Application of the Interactive Approach to the Teaching of English Reading in College

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Abstract: Based on the careful analysis of the reading process and the thorough comparison of the three approaches to reading (the bottom-up approach, the top-down approach and the interactive approach), this paper focuses on the interactive approach to teaching English reading in college. It suggests that during the reading process, the focus should be put both on decoding the meaning of the text and on activating the systemic and schematic knowledge, with the bottom-up and the top-down strategies functioning interactively to improve the students' reading ability and cultivate critical reading and thinking in them. Several practical ways are also suggested to help the students improve reading comprehension.

Key words: interactive approach; reading strategies; schematic knowledge; critical reading; critical thinking

1. Introduction

Where there is no reading, there is no improvement in foreign language learning. Therefore, improving students' reading ability has always been a focus in college English teaching. The potential problems in reading lie mainly in the traditional way of teaching reading.

Traditionally, EFL reading teaching in Chinese colleges emphasizes language instruction rather than reading instruction. In traditional English reading classes in college, teachers seldom bother to teach students how to read; they think that comprehension will develop naturally as long as the students know the meaning of the words in the text. In such classes teachers are always engaged in explaining words and analyzing sentence structures. The typical reading lessons are characterized by focus on the teacher, lengthy and detailed explanation of words in the glossary, and a step-by-step analysis with excessive explanation. Thus, the students tend to regard reading as close reading, not taking into consideration various ways of reading; they tend to read the foreign language slowly and with low comprehension. Alderson (1989: 1) once argued: “Students reading in a foreign language seem to read with less understanding than one might expect them to have, and to read considerably slower than they reportedly read in their first language.” This phenomenon ought to be
changed to satisfy the students’ ever increasing demands for reading instruction.

To solve the problems teachers and students are faced with, we need to have a clear understanding of what reading is and what happens during the reading process. Reading comprehension means extracting the required information from the text as efficiently as possible. There are two broad levels in reading: receiving visual signals from the eyes and the cognitive task of interpreting the visual information, relating the received information to the reader’s own general knowledge, and reconstructing the meaning the writer wants to convey (Wang, Cheng 111). Reading is not a passive decoding process, but an active, in fact, an interactive process; it constantly involves word recognition, predicting, anticipating, inferring, making hypotheses, confirming hypotheses, revising hypotheses and reconfirming hypotheses.

2. Three approaches to reading

The theory of reading has evolved in three stages: namely the traditional approach, the psycholinguistic approach and the interactive approach to reading.

2.1 The traditional approach to reading

The traditional approach to reading is commonly known as the bottom-up approach. Traditional reading researchers view reading as a passive, bottom-up decoding process, primarily as a process of reconstructing the author’s intended meaning by recognizing the printed letters and words, and building up the meaning for a text from the smallest textual units at the “bottom” to the largest textual units at the “top”. The central notion behind the bottom-up approach is that reading is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents in order to get at the meaning. Cambourne (1979) provides the following illustration of how the reading process is supposed to work:

\[ \text{Print} \rightarrow \text{Every letter} \rightarrow \text{Phonemes and graphemes} \rightarrow \text{Blending} \rightarrow \text{Pronunciation} \rightarrow \text{Meaning} \]

cambourne (1979: 79)

The bottom-up approach considers reading as a process of decoding written symbols in a linear fashion, which neglects many other contextual factors that may contribute to the meaning of a text. This approach over-emphasizes the text as the center of the reading process and overlooks the reader’s active role in the reading process.

2.2 The psycholinguistic approach to reading

The alternative approach to the traditional approach is the psycholinguistic approach: the top-down approach to reading. One of the popular representatives of this approach, Goodman (1967: 126) thinks that “reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. … Efficient reading doesn’t result from precise decoding, but from skill in selection the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses that
are right the first time.” Rather than decoding each symbol, the reader begins with a set of hypotheses or predictions about the meaning of the text he is about to read, and then selectively samples the text to determine whether his predictions are correct or not. If the predictions are not confirmed, the reader may revise his predictions by sampling the text again. Reading is a process of reconstructing meaning rather than decoding form, and the reader only resorts to decoding if other means fails. Cambourne (1979) provides the following illustration of the top-down approach to reading:

\[
\text{Past experience, language } \rightarrow \text{Selective aspects } \rightarrow \text{Meaning } \rightarrow \text{Sound, pronunciation}
\]

\[
\text{intuitions and expectations of print } \rightarrow \text{if necessary}
\]

Cambourne (1979: 88)

In the top-down manner of reading, not only is the reader an active participant, making predictions and processing information, but also everything in the reader’s background knowledge plays a significant role in reading. The top-down approach agrees that the reader, rather than the text is at the heart of the reading process. And it exaggerates the reader’s role in reading process and marginalizes the necessary decoding process in reading. The shift from the bottom-up approach to the top-down approach is theoretically from one extreme to another.

2.3 The interactive approach to reading

The accepted theory of reading has changed dramatically, from the bottom-up approach to the top-down approach, and then to the interactive approach. Reading is not viewed as a passive process, but as an active and in fact an interactive process. The following figure suggests a simplified graphic perspective on this definition:

![A simplified Interactive Parallel Processing sketch](Grabe 1988: 59)

It is held that there is an integration of bottom-up processes with top-down processes in reading. Grabe (1985, cited in Jin 1993:12) explains that the reading process is not simply a matter of extracting information from the text. Rather, it is “one in which the reading activates a range of knowledge in the reader’s mind that he
or she uses, and that, in turn, may be refined and extended by the new information supplied by the text.” According to the interactive approach to reading, reading is an interactive process. During reading, the reader constructs a personal interpretation of a text; there is an interaction between the reader and the text. The reader also tries to get at the author’s original intentions; there is an interaction between the reader and the author. And there is also a constant interaction between the lower-level bottom-up strategies and the higher-level top-down strategies the reader employs.

The interactive approach is superior to the first two approaches in that it covers both perspectives and better reflects the nature of reading and the reading process.

3. Suggested ways of improving reading comprehension

The ability to read at a reasonable rate with good comprehension has long been recognized to be as important as other skills. Teachers in English language education should be vitally concerned with approaches that can improve the reading comprehension of students. The interactive approach to reading is of great value in this respect. We believe that in order to help the students to become efficient readers, it’s necessary for us teachers to cultivate the awareness of the interactive approach to reading in the students and teach them certain reading strategies and encourage them to read interactively by employing both bottom-up lower-level strategies and top-down higher-level strategies. Our aim is to help the students become efficient and critical readers both by reading intensively in class and by a large amount of reading after class.

3.1 Training bottom-up and top-down strategies during the three-phase procedure in class

Reading strategies are “plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning” (Duffy 1993). Reading strategies are specific abilities that enable the reader to read the written form as meaningful language, to read anything written with comprehension and fluency, and to mentally interact with the message the writer conveys. Certain reading strategies should be commanded because different reading strategies are used in order to achieve different reading purposes. There are various kinds of reading strategies. Some let the reader figure out new words, predict the next word, phrase, or sentence quickly for speed recognition; some help the reader see the relationship of ideas and use these in reading with meaning and fluency. Some help the reader use knowledge of the world to interpret the text.

Furthermore, the college English syllabus (1999) also prescribes that the reading strategies should be cultivated on the students’ part. Nuttall (1982) argues that the aim of intensive reading is primarily to train students in reading strategies. Strategies help the students process the text actively, to monitor their comprehension, and to connect what they are reading to their own knowledge and to other parts of the text. In order to become efficient readers, the students need to employ both the lower-level bottom-up strategies, e.g. word recognition, and the higher-level top-down strategies, such as prediction, inferring and using background knowledge. The students need to read
interactively with the bottom-up and top-down strategies functioning harmoniously. These strategies help to improve reading comprehension as well as efficiency.

My belief is that strategy training is one of the most important ways of improving reading comprehension. Different strategies are trained during the three-phase classroom procedure of reading. During the pre-reading phase, various schemata related to the text should be activated or provided, such as the students’ linguistic schemata, content schemata, and formal schemata. Strategies, such as prediction, previewing, using the background knowledge, predicting, can be practiced. During the while-reading phase, the students should read the text actively, adopting the interactive approach. Reading strategies such as skimming for the gist, scanning for specific information, recognizing rhetorical structures, understanding the author’s purposes, inferring the meaning from contextual clues, critical reading and avoiding bad reading habits can be practiced. The post-reading phase serves as a phase of consolidation. During the post-reading phase, the students should be given time to reflect; they are encouraged to ask questions and answer the questions. This is a phase of enlarging the students’ schemata and relating what the students have read to their own knowledge. Strategies such as reviewing and reading to present can be practiced.

It has been suggested that during the reading process, both systemic knowledge and schematic knowledge be applied; and that the focus should be put both on decoding the text and on guessing and predicting with the bottom-up and the top-down strategies functioning interactively.

### 3.2 Supporting extra-curriculum reading

If the best way to improve one’s knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers, then the next best way is to read extensively in it. According to Krashen (1985), learners need to be exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input which is meaningful, relevant, and interesting, in a stress-free environment, and clearly individual extensive reading outside classroom is valuable to our students. Students will not become fluent readers overnight, and it may take a long time before there is a marked improvement in their reading abilities. Students learn to read by reading and they also need to read fast with full understanding. To achieve this they are encouraged to read extensively.

The teachers should select suitable reading material for the students’ extracurricular reading. The English graded readers, magazines, newspapers such as *The Twenty First Century, English Weekly* are among the students’ favorites. And the students should form a habit of reading and read extensively in English so that their problems with reading can be solved mainly by reading itself.

One way of supporting extensive reading is to set aside enough time for teachers’ short interviews with the individual students about their reading. Teachers can use this time to communicate with the students, recommend books, advise on reading problems, suggest activities, and encourage students to reflect on their reading and thinking.

Book conferences can also be held, not for checking comprehension but for helping the student to respond to the text and use English in a real communicative
situation. Teachers can elicit responses through a range of carefully prepared questions, sufficiently open-ended to provoke attempts at putting ideas together, for example: Where does the story take place? Who are the main characters? Which characters impressed you most? Which characters did you sympathize with? Why did you enjoy the way the writer describes particular characters? Students can take on the roles of asking questions as well as answering them. Since the students read different books, they can exchange their thoughts and ideas freely and share their experience and learn form one another. Thus, reading and learning occur unconsciously and naturally. And by a large amount of reading, different kinds of schemata needed for comprehension of various texts are enlarged, which lays a good foundation for efficient and successful reading.

4. Conclusion

Based on the careful analysis of the nature of reading and the thorough comparison of the three approaches to reading, the interactive approach to the teaching of English reading in college is advocated in order to improve the students’ reading ability and encourage them to read extensively and critically and therefore think independently.

We arrive at the conclusion that it is possible and feasible to apply the interactive approach to the teaching of English reading in college. And it is noted that teachers should develop the students’ awareness of the interactive approach to reading and encourage them to read extensively with the bottom-up strategies and the top-down strategies functioning interactively. When we recommend training the students’ reading strategies, we should not forget the development of the student’s critical reading and independent thinking, which is in correspondence with the modern educational principle. The ultimate goal of teaching reading in college is that the students gradually become the critical readers and independent thinkers through successful and efficient reading.

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