Grasp Reading Skills to Improve Reading Ability?

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Abstract
The most common problem students have nowadays, including English majors, is that they have difficulty in understanding the long sentences, or sentences with complicated structures. Therefore, how to improve reading ability draws more and more attention. After years of practicing, it is time for us to stop and think: whether there is something about the way we teach students how to improve their reading ability which in fact prevents the students from learning sooner. As a matter of fact, there are so many misunderstandings and wrong practice. The author analyses the problems in each case, and points out the bottleneck of improving reading ability. In the last section of the paper, the author puts forward some practical ways to improve reading ability from experience.

Key words: reading skills, reading ability, bottleneck, thinking mode

Introduction
With the further development of the reform and opening-up, more and more Chinese people start to realize the importance of learning the English language. However, along with the enthusiasm of mastering English come confusion, frustration and even depression among the English learners and teachers. People want to learn English well since they know they should, but at the same time they hate it. We are forcing ourselves through it, because we all know the benefits of good English, and we all see the rewards of a successful English learner. Facing this kind of awkward situation, what shall we do? Books on how to learn English well are becoming popular; all kinds of training centers emerge in large numbers. People are putting in more efforts. Writers, sellers and founders of training centers are making good money! What have we the learners got? We feel more confused and frustrated. We still feel short whenever we try to accomplish tasks in English. Is it the time for us to ask WHY? WHY? We do not know the real purpose of learning English! Because of that, we never have a clear idea about what is the bottleneck for our Chinese English learners. When we are going the wrong direction, when we are focusing on the wrong point, the more efforts we put in, the further we are away from our destination. That is why we see so many confused faces. That is why we seldom see people learning English with a sense of achievement. It is high time for us to clear it all up. Knowing the purpose helps us see clearly the aspect we shall work on, and at the same time helps us know what problem we may face. Therefore, when we learn, we are ready!
What is the purpose of learning English? As an English teacher at university, I think for most university students, they use English in a way that they may obtain more advanced information concerning their own special fields, and then they may put the newly learnt knowledge into practice. This should be the reason why they learn English at school.

Focus Therefore, it is essential for university students to improve the English reading ability. Reading is a kind of communication, and for most people in most situations it is more important than speaking. For college students today, it is more important for them to obtain the latest information on their own fields through English, rather than showing their English certificates. As matter of fact, ordinary reading is far more important for them than any other forms of reading. Ordinary reading, according to Carver (1990), is looking at “each consecutive word of a prose passage in order to comprehend the complete thought contained in each sentence” (p. 15).

Current conditions and problems However, the most common problem students have nowadays, including English majors, is that they have difficulty in understanding the long sentences, or sentences with complicated structures. Often they have no idea at all.

I am not the only person who sees the problem. It has already drawn great attention in the Circle of English education in China. After years of practicing, we have not really sought out some effective solutions, which calls for true reflection: whether there is something about the way we teach students how to improve their reading ability which in fact prevents the students from learning sooner? Why we still cannot find the way out even with good intentions and many reforms? The reason is that there are still many misunderstandings about English learning among teachers and students and wrong practices.

Myth 1: A large number of fast reading practices could be the way to improve reading ability.

Not true. Reading is not an issue of speed. Reading is a special psychological process with the purpose of understanding sentences and the meaning conveyed by the sentences. Reading rate refers to a speed at which the correctness of understanding is not lower than 70%. Therefore, the true ability of reading comprehension should not and cannot be achieved only by reaching certain speed; but more importantly it means the correct and complete understanding of the given passage. The point they are missing is that reading rate itself cannot develop ability, nor can it improve ability. As a matter of fact, reading rate can only show the ability. A large number of fast reading practices without complete understanding will only blunt the enthusiasm of the learners. We should also understand that fast reading strategies such as scanning or skimming will be employed to help students to search a text for a specific word or specific information, and that this is far from the whole concept of reading, especially the academic reading for most students.

Myth 2: When teaching reading, teachers always focus on the explanation of the so-called reading skills, and they believe that “guessing” or “skipping over new
words” is the best reading skill students need to grasp in order to improve their reading ability.

**Not true.** Teachers are wrong when they think there are reading skills only when it comes to reading English passages. When these people are thinking that students need to grasp all kinds of English reading skills, they themselves seldom think about the general character shared by our native language and the target language. As we all know, there are reading skills in all languages. It is also true for the Chinese language. Chinese students have been reading Chinese passages all their lives, and it is not at all surprising that they have already grasped many reading skills if not all of them. We are seldom suspicious of the Chinese reading ability of a university student, and we should not. They have the reading ability. Then why they lack means when reading passages in English? Why the so-called reading skills they have learned in English class do not work? The main reason is that there is always a prerequisite when we talk about the so-called reading skills such as “guessing”. The prerequisite is to have a complete grasp of the minimal basic English vocabulary and to know the basic rules of word building as well. With this prerequisite, even when the teacher does not suggest the skill of “guessing”, students will use the skill, since they have practiced it a lot in reading Chinese passages and it comes so natural.

Today the students do not know how to guess only because they lack the basic English knowledge. Without the basic English knowledge, they cannot understand the context, and then there is no way for them to make an intelligent guess! They do not know how to predict! There is no background knowledge to support their guessing! There are times when the students may feel the “guessing” skill works – when they were very lucky in guessing the answer right, or when they read for entertainment where the wrong guess will not do any harm. However, you may never find the method work when it comes to scientific articles. When they read scientific articles, the skill will not work that well. As a matter of fact, they should not try to make guesses when reading serious passages, and even when they want to, more often than not they may feel it does not work. Let’s look at the following example – a definition of an organ:

> It is a hollow organ with muscular walls in the circulatory system of an animal. In vertebrates, the organ is divided into auricles and ventricles.

I wonder how many students can guess out those underlined words, and how many of them can guess out that the organ is heart.

As we have mentioned before, when students want to obtain more information concerning their own specialties, the most practical and important way is to read English articles. For them, reading English is the main source of information input and accumulation, and the most effective and reliable source as well. When it comes to science and technology, there should be no guess at all. Can you imagine a person without sound basic knowledge is doing some scientific research in English? He may only employ “guessing” or “skipping over the new words” when reading a scientific article. Will you trust his understanding? Do you have confidence in his reading report? Will it not cause delay in work?

In addition, in almost all the reference books when the authors try to explain
the so-called skill of “guessing”, they are always giving examples at the syntactic level, usually simple sentences with the very clear clue that supports their explanation. However, when most reading materials students are reading in real life are written by native English speakers to the readers who are also native English speakers, how many times will students only deal with simple sentences in their academic reading? How many times the texts will take into consideration that the readers are non-native speakers and give very clear hints to help readers to understand the “new words”? Even when the authors are trying to do so, what criteria should they use to define which words may be the new words for an ordinary reader? This explains why the so-called English reading skills can never work if the Chinese English learner does not have a good command of basic English knowledge.

Myth 3: “To paraphrase” is the only way to handle the difficult or complex sentences in reading materials.

Not true. When explaining the difficult or complex sentences, some teachers would persistently paraphrase them. As we all know, paraphrasing shows a good command of English on the part of the students, but it can never solve the problem at the first stage – to understand the given sentence. When the students do not have a clue about what is conveyed in the given sentence, how can they paraphrase? What is worse, this practice totally ignores the importance and difficulty in learning English grammar. When teachers only paraphrase the long and difficult sentences, they are not only doing nothing good to improve the reading ability of students, but also helping students to develop the laziness of thinking. When the students come across difficult sentences, they would naturally turn to their teachers or reference books, since they do not know how to solve the problem on their own. Therefore, only using paraphrasing may mislead students.

Now we should realize how serious these misunderstandings are. Among those people who are holding those wrong beliefs, some of them are well-known professors and many of them are English teachers. Therefore, it is necessary and urgent to abandon the wrong beliefs and to stop the wrong practice.

What is the bottleneck of improving reading ability?

To abandon the wrong beliefs, we should have the correct thought and concept of the English language. Since we all have the Chinese reading ability, the key point would be focused on the English language. We should admit that two different cultures (Chinese and English) definitely cultivate two different thinking modes, which lead to a big difference in thinking mode in the two languages –Chinese and English.

In the first layer – the fundamental one, Han nationality belongs to humanistic culture, which lays more emphasis on intuition and images. It determines that the Chinese language has the graphic quality. Chinese is an agglutinative language, having
no inflections. The word building is based on the binding of morphemes. Therefore, Chinese grammar is covert. On the other side, English-speaking nationalities belong to scientific culture, and the English language emphasizes the function. English is an analytic language, which indicates the relation of words in a sentence by means of word order, prepositions or auxiliary verbs. Meanwhile, compared with the Chinese language, English still has abundant inflections. English grammar is overt. Due to the difference in the nature of the native language (Chinese) and the target language (English), there exist two different thinking modes. It is the English thinking mode that holds the key to remove the bottleneck. It explains why the Chinese students have difficulty in understanding long and complex English sentences.

We are going to have a close look at examples at the syntactic level. Taking an amplifier to examine the bottleneck, we can see the great power of the English thinking mode.

In Chinese, the subject and predicate of a sentence only need to be concord in syntax, and there is no need to have agreement in the word endings.

e. g.  她是我的朋友。
       他们是学生。

While English calls for the agreement in number, person, verb tense in a sentence.

e. g.  The boy shows his mother much attention.
       The boys are playing outside.

In Chinese, a compound sentence can consist of several short sentences without using conjunctions between them as long as there are connections in the meaning. For a sentence in Chinese, the emphasis is put on the meaning more than the structure, since in most cases the word order is fixed.

e. g.  明天游览长城,我带照相机去。
       小明去旅行去了,昨天他回到了北京。

In English, however, a compound or complex sentence requires conjunctions and pronouns or adverbs to link every part of a sentence to make it a whole both in meaning and form.

e. g.  I’ll give you until tomorrow.
       He dropped to his knees and peeped through the keyhole.

Different from Chinese, the emphasis is focused on the integrity and compactness of the sentence structure, and the order is more flexible compared with Chinese.

Generally speaking, the Chinese language is a topic-prominent language, while English is a subject-prominent language. Therefore, when we express ourselves in Chinese, we highlight the topic or the theme, but not the subject. As long as we make the topic or the theme explicit, whether there is a subject for the sentence will not be a big deal.

e. g.  下雨了。
       有人请他吃饭。
       是风把门吹开了。

However, in an English sentence, the subject plays an important role in the sentence, and it determines the structure of the sentence, and even the choice of words in this
sentence.
e. g. They know that he is an expert.
  It is known that he is an expert.
  He is known to be an expert.

So far we have had a more complete picture of the difference between the Chinese language and the English language, and it is inevitable that the difference holds the Chinese students back from understanding English passages. When a Chinese student does not have a clue of the English thinking mode, he would naturally use what he has – the Chinese thinking mode – to analyze the English passage he is reading, which surely will not help him in a positive way, but only will confuse him.

**How to remove the bottleneck?**

*Set up a clear and solid English thinking mode.*

When we realize and admit the difference, it does not mean that to set up the English thinking mode is easy for us Chinese. Rome was not built in a day. We should not expect students to develop this thinking mode in a few lessons. To have the English thinking mode requires the efforts both from the teacher and the students. It involves a long-term guidance from the teacher and deliberate seeking on the part of the students, and the positive aid of our native language – Chinese. Now we may see how wrong it is when we ignore or deny the difference in the thinking modes, and how useless it is when we are only focusing on the so-called reading skills themselves. We should also realize that the impact of different thinking modes will not become less important or disappear when we try to deny it or ignore it. As a matter of fact, it is the difference that hinders our Chinese students from making any progress in the English learning as a whole, not only in the field of reading. To break the bottleneck, the only way out is to attach great importance to the difference and to reduce the negative impact of the difference.

There is also one thing we should make clear. The thinking mode we are talking about here does not refer to the cultural difference, rather, the mode of the language order in English, which is far more complex than the English culture and far more difficult but important than the culture itself. We should fully understand that the difference in the thinking modes is the “invisible” obstacle that hinders Chinese students. The cultural difference we often talk about is just like the part of an iceberg which is above the surface of the water. The other part under the water (take up 70%) is the main issue and our focus, where hides the core of the culture – the thinking mode. I think that the English thinking mode will be the premise for us to discuss or study culture difference, and more importantly, the decisive factor when we try to improve reading ability in English. Without the English thinking mode, to improve English reading ability will be an empty talk and we are misleading our students and fooling ourselves.
Have a correct view upon the function of Chinese in foreign language learning.

Since we have already seen through the bottleneck of improving the English reading ability, what we should do now is to help students develop the English thinking mode. We have also known it is not easy. What we should understand is that when we say it is ‘not easy’, we should see the difficulty lies in the “unfamiliarity”, but not that students do not understand the mode. We should ready for the long and painful process where the “unfamiliarity” becomes familiarity, familiarity becomes habit, and habit becomes second nature – the new habitual thinking patterns will one day come naturally. Luckily, this time we have a shortcut to cut short the pain – also the inevitable way: to have a correct understanding of the function of the native language in foreign language learning and to give full play to the function of the native language. It is sad to see that instead of helping students analyze the English thinking mode in the difficult and complex English sentences by comparing the Chinese thinking mode, teachers would rather use simple English to paraphrase them. The reason is simple: There is a common belief that speaking Chinese in an English class is breaking the law, and it is a taboo. Those who speak Chinese in class would be considered to be a teacher without much real knowledge of English or with bad teaching results. That is the unspoken law. Honestly, teachers know only using paraphrasing can only lead to one result: students will know the hows but not the whys. Students are actually making guesses when they come across long and complex sentences and they have no choice! Teachers still use this method and take the risk of letting students misunderstand it or be confused at all, because they do not want to be put on a tag saying “low teaching efficiency” or “unqualified teacher”. That is why English teaching in China is still at a low tide of being “time-consuming and ineffective”.

Learning from the past experience and speaking from my own teaching experience, to have right attitude towards the function of Chinese in English teaching is one of the ways to renew the thought and concept of the English teaching in China. When we want to get rid of the negative influence of Chinese in English learning, we should compare our own thinking mode with the unfamiliar English thinking mode. This comparison should be a long-term work until it becomes a habit. Only by this way can we set up the English thinking mode. Only when we can handle the two thinking modes in our mind and switch between them freely, can we improve the English reading ability during a large number of reading practices.

Study and learn translation.

When talking about comparison between the two languages, we should study and learn translation. People may think it’s out of date and that it has nothing to do with our English teaching and learning, but the job for the translators. However, when reading the works of the translators, we can see their efforts made in pointing out the difficult points for a Chinese English learner, and basically they speak from their own experience, which is authentic and of course involves a lot of work. What they present before readers will definitely save the learners a lot of roundabout course when learning English. Their works will definitely the great treasure when Chinese English
learners want to improve the English reading ability, and the English proficiency as a whole.

**Bibliography**


