An Exploration of Efficient Reading Strategies in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract: In an EFL classroom, teachers are encouraged to cultivate students into effective readers by improving reading speed, enriching reading strategies, developing literacy and assisting them to explore the underlying cultural values.

Keywords: Efficient reading;Text-related strategies;Vocabulary-related strategies

The reading process is often described as a purposeful process as the readers will set different purposes at different stages and will employ the appropriate strategies intentionally. In this paper, I will identify the problems of learners within a specific L2 context, and also come up with some successful sub-skills and strategies concerning reading and vocabulary.

1. Common Reading Problems in a College English Classroom in China

I will introduce a group of learners and identify the typical problems of reading strategies, and also include possible types of activities that can help with the students' difficulties. The learners involved in my context are Financial Services and Management major students in Eurasia University. As fresh students aged from 18 to 20 years old, most of them have learned English language for more than 9 years. Their English proficiency ranges from pre-intermediate to intermediate level. They typically learn through the lecture-based English language courses and averagely spend about 6 hours per week on learning. They are required to pass CET-4 for job requirement.

Due to the lack of interests and strategies, the students find many problems within reading strategies. First, their reading speeds are relatively slow compared to the speed that demanded in exams. Moreover, the students are unfamiliar with the different types of reading strategies and have no consciousness of applying. They cannot make good use of schematic or linguistic knowledge to infer the meaning. The learners often have problems on understanding text structure, which could hinder their reading processes as they read the texts without clear purposes.

2. Several Successful Reading Strategies Applied in Shaping Effective Readers

2.1 Efficient Reading

One of the most common strategies of efficient reading is to make use of the resources within texts. An effective reader is able to utilize as many resources as possible according to the different reading purposes at each stage, and he is likely to be benefited from the graphic conventions.

Another component is related to improving reading speeds. An effective reader not only increases the average reading speed, but also seeks to make a balance between speed and comprehension. Research also illustrated that an effective reader can avoid the habits of subvocalizing, finger-pointing and regressive eye movement, which could hinder their development of reading speed.

Skimming and scanning are two types of reading strategies aimed at increasing reading speeds. Skimming refers to reading quickly to get the gist, which includes overall theme, key topics, main ideas and structure of a text (Scrivener, 2011). Scanning is about to locate a specific piece of information or to seek an initial impression of the appropriateness of the texts (Kerr, 2009). These two "top-down" strategies enable the reader to search for the most valuable parts of the text in a given time.

2.2 Text-related Strategies

Prediction refers to the strategy that the reader can start to read with some assumptions or questions. This is possible because

people tend to organise their texts following the similar sequenced thoughts. An effective reader can make good use of his logical, cultural and grammatical knowledge to predict in the reading process.

Forming or activating schemata is also an important reading strategy that an effective reader often employs. It is a way of exploiting one's background knowledge and experiences in order to have a better understanding of the text (McDonough and Shaw, 2003). A successful reader often concentrates on the reading purposes and may not be hindered by the incomprehensible words or sentences.

With regard to some difficult texts, simplifying sentences is a strategy to improve understanding. It suggests that the reader should identify the essential parts and the bare structure of the sentence by removing the optional words first. The next step is to restore the words removed and try to interpret the whole sentence. By doing this, the grammatical relationship between each component becomes clearer, which in turn increases the understanding of the complex sentence.

An efficient reader is able to utilize cohesive devices to make a better comprehension. Cohesive devices are essential for the reader to notice since they formulate the related ideas, the sentences and even the whole passage. Moreover, the discourse markers are also used as cohesive devices to demonstrate the relationships within and out of the text, and also signal the text structure and the writer's views. As an efficient reader, one has to pay attention to cohesive devices to make a good sense of content and structure.

2.3 Vocabulary-related Strategies

An effective reader can deal with vocabulary-related strategies from the following aspects. Firstly, a skilled reader knows when to ignore difficult words. Moreover, a successful reader is able to use three strategies when dealing with the unknown words: guessing from structural clues, inferring from context and using a dictionary.

Guessing meaning from structural clues encourages the reader to decipher both the grammatical functions and the morphology of the unknown word. Inferring meaning from context is another strategy adopted by the effective reader. By collecting the clues provided by the context, the reader may get a rough idea or possible meanings of the unknown word. The last strategy for inferring the word's meaning is by using a dictionary. An effective reader does not rely on the dictionary and only use it according to his own needs.

2.4 Extensive Reading and Reading for Detailed Comprehension

Reading intensively and extensively are two strategies aiming at different training purposes. Extensive reading involves reading for pleasure or general language improvement. It would be better for the reader to select the materials which are specially written so that they will read them fast and fluently (Harmer, 2007). Intensive reading is directed to the understanding of detailed information. An effective reader is able to answer comprehension questions, infer meaning from the text and assess the attitudes of the writer in reading for detailed comprehension (Scrivener, 2011).

3. Reading Activities Involved and the Approach of Communicative Language Teaching in Real Teaching Practice

As a teacher, I designate three types of activities that can help the students with their difficulties: practice for reading efficiency, interpretation of the text through comprehension questions and re-presentation of content. The students in my context have difficulties in improving the reading speed, and I selected the activities of practicing scanning and skimming which enable the learners to focus on the valuable parts of texts. These techniques are of great importance to guarantee the necessary pace in reading. Moreover, the problems of inferring the meaning of unknown words or implicit information within the texts can be solved by setting a series of comprehensible questions. This demands the learners to incorporate both of their linguistic and schematic knowledge so that they can achieve the success in comprehension. Another type of the activities is to encourage the learners to reproduce outcomes through the information conveyed from the reading. The outcomes involve non-language activities, spoken language and writing. For instance, the learners can practise their skills of summarizing, note-taking and translation by re-presenting the original reading texts. This leads to an efficient reading and allows the learners to achieve deepened insights.

I mainly take the approach of Communicative Language Teaching as the basis of my lesson. This approach focuses more on communicative competence than linguistic competence in the language teaching and learning process. It aims to establish a set of principles that can be viewed as support in the classroom procedures. The principles encourage students to acquire the language through authentic, fluent and meaningful communication. In addition, it concentrates on the integrated use of different language skills. It also views learning as a creative process and allows the students to learn through trials and errors (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

My rationale of applying Communicative Language Teaching approach is closely related to learner's need analysis. First, the

teacher encourages students to learn through communication and experiences by establishing a series of activities in class. The teacher also records the performances of students and offers them the support. By taking this approach, students will become more active in negotiating meaning even if they still lack linguistic competence of the target language. In this instance, the teacher changes his role from a person of authority to someone viewed as a "co-communicator" (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011). Second, this approach takes a different perspective on the language itself and the culture. It views the linguistic competence as a part of communicative competence and focuses greatly on the functions of the target language. This is a way to relate the target language to the real use of language, which could be useful in increasing the students' interests of learning.

The choice of my topic which discusses how to achieve success in college is closely related to the students. This displays strengths as it is possible to activate the schematic knowledge before reading and the students are expected to share some similar knowledge or information with the writer. This kind of topics discusses on the academic issues is common in exams such as CET-4 and CET-6. Therefore, it would be suitable for the students to become familiar with that type of topics.

The first step of my lesson plan is to set up aims, materials, assumptions of the students, the anticipated problems and solutions and the student's role as reader. Then, I begin to provide the students with a reason for reading by activating their schematic knowledge. The following step is to introduce the texts to the students. After that, I ask the students to read for gist to improve their use of skimming. This activity requires the students to get a general impression of the text and the structure of the ideas. A series of tasks are set to train different reading strategies such as scanning, detailed comprehension, and understanding the structure. The focus on vocabulary is essential in reading tasks, as the students can improve their abilities through inferring the meaning and the use of words. I also include a focus on spoken language since it improves the learners' overall linguistic competence. Within the procedures, I also interweave some patterns of classroom interaction such as pair work, individual work, teacher talk and group work to enhance my lesson in a communicative way. The steps of concept check and feedback are also of great importance because the students need assessment and correction.

4. Conclusion

In real teaching practice, the EFL teacher should choose the appropriate methodology which will underlie the basis of a lesson plan. Moreover, the tasks or activities involved in a reading lesson should be arranged in reasonable sequences so that the students will make the most of the activities.

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