL reading lesson based on the same reading text. By employing classroom observation and discourse analysis, this study aims to explore the following three research questions:

(1) What are the differences in the frequency and typological distribution of teacher transitional discourse between the exemplary and the routine EFL reading lessons?

(2) How do the two types of lessons differ in their functional realization of transitional discourse, particularly regarding logical construction and cognitive scaffolding?

(3) What specific discursive strategies does the exemplary teacher employ to scaffold students' cognitive processes and facilitate deep reading?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Transitional Discourse in Classroom Interaction

Teacher talk serves as the primary medium through which teachers impart knowledge, organize instruction, and provide language input in EFL classrooms. As Nunan (1991) points out, "teacher talk is of crucial importance, not only for the organization of the classroom but also for the processes of acquisition". In senior high school EFL reading instruction, high-quality teacher talk can build cognitive scaffolding for students, facilitating their deep understanding of texts. Among the various components of teacher talk, classroom transitional discourse represents a highly practical yet frequently overlooked form of discourse. And as a vital component of teacher talk, it has been given a range of definitions by international scholars.

In the classroom-management tradition from which most empirical work on transitions derives, a transition is first of all a behavioral interval interposed between two tasks. McIntosh et al. (2004) stated this in the most straightforward way: "In transitions, we demand a lot from students-we ask them to halt their current routine, perform a long chain of tasks, and initiate a new activity, all without breaking classroom rules". Thus, based on this definition, transition language is essentially a series of behavioral instructions and requirements issued by teachers to students, with its main focus still on classroom management.

Apart from focusing on its role in classroom management, the academic circle often defines transitional language in the context of sequential organization in the field of discourse analysis. That lessons are not undifferentiated streams of speech but hierarchically organized sequences of activities was established early in second language classroom research (Chaudron, 1988); what remained under-theorized was the boundary between those activities. Icbay (2011) defined transitions as "the periods in any social interaction that take place 'when contexts change'", and in the classroom such contextual change occurs precisely when participants move between speech exchange systems. Meanwhile, he also focused on the mending function of interlanguage at the moment of order breakdown, put forward the discourse concept of "tying signals", and defined it as "the set of techniques used mainly by the teacher to maintain the flow from a previous event to a current event" (Icbay, 2011) and restore classroom order. Markee (2004) creatively put forward the concept of Zones of Interactional Transition (ZITs), and defined the transitional discourse within this zone as the "talk that occurs at the boundaries of different classroom (and perhaps other institutionally oriented) speech exchange systems". The boundary, in other words, is not a line between two activities but a stretch of interaction in which the new order is proposed, resisted or ratified. Furthermore, Jacknick (2011) highlighted the negotiated nature of transitional discourse when closing a prior topic and initiating a new one. She pointed out that such discourse occurs at the interactional seams where "shifts entail the closure of one topic or activity and the opening of another", serving as a crucial vehicle for teachers and students to jointly negotiate floor rights and interactional control. Similarly, Murphy Odo (2026) offered his conceptualization, asserting that lesson transitions "are not simply temporal boundaries between activities, but interactionally accomplished moments in which participants display their understanding of what activity is ending, what activity is beginning, and how participation is to be reorganized".

Regardless of the specific perspective taken, most scholars share a fundamental consensus on transitional discourse: it functions in the classroom to "link different instructional segments into a structurally compact and seamlessly integrated functional whole"

(Xie, 2015). It serves a crucial bridging role, articulating various pedagogical stages and activities to render the lesson both hierarchically distinct and logically coherent. Contextualizing this within the senior high school EFL reading instruction of the present study, teacher transitional discourse is defined herein as specific classroom talk employed by teachers during instructional transitions or at activity boundaries. It serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it advances classroom procedures and manages interactional order (organizational function); on the other hand, it serves to foreground the textual logic and construct cognitive scaffolding for students (cognitive function).

2.2 Functions and Classifications of Teacher Transitional Discourse

2.2.1 Functions of Teacher Transitional Discourse

Academic exploration of the functions of transitional discourse has primarily undergone a shift from surface-level classroom organization to deep-level cognitive construction. Early classroom discourse analysis largely emphasized its organizational function, namely utilizing boundary markers to segment instructional steps and maintain classroom order (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). With the development of cognitive psychology, researchers began to focus on its cognitive function, viewing transitional discourse as a crucial means to help students cross their Zone of Proximal Development. Zhang (2020) points out that high-quality transitional discourse can "promote students' integration and understanding of instructional content." Wei (2013) further emphasizes that the linguistic knowledge "'connected' by teacher transitional discourse deepens students' understanding of linguistic meaning and knowledge construction to a certain extent, thereby leaving a more profound impression on students". Integrating cutting-edge literature from foreign language classroom instruction and micro-interaction domains, the functions of teacher transitional discourse can be deepened and expanded into the following three progressive dimensions:

First, transitional discourse possesses the most fundamental function of classroom organization and order management. In the surface-level instructional flow, transitional discourse is not only used to demarcate activity boundaries but also undertakes the vital function of restoring classroom order and maintaining the pedagogical flow at activity transition nodes. When the switching of instructional activities causes a temporary interruption of the original interactional structure, Icbay (2011) found that the "tying signals" used by teachers act as "a mechanism that had a dual function: (a) maintaining the flow from the previous event to the next one, and (b) restoring the classroom order lost in the transition". Murphy Odo (2026) also indicates that explicit transitional announcements can point out the next task trajectory for students, which is "essential for sustaining student engagement, managing classroom dynamics, and optimizing learning opportunities."

Second, in the dimension of micro-interaction and metadiscourse, transitional discourse regulates teachers' and students' interactional floor rights and dialogic spaces by managing the classroom information flow. Li and Hu (2026) explored the synergistic effect of metadiscourse and teacher discourse moves, pointing out that teachers' use of interactive metadiscourse such as transition words and frame markers can "jointly mobilize move sequencing and metadiscourse to construct differing dialogic spaces that foster student thinking". Furthermore, transitional discourse is not a unidirectional teacher-controlled tool. Jacknick's (2011) micro-conversation analysis reveals that students often strategically intervene utilizing the step-by-step design of teacher transitional discourse, demonstrating that "students demonstrate control over talk by creating 'wiggle room' at activity transitions" to redirect the talk back to a prior topic.

Finally, in the deep cognitive dimension, particularly in the context of EFL reading instruction, transitional discourse acts as a cognitive scaffold, directly serving higher-order thinking training and the construction of text comprehension. Wang et al. (2025), in their study on knowledge-building reading classrooms, found that strategies such as "asking for explanations" and "encouraging participation" mobilized by teachers during phase transitions and interactional moves "significantly influenced student discourse moves, fostering explanatory reasoning, judgment-informed idea integration, and high-level reading comprehension". Similarly, Relyea et al. (2026) emphasize the function of metacognitive teacher talk during transitions and reading guidance, pointing out that by "making thinking visible", teachers can precisely construct differentiated metacognitive and knowledge-building scaffolds based on students' initial proficiency and the specific cognitive demands of the reading task.

2.2.2 Classifications of Teacher Transitional Discourse

Scholars have also proposed a variety of frameworks for the classification of teachers' transitional language based on different research perspectives.

Early research primarily approached transitional discourse through rhetorical devices and semantic cohesion. In localized pedagogical applications, Chen (2003) categorized transitional discourse into introductory, direct, inductive, and cohesive types.

Cheng (2009) proposed four instructional strategies for transitional talk: direct entry (following the natural instructional flow with verbal prompts), entry via questioning (directing focus through inquiry), suspenseful introduction (stimulating interest by creating suspense), and inductive progression (building momentum through periodic summaries).

From an international perspective, scholars employing Applied Conversation Analysis (CA) focus on the structural organization and multimodal orchestration of transitional discourse at interactional boundaries. Based on the nature of conversational seams, Jacknick (2011) divided transitions into inter-activity shifts (occurring at major activity closures) and intra-activity shifts (occurring between specific items or sub-topics within an activity). On a multimodal interactional level, Odo (2026) conceptualized teacher transitional practices into three distinct patterns: (1) explicit announcements of the next activity, utilizing lexical markers such as now, so, next in combination with directives and embodied conduct to establish explicit instructional boundaries; (2) embodied intra-activity instructional shifts, navigating focus reorientation within an ongoing activity framework via PowerPoint slide changes, gesture, and contrastive verbal projection, rather than explicit verbal closures; and (3) incremental distributed lesson transitions, accomplishing transitions across multiple turns through the cumulative deployment of evaluative talk, task projections, and orientation to classroom materials. Furthermore, Satar and Çimenli Olcars (2025) noted that explicit topic transitions frequently rely on Heyman's (1986) three functional formulations of work-thus-far, work-at-hand, and work-to-come, in conjunction with transition-relevant objects such as task sheets, to coordinate smooth shifts across conversational trajectories between teachers and students.

Beyond micro-interactional structures, international research examines transitional discourse through metadiscourse regulation and cognitive scaffolding frameworks. Targeting metalinguistic discussions, Newman (2025) classified framing questions into four distinct moves: Effects Open, Choice Open, Choice Focusing, and Choice Alternative, illustrating how teachers systematically shift students' intuitive impressions toward fine-grained linguistic analysis through transitional questioning. In terms of cognitive scaffolding, Wang et al. (2025) categorized teacher scaffolding discourse into cognitive dimensions (initiate inquiry, ask for elaboration, ask for explanations, invite different ideas), regulatory dimensions (give instructions), and social dimensions (encourage participation), empirically demonstrating that these distinct scaffolding moves sequentially drive different levels of student reading comprehension (ranging from literal retrieval L1 to deep explanatory L3 and critical evaluation L4). Similarly, Relyea et al. (2025) deconstructed metacognitive teacher talk into an intersecting framework of knowledge types, metacognitive processes, and instructional modes, providing a fine-grained analytical grid for examining how transitional discourse renders thinking processes explicit.

From a Chinese localized pedagogical perspective, research mostly approached transitional discourse through classroom rhetorical devices and the natural progression of teaching. Chen (2003) categorized transitional discourse into introductory, direct, inductive, and cohesive types. Cheng (2009) proposed four instructional strategies for transitional talk: direct entry (following the natural instructional flow with verbal prompts), entry via questioning (directing focus through inquiry), suspenseful introduction (stimulating interest by creating suspense), and inductive progression (building momentum through periodic summaries).

2.3 Limitations of Existing Research

Despite the growing interest in teacher discourse, a review of the literature reveals several notable gaps regarding transitional discourse in EFL reading classrooms:

(1) Limitations in Functional Positioning: Previous studies have predominantly viewed transitional discourse through a procedural lens, emphasizing its organizational management functions, such as maintaining classroom order and segmenting instructional steps. Its deeper pragmatic potential as a cognitive scaffold to facilitate students' logical construction and higher-order thinking at activity boundaries remains largely underexplored.

(2) Limitations in Analytical Focus: Current research on teacher scaffolding and cognitive development heavily concentrates on the initiation (questioning) and feedback phases of the highly structured discourse sequences. Consequently, the interactional seams, whether at macro-activity boundaries (ZITs) or during micro intra-activity shifts, are frequently overlooked. Little attention has been paid to how transitions themselves act as crucial hubs for maintaining students' cognitive continuity.

(3) Limitations in Research Design: Existing literature largely consists of descriptive analyses or focuses on single lesson types. There is a scarcity of comparative case studies contrasting exemplary and routine lessons. This methodological gap makes it difficult to extract concrete, evidence-based discursive strategies that frontline teachers can use to transform mechanical procedural markers into effective cognitive ladders.

To bridge these gaps, this study adopts a comparative case study approach to investigate how teacher transitional discourse shifts from organizational management to cognitive scaffolding in EFL reading lessons, thereby providing practical insights for fostering students' deep reading and meaning construction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to investigate the functional differences in teacher transitional discourse between an exemplary and a routine EFL reading lesson. This design allows for an in-depth examination of how different pedagogical approaches to transitional discourse influence students' cognitive pathways within the same instructional context.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

The participants in this study consisted of two senior high school EFL teachers (pseudonymized as Teacher A and Teacher B) and their respective students in Chongqing, China. Teacher A's lesson was awarded first prize in the 17th Teacher Basic Skills Competition. Teacher B delivered the routine lesson and her lesson was selected from the 14th High School English Open Class Observation. Both classes lasted 40 minutes and consisted of approximately 40 students with an intermediate level of English proficiency.

3.3 Data Collection

The instructional content for both lessons was based on the reading text "John Snow Defeats 'King Cholera'", selected from Unit 1 of the state-approved *PEP Senior High School English Selective Compulsory Book 2 (2019 Edition)*. This scientific expository text details how British physician John Snow solved the cholera mystery through rigorous scientific procedures, placing high cognitive demands on students' logical analysis and deductive reasoning. Data were primarily collected through classroom observation and video recordings. Two full lesson videos, each lasting approximately 40 minutes, were obtained. All classroom discourse was transcribed verbatim into textual data. To ensure analytical precision, instructional segments irrelevant to pedagogical transitions, such as simple reading aloud or pronunciation correction, were excluded from the corpus. The final dataset strictly comprised teacher discourse utilized during instructional transitions and activity boundaries.

3.4 Data Analysis

To systematically analyze the transitional discourse, an analytical framework integrating Bloom's Revised Taxonomy was developed as shown below, categorizing the discourse into organizational and cognitive dimensions.

Table 1. Analytical Framework

Primary Dimension	Secondary Dimension	Definition and Core Function	Examples
Organizational transitional discourse	Classroom management and procedural articulation	**[Surface-level Processing]** It is primarily used to maintain classroom order, mark the transition of instructional segments, and issue physical directives (e.g., turning pages, looking at the blackboard). It does not involve deep processing of textual content.	"Now, let's move on to the next part." "Please turn to page 23." "Time is up."
Cognitive transitional discourse	(1) Logical construction	**[Intermediate-level Processing]** Teachers use explicit logical connectives (e.g., causality, transition, progression) to connect scattered information points, explicitly foregrounding the internal logical structure of the text.	"Since he found the pump, what did he do next to prove his theory?" "It looks like a normal map, however, notice the red dots…"
	(2) Cognitive inspiration	**[Deep-level Processing]** By utilizing follow-up questions, rhetorical questions, hypotheses, or inferences, teachers build cognitive scaffolds to guide students in critical thinking, evaluation, or creative expression.	"Does this evidence directly prove his theory? Think about it." "What if John Snow had ignored the citizens' request?"

To bridge the aforementioned gaps, this study constructs a novel analytical framework for transitional discourse. The framework categorizes transitional discourse into two primary dimensions: organizational and cognitive. Its core objective is to explicitly distinguish the differing functional emphases of teacher talk between classroom management and cognitive guidance. It is important to note that Bloom's Revised Taxonomy was used as a supplementary analytical lens to interpret the cognitive demands and affordances of teachers' transitional discourse, rather than as a direct classification criterion.

Specifically, organizational transitions (e.g., maintaining order, advancing procedures) ensure the orderly flow of instructional segments, serving as a prerequisite for deep reading. Conversely, cognitive transitions, which constitute the core observational focus of this study, are subdivided into logical construction and cognitive inspiration. Through explicit logical connectives or heuristic questions, teachers construct cognitive scaffolds that place higher cognitive demands on students, prompting them to move beyond literal information retrieval and potentially engage in analyzing textual threads, evaluating deep implications, or creating new understandings.

The data analysis proceeded in three sequential steps. First, the transcribed corpus was imported into NVivo for qualitative text-based discourse analysis. To ensure the reliability and transparency of the quantitative results, specific operational definitions and coding procedures were established. First, the unit of analysis was defined as a functional "utterance" that strictly occurred at the boundaries of macro-activities or micro-discourse sequences, taking the form of a complete sentence, an independent clause, or a question within a teacher's turn. An utterance was identified as a transitional move if it explicitly marked the closure of a previous pedagogical step or the initiation of a new one, frequently accompanied by discourse markers (e.g., so, now, then, let's).

Second, to address potential functional overlap within a single utterance (e.g., a move serving both organizational and cognitive purposes), a "highest cognitive demand" coding rule was applied. If a transition merely managed the procedure, it was coded as Organizational; however, if it simultaneously managed the instructional flow and elicited higher-order thinking, it was exclusively categorized under Cognitive transitions. Furthermore, within the cognitive dimension, the boundary between Logical Construction and Cognitive Inspiration was strictly demarcated: the former focuses on the teacher's explicit integration of textual information (e.g., explaining causal or contrastive links between paragraphs), whereas the latter necessitates prompting students to generate independent ideas beyond the literal text (e.g., making inferences, evaluations, or hypotheses).

Finally, qualitative discourse analysis was conducted on typical transitional excerpts, with a specific focus on critical logical nodes such as the shift from hypothesis to verification, to profoundly deconstruct the discursive strategies Teacher A employed to scaffold deep reading.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the core findings of the comparative case study, addressing the three research questions respectively. The results are organized into three subsections. Section 4.1 quantitatively compares the structural differences in the frequency and typological distribution of transitional discourse between the two teachers (addressing RQ1). Section 4.2 qualitatively analyzes the fundamental differences in how the two lessons realize cognitive transitional discourse, with a particular focus on logical construction and cognitive inspiration (addressing RQ2). Finally, Section 4.3 deconstructs the specific scaffolding strategies employed by the exemplary teacher to facilitate students' deep reading (addressing RQ3).

4.1 Comparison of the Overall Distribution Characteristics of Teachers' Transitional Discourse

To grasp the macro-level landscape of transitional discourse in the two reading lessons, this subsection first conducts a quantitative examination of its distribution. Based on the coding statistics, the following analysis highlights the commonalities in the overall frequency of transitional moves between the exemplary and routine lessons, as well as the marked structural discrepancy in the proportions of organizational versus cognitive transitions. This quantitative overview establishes an objective data foundation for the subsequent qualitative discourse analysis.

4.1.1 Statistics of Frequency and Typological Distribution

To investigate the current application of teacher transitional discourse in senior high school EFL reading instruction, this study first conducted a systematic identification and frequency analysis of the transitional moves in the two lessons. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the total frequency and functional dimensions of transitional discourse between the exemplary lesson (Teacher A) and the routine lesson (Teacher B).

Table 2. Frequency and Typological Distribution of Transitional Discourse

Primary Dimension	Secondary Dimension	Frequency and Percentage of Transitional Discourse for Teacher A (Exemplary Lesson) (N/%)	Frequency and Percentage of Transitional Discourse for Teacher B (Routine Lesson) (N/%)	Characteristics of Difference
Total Transitional Discourse	/	59 (100%)	60 (100%)	Similar total frequencies
1. Organizational Transitional Discourse	1. Organizational Transitional Discourse	28 (47.5%)	39 (65.0%)	Higher in the routine lesson (+17.5%)
2. Cognitive Transitional Discourse	(1) Logical construction	25 (42.4%)	13 (21.7%)	Higher in the exemplary lesson (nearly double that of the routine lesson)
	(2) Cognitive inspiration	6 (10.2%)	8 (13.3%)	Slightly higher in the routine lesson (but most of the questions are single and lack logical chains)

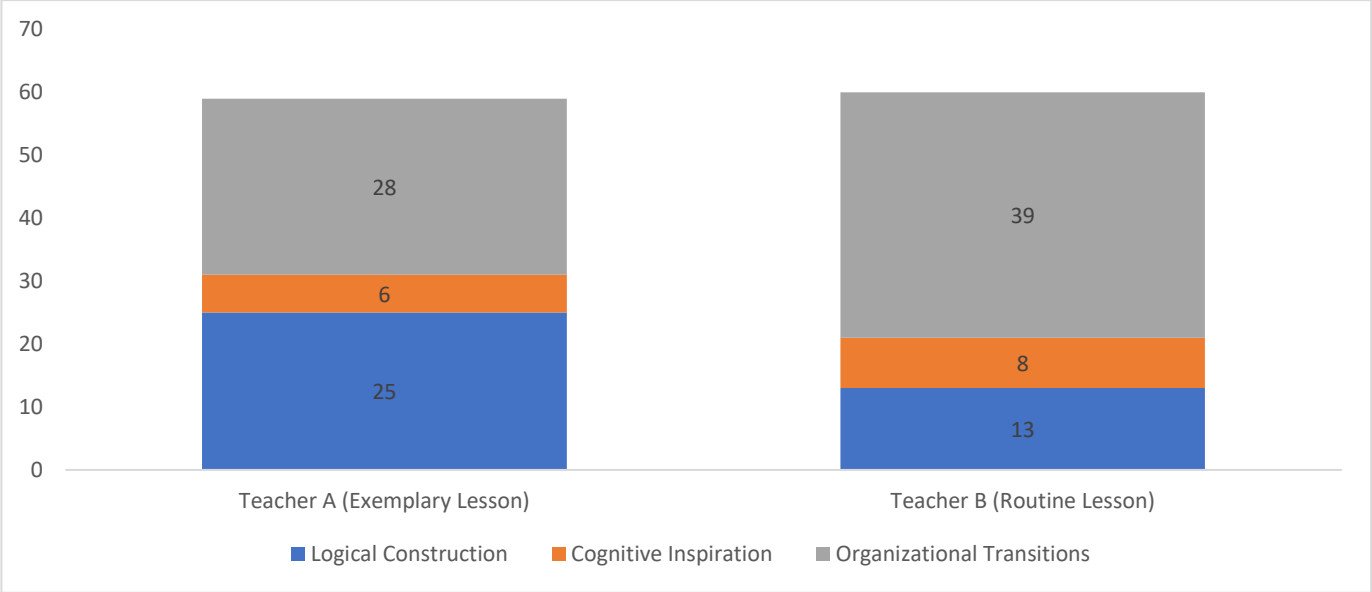
Note: N represents the frequency (Number), and % represents the percentage of that specific category relative to the teacher's total transitional discourse. The data were derived from the transcriptions of the 40-minute video recordings of both lessons.

As shown in Table 2, the total frequency of transitional discourse used by the two teachers throughout the lessons did not differ substantially. Teacher A employed 59 transitional moves, while Teacher B utilized 60, indicating that both teachers possessed a strong awareness of classroom articulation and frequently deployed transitions to maintain instructional coherence.

However, a significant structural discrepancy emerged in the functional typological distribution of transitional discourse between the two lessons. Teacher B (routine lesson) exhibited a higher reliance on organizational transitions, with a frequency of 39 (65.0%); in contrast, Teacher A (exemplary lesson) produced 28 organizational transitions (47.5%), which was lower than the sum of her cognitive transitions. Regarding the use of cognitive transitions, Teacher A's investment was significantly more prominent, with logical construction and cognitive inspiration moves collectively accounting for 52.6%, thereby serving as the dominant form of classroom articulation. The discrepancy in logical construction was the most notable, with Teacher A's frequency (25) being nearly double that of Teacher B (13). Nevertheless, the difference in the frequency of cognitive inspiration transitions between the two teachers was minimal (6 for Teacher A, 8 for Teacher B), and the overall proportions remained relatively low for both (approximately 10%-13%). This indicates that there is further room for improvement in guiding students' higher-order thinking during instructional phase transitions in both lessons.

To more intuitively present this structural discrepancy, Figure 1 compares the distributional proportions of the three types of transitional discourse between the two teachers. As illustrated, Teacher B's transitions were primarily concentrated at the organizational management level (gray area), whereas the distribution of Teacher A's transitions in logical construction (blue area) increased significantly, reflecting her focus on the deep logic of the text.

Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Transitional Discourse Types



4.1.2 Analysis of Differences

Based on a further comparison of Table 2 and Figure 1, it is evident that despite a high degree of consistency in the total volume of discourse, the two teachers exhibited fundamentally different pedagogical orientations in terms of functional emphasis and cognitive depth. The transitional discourse in the routine lesson displayed a distinct management-oriented characteristic, primarily serving the advancement of classroom procedures. Conversely, the exemplary teacher significantly emphasized the explicit foregrounding of textual logic, demonstrating a clear cognitively oriented characteristic. This shift in focus from surface-level organization to deep-level construction is specifically manifested in the following three dimensions:

(1) Quantitative Similarity vs. Qualitative Discrepancy

The lesson data revealed that the total number of transitional moves used by both teachers within a similar timeframe was nearly identical (59 for Teacher A, 60 for Teacher B). This suggests that both teachers possessed a foundational awareness of classroom discourse, utilizing transitions to connect instructional segments and bridge activity gaps, resulting in quantitative similarity. However, a pronounced qualitative discrepancy emerged in the structural proportions of these transitions. Teacher B relied heavily on organizational transitions, with a frequency of 39 (65.0%), meaning nearly two-thirds of the transitional talk in the routine lesson was devoted to surface-level management tasks such as maintaining order and issuing teaching directives. In contrast, Teacher A devoted only 47.5% of her transitional discourse to organizational transitions, allocating more discursive resources to guiding students' cognitive processing. This structural difference clearly indicates that while the routine lesson relied more on external, mechanical directives for instructional articulation, the exemplary lesson prioritized building internal cognitive connections to propel the lesson naturally and smoothly.

(2) A Marked Discrepancy in Logical Construction Transitions

The most significant variance occurred in the use of logical construction transitions. Teacher A employed these logical links 25 times, nearly double Teacher B's frequency (13). This notable frequency gap indicates that the exemplary teacher was more inclined to utilize explicit logical connectives (e.g., so, therefore, since) to weave scattered knowledge points into a rigorous logical chain. In reading instruction, such high-frequency explicit logical expressions construct clear cognitive scaffolds for students, assisting them in untangling the textual threads. Conversely, due to a lower frequency of logical construction transitions, Teacher B predominantly relied on mechanical directives (e.g., "what to do next") for activity shifts, resulting in a somewhat fragmented presentation of knowledge points that lacked internal coherence.

(3) Implicit Differences in Cognitive Inspiration Transitions

Statistically, Teacher B (8 occurrences) slightly outnumbered Teacher A (6) in cognitive inspiration transitions. However, qualitative coding revealed that Teacher B's transitions in this category were predominantly singular questions lacking a

sequential chain. This indicates that cognitive inspiration in the routine lesson was often point-like and isolated; the teacher might pose an open-ended question (e.g., "What do you think?"), but lacked further follow-up questions or logical elevation after the student's response, leaving the cognitive activity at a superficial level. In comparison, although Teacher A had a slightly lower absolute frequency, her cognitive inspirations were embedded within logical chains. Through precise questioning following logical groundwork, she guided students toward deeper inference and knowledge construction. Overall, the total proportion in this dimension remained low for both teachers (approximately 10%-13%), highlighting a universal need for improvement in utilizing transitional discourse to foster students' higher-order thinking in senior high school EFL reading instruction.

4.2 Comparative Analysis of the Realization of Cognitive Transitional Discourse

Having established the significant structural discrepancies in the macroscopic frequency and distribution of transitional discourse, this section shifts the analytical lens from quantitative statistics to micro-level qualitative discourse analysis. The objective is to uncover the specific realization mechanisms of cognitive transitional discourse within authentic classroom interactions. By drawing on typical instructional excerpts from "John Snow Defeats 'King Cholera'", the following analysis examines in detail the fundamental differences between the exemplary and routine teachers in guiding students' cognitive processing pathways. This qualitative examination is bifurcated into two core dimensions: logical construction (explicitizing implicit logic) in Section 4.2.1, and cognitive inspiration (shifting from information retrieval to deep inference) in Section 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Logical Construction: Explicitizing Implicit Logic

In senior high school EFL deep reading instruction, texts typically possess rigorous internal logic, yet these logical relationships sometimes remain implicit beneath the textual surface. The core function of logical construction transitions is for teachers to explicitly reveal the hidden cognitive threads within the text through discursive design, potentially helping students overcome cognitive barriers from surface information retrieval to deep logical comprehension. Particularly in historical scientific narratives like "John Snow Defeats 'King Cholera'", a strict causal necessity exists between the various steps of scientific inquiry (e.g., finding a problem, formulating a hypothesis, and gathering evidence). Whether a teacher can utilize transitional discourse to articulate the underlying logic connecting these phases directly reflects their competence in logical construction. The following section compares how the two teachers utilized transitional discourse to guide students in understanding how John Snow discovered the problem, thereby deconstructing their differences in this competence.

(1) Analysis of the Routine Lesson: Surface-Level Information Matching

When handling the instructional segment where John Snow discovered a problem amidst theoretical conflicts and entered the first stage of scientific inquiry, Teacher B adopted a strategy of matching information at the textual surface. The discourse excerpt is presented in Extract 1.

Extract 1: The Routine Lesson (Transition to the First Stage of Scientific Inquiry)
1 T: Actually, two contradictory theories, that is a difficult problem to deal with. **So** at first, which stage? John Snow...
2 S: Found a problem.
3 T: Found a problem. So that is the first stage OK. **And then** what happened? He was determined to find out why.

Regarding the use of discourse markers, Teacher B primarily relied on basic procedural connectives such as so and and then to advance the lesson. Although she mentioned the background of "two contradictory theories", she did not explore it deeply. Instead, she immediately used "So at first, which stage?" to direct students toward retrieving textual information. The subsequent question, "And then what happened?", similarly served only to propel the instructional procedure, simplifying the complex process of scientific reasoning into a linear chronological sequence and failing to effectively guide students in considering the internal logical connections between the steps.

This treatment of transitional discourse exhibits clear procedural characteristics. The teacher's focus was on directing students to quickly locate and match the names of the "seven stages of scientific inquiry" within the text (i.e., finding the sentence "John Snow found a problem"), neglecting to explain the internal logic between the stages. Specifically, the teacher jumped directly from the theoretical conflict to the first stage of scientific research, lacking a crucial logical bridge to explain why a conflict of theories would lead a scientist to identify a problem. In this discursive mode, the rigorous logic inherent in scientific inquiry was reduced to a mechanical reading fill-in-the-blank task. The transitional discourse merely functioned to segment the procedure (i.e., signaling "this part is finished, let's move to the next"), failing to effectively prompt students to deeply ponder the starting point of scientific thinking.

(2) Analysis of the Exemplary Lesson: Explicitizing Logical Chains

In contrast to Teacher B, whose transitions were solely used for information matching, Teacher A employed a strategy of explicitizing logical chains when handling the same segment. The discourse excerpt is presented in Extract 2.

Extract 2: The Exemplary Lesson (Transition to the First Stage of Scientific Inquiry)
1 T: We now know the second one was correct, **but** at that time, was John Snow sure about that the second one was correct? No he was not sure. **So** he still needed proof. **So** here comes the first step, find a problem, right?

Although Teacher A also utilized basic procedural connectives like "so" to advance the lesson, her transitional design did not stop at eliciting surface-level information (e.g., asking "what is the first step"). Instead, she constructed a complete cognitive loop through fine-grained discursive scaffolding.

Initially, she used the adversative conjunction "but" to establish a cognitive contrast between "what we know now" and "the cognitive limitations of people at that time". This discursive strategy naturally immersed students in the specific historical context, allowing them to intuitively perceive the necessity of scientific inquiry. Subsequently, she employed two consecutive "so" connectives to build a rigorous causal deductive chain. The first "so" ("So he still needed proof") explicitized the hidden scientific logic that an unverified theory is merely a hypothesis, thereby revealing the internal motivation for the scientist's actions. The second "so" ("So here comes the first step...") seamlessly transformed this motivation into a concrete investigative action.

Aided by this logical construction transitional discourse, Teacher A deepened a simple information-locating task into the profound processing of the text's internal logic. This pedagogical treatment not only clarified the specific steps of scientific inquiry for the students but also guided them to decipher the causal necessity generating these steps (i.e., why "finding a problem" is the logical starting point of scientific inquiry). Consequently, it provided opportunities for the cultivation of students' scientific thinking within reading practice.

4.2.2 Cognitive Inspiration: From Information Retrieval to Deep Inference

The core value of cognitive inspiration transitional discourse lies in utilizing teacher guidance to help students transcend the simple extraction of surface-level textual information, thereby proactively engaging in inference and evaluation of the text's profound implications. In the text "John Snow Defeats 'King Cholera'", the character analysis of the protagonist, John Snow, is a crucial instructional link for cultivating students' critical thinking. Teachers must not only guide students to find adjectives describing the character but also utilize transitional discourse to build scaffolds, guiding students to deduce character qualities based on textual facts. By comparing the different discursive strategies employed by the two teachers when handling the plot where "John Snow adhered to the unpopular germ theory", the following section deconstructs their differences in the depth of cognitive guidance.

(1) Analysis of the Routine Lesson: Pseudo-Open Guidance Based on Predetermined Paths

When guiding students to analyze character qualities, Teacher B (routine lesson) provided contextual scaffolding; however, when addressing students' generative responses, she exhibited a pronounced path dependence on predetermined answers. The discourse excerpt is presented in Extract 3:

Extract 3: The Routine Lesson (Transition to Character Analysis)
1 T: Actually in the past, most people agreed to the first theory, while John Snow agreed to the second one. **So** what kind of person? He has what?
2 S: He is rigorous.
3 T: Yeah rigorous, and because of what?
4 S: Because every questions needs proof.
5 T: Yes, okay. **And then** he has a maybe uh questioning mind, right?

In this excerpt, by contrasting the general public's view at the time with John Snow's view, the teacher initially attempted to lead the students to deduce the predetermined target concept of "daring to question". However, when a student provided an unexpected yet highly reasonable answer ("rigorous") along with corresponding evidence, Teacher B's discursive treatment exposed the limitations of the routine lesson.

Although the teacher granted formal affirmation to the student's response, she did not capitalize on this opportunity to dig deeper, such as following up on why the quality of rigor is vital for a scientist. Instead, she swiftly employed the connective "and then" to switch the turn, forcefully pulling the cognitive trajectory back onto her predetermined track of a "questioning mind".

This interaction reflects the teacher's over-reliance on predetermined lesson plans. Although she afforded students the opportunity to express themselves, her focal point remained constantly on steering them back to the established track. Consequently, when a student demonstrated an unexpected logical inference, the teacher did not treat it as a valuable perspective worthy of profound exploration but chose to bypass it quickly. This caused the instruction to stagnate at the level of merely checking answers, failing to achieve genuine cognitive expansion.

(2) Analysis of the Exemplary Lesson: Scaffolded Inference Based on Chains of Evidence

In contrast to the routine lesson where the teacher used transitional discourse to directly extract conclusions from students, Teacher A (exemplary lesson) adopted a strategy of scaffolded inference based on chains of evidence when guiding the same cognitive node. The discourse excerpt is presented in Extract 4:

Extract 4: The Exemplary Lesson (Transition to Character Analysis)
1 T: **Then** John Snow subscribed to the second one, **so** he didn't give into others right? He dared to question others' opinion. **Then** what kind of person was he? Someone who insists on his own opinion. Someone who dared to question others. **So** we can say he has? This boy, can you have a try?
2 S: He has critical thinking.

As evidenced by this excerpt, Teacher A's discursive design did not stop at simply asking what traits the character possessed. Instead, she utilized progressively layered transitional discourse to construct a cognitive ladder moving from the concrete to the abstract, strictly adhering to a specific sequence.

First, the teacher confirmed the basic information within the text (namely that John Snow subscribed to the second theory) to ensure the accuracy of the evidence source. Second, she conducted a behavioral interpretation. Utilizing the causal connective so, the teacher guided students to elucidate the behavioral significance behind this fact, pointing out that he did not yield to others and dared to question. This phase is critical; it transforms cold objective facts into behavioral manifestations imbued with personality traits, thereby achieving a logical leap from factual phenomena to character analysis. Finally, the teacher engaged in quality extraction and conceptual elevation. Having laid the groundwork of specific behavioral characteristics, she seamlessly posed the core question regarding the character's traits, thereby guiding the student to use the professional terminology of "critical thinking" to summarize and define John Snow's qualities.

By progressing from facts to behaviors and subsequently to qualities, this chain-like transition deconstructs complex cognitive activities like character evaluation into concrete, operable steps for students. It not only assists students in arriving at accurate conclusions but, more importantly, clearly demonstrates the complete cognitive process of conducting logical inferences based on textual evidence, ultimately guiding students beyond surface-level information retrieval and toward deep logical reasoning.

4.3 Strategies for Constructing Cognitive Scaffolds by the Exemplary Teacher

Through the analysis of the exemplary teacher's discourse, this study finds that Teacher A provided opportunities for deeper cognitive processing primarily because she adeptly utilized transitional discourse to construct cognitive scaffolds. Therefore, based on the preceding analysis of specific instructional excerpts, this study extracts three core scaffolding strategies employed by the teacher.

Strategy 1: Explicitizing Causal Logic

When teaching the steps of scientific inquiry, Teacher A adopted a problem-oriented heuristic discursive strategy. Instead of directly and mechanically requiring students to locate "the first stage of scientific research", she first utilized transitional discourse to reveal John Snow's state of uncertainty at that time ("No he was not sure"), subsequently guiding students to understand the urgent need to seek evidence ("So he still needed proof"). Building on this, she naturally elicited the subsequent investigative steps ("So here comes the first step..."). This discursive design effectively integrates originally scattered instructional steps, placing them within a rigorous framework of causal logic.

Consequently, the core mechanism of this strategy lies in explicitizing causal logic. By frequently employing causal transitional words (e.g., so, therefore, since), the teacher transformed the implicit logical associations within the text into explicit discursive chains. Under this operational mechanism, transitional discourse is no longer merely a signal prompting procedural shifts; it becomes a cognitive tool for revealing the internal connections between events. Thus, while mastering linguistic knowledge, students can naturally internalize the rational thinking patterns required for scientific inquiry.

Strategy 2: Constructing Progressive Inductive Scaffolds

During the character analysis segment, Teacher A demonstrated a clear inferential pathway. She first utilized transitional discourse to confirm the textual fact that John Snow subscribed to the germ theory, and immediately followed this by utilizing so to guide students in interpreting the behavioral significance of this fact. Finally, she used "Then what kind of person...?" to guide students to inductively arrive at the abstract concept of "critical thinking". This layered, progressive approach can effectively avoid the stereotyping issues that frequently occur when students evaluate characters.

Accordingly, this instructional strategy can be summarized as constructing progressive inductive scaffolds. When facing higher-order cognitive tasks such as character evaluation and main idea summarization, the teacher relies on transitional discourse to build a hierarchical cognitive framework progressing from facts to behaviors and ultimately to concepts. Essentially, this strategy visualizes the cognitive process, clearly demonstrating the entire deductive trajectory from concrete textual evidence to abstract disciplinary concepts, thereby effectively achieving the cognitive training objective of supporting viewpoints with facts.

Strategy 3: Creating and Reconstructing Semantic Conflicts

When exploring the deep meaning of "defeat" in the title, Teacher A employed a discursive guidance sequence of negation, transition, and reconstruction. When a student chose to fill in the title with "destroy", she first used no and so to logically and gently correct the student's literal interpretation of physically eliminating the virus ("So 'destroy' maybe not proper"). Subsequently, she utilized actually to introduce a deeper perspective, pointing out that John Snow defeated cholera in terms of scientific spirit ("So in scientific spirits, he really defeats..."). This discursive design disrupted students' linear mindset, prompting them to conduct secondary processing of the core vocabulary.

This indicates that the exemplary teacher excels at utilizing the strategy of creating and reconstructing semantic conflicts. Deep reading requires breaking through surface semantics to touch upon the profound implications of the text. By actively generating cognitive conflicts through adversative transitional discourse, the teacher disrupts students' established mindsets, driving them to reconstruct meaning at a higher cognitive dimension, thereby encouraging more critical and in-depth interpretation.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Major Findings and Conclusions

Through a profound comparison of transitional discourse utilized in an exemplary and a routine lesson based on the same text, this study reveals the potential impact of discursive articulation on the development of students' cognitive processes. Overall, the discursive advantage of the exemplary teacher lies in transcending the mere instructional procedural signaling function, transforming transitions into cognitive scaffolds that facilitate deep processing. In terms of textual logical construction, compared to the routine teacher who tended to use chronological sequential markers to drive a linear instructional flow, the exemplary teacher demonstrated a strong awareness of textual structure. She frequently employed causal transitional words to explicitize the internal connections between paragraphs and events. Through discursive demonstration, she transformed procedural transitions into more explicit logical connections, potentially supporting students' understanding of the causal relationships within the text.

Simultaneously, the two teachers exhibited markedly different guidance pathways when handling higher-order cognitive tasks. The routine teacher's discourse often displayed a path dependence on predetermined answers; her transitions primarily served to quickly check whether students conformed to preset labels, causing cognitive training to stagnate at the surface confirmation stage. In contrast, the exemplary teacher utilized transitional discourse to construct progressive inductive scaffolds. Rather than rushing to elicit abstract conclusions, she guided students through a complete inferential process—from locking onto evidence and interpreting significance to extracting qualities. Furthermore, when interpreting texts with ideological depth, the exemplary teacher excelled at employing adversative transitions to proactively create cognitive conflict situations, guiding students to conduct secondary processing and meaning reconstruction of core textual concepts, thereby encouraging students to explore the deeper meanings of the text.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Based on the aforementioned conclusions, this study offers the following implications for senior high school EFL reading instruction. First, teachers should shift their discursive paradigm, upgrading transitional discourse from a mere "classroom management tool" to a "cognitive scaffold". During the lesson planning phase, teachers should not only design main questions but also pre-plan logical connectives at activity boundaries, utilizing explicit conjunctions to weave fragmented knowledge points into a cohesive network. Second, teachers must remain vigilant against pseudo-open discursive traps and enhance their sensitivity to generative classroom resources. When students provide unexpected responses, teachers should avoid using procedural transitions to forcefully pull them back to the predetermined lesson plan. Instead, they should employ follow-up questions and progressive transitions to guide students in completing their chains of evidence, potentially supporting cognitive expansion.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study reveals the application of teacher transitional discourse and its impact mechanisms on cognitive quality in high school EFL reading instruction, certain limitations remain.

First, the sample size and representativeness are limited. Adopting a comparative case study approach, this research selected only one exemplary and one routine lesson for analysis. Individual variables, such as the two teachers' pedagogical styles, discursive habits, and their students' English proficiency levels, affect the generalizability of the findings to some extent. Therefore, whether these findings can be fully extrapolated to broader high school EFL teaching contexts requires further verification. Second, the data sources are relatively singular, lacking multidimensional triangulation. This study primarily relied on classroom video recordings and transcribed texts for discourse analysis, with a focal perspective on the teacher. However, it lacks direct examination through student interviews or learning artifacts (e.g., mind maps) to verify actual cognitive development. This analytical pathway might not fully and accurately reflect the students' internal cognitive transformation processes. Third, a degree of subjectivity exists in the data analysis. Although this study relied on relevant theoretical frameworks for coding and analysis, determining whether a specific utterance successfully functioned as a scaffold depended largely on the researcher's qualitative interpretation, lacking the supplementary support of quantitative data. Finally, since the two lessons involved different teachers and student groups, the observed differences in transitional discourse cannot be attributed solely to teachers' discourse practices. Other factors, including teaching experience, pedagogical styles, and classroom contexts, may also have influenced the interactional patterns.

Based on the aforementioned limitations, future research could be expanded and deepened in the following aspects:

First, expand the sample size and conduct large-scale studies incorporating corpus linguistics. Subsequent research could collect data from exemplary and routine lessons across different regions and lesson types (e.g., reading-writing or listening-speaking classes) to establish a small-scale classroom discourse corpus. By employing corpus linguistic methods, researchers can summarize more universally applicable characteristics of pedagogical discourse. Second, adopt multimodal and mixed-methods approaches to focus on students' actual acquisition. Future studies should employ post-lesson interviews or retrospective verbal reports to investigate students' authentic perceptions of teacher transitions. Simultaneously, by analyzing substantive outputs like the quality of students' classroom responses or written texts, a complete chain of evidence from discursive input to cognitive output can be closed. Finally, refine the research on the correspondence between transitional discourse and specific cognitive dimensions. Future studies could profoundly investigate the precise correlations between specific types of transitions (e.g., causal or adversative) and concrete cognitive dimensions such as critical or creative thinking, thereby providing frontline teachers with more operable discursive guidance strategies.

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