Preliminary Notes on a Strategy-Oriented Teaching Model of EFL Reading

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Abstract:
This paper first overviews the status quo of EFL reading teaching in FLC (the Foreign Languages College of Shanxi University) with some problems detected. The most distinct one is that most reading teachers lack systematic theoretical knowledge to guide their teaching practice. With reference to the teaching objectives specific to the reading course for English majors at the basic stage, the author first examines the existing problems and then, as an optional solution to them, proposes a tentative strategy-oriented teaching model of EFL reading.

Key Words: EFL reading; teaching; strategy

I. Introduction
The author works in the Foreign Languages College of Shanxi University in China (FLC), teaching 2nd-year English majors the intensive reading course. As an EFL reading teacher, she knows clearly from experience the status quo of the EFL reading teaching in FLC, in particular that in connection with English majors at the basic stage of their college study.

As English majors, students at the basic stage are expected to achieve some general aims designed by the national syllabus at the end of their first two years’ major study. Specific to the reading course, the teaching objectives generally regulate that students should be able to:

- understand the articles and materials written or published for the native speakers at the intermediate level;
- understand the literal meaning of the given text and make inferences as appropriate;
- understand the textual relationships at both microstructure and macrostructure levels;
- master the rapid reading skills;
- know well about different text types and writing styles.

With our attention paid to the actual teaching of reading course in FLC, reading teachers come into question. Up to the moment, the English reading teachers there are all postgraduates with literature or linguistics MA degrees. Nevertheless, few of them, with the author included before she attended the academic exchange program in Singapore, have ever studied how to teach English reading on a theoretical basis and
in a systematic way, which has resulted in a problematic situation.

II. Problems Perceived

A closer look at the status quo of the teaching of EFL reading in FLC can easily detect some problems. In the paragraphs to come, the author will try to examine these problems and their causes, aiming to facilitate the directed provision of possible solutions.

According to the general objectives of the reading teaching for English majors, it is required of the students to master some useful reading strategies, such as skimming, drawing inferences, recognizing text structures and what not. However, the actual teaching cannot have these aims achieved even partially. Lack of theoretical knowledge about EFL reading, the teachers in FLC have to seek help from their own perceptual experience, which, more often than not, results in several dissatisfactory teaching effects. First, they usually have little idea about how to plan a lesson regularly and systematically. What they do is just sitting at the desk, going through the whole text to be taught, looking up in dictionary all the words and expressions they think important, checking against the teacher’s book to make sure that everything to be explained in class has been covered in preparation. Second, teacher presentation with focus on vocabulary study mainly features the classroom instruction. No wonder when asked to give the problems they face in reading, students tend to say that they just lack the vocabulary. Influenced by their teacher’s vocabulary-oriented teaching, they have no idea about the complexity of reading process and the fact that reading difficulty may not only proceed from language deficiency, but also from lack of reading strategies. Third, they seldom get down to learn students’ needs, have them analyzed, and tailor the teaching method accordingly. Instead, they just rigidly follow the natural arrangements of texts and exercises with the help of their perceptual experience. They exploit the prescribed text just for its own sake, not to use it as a means to teach students how to read effectively in a foreign language. Consequently, students lack motivation to read in class. They sit there just because intensive reading course is compulsory, making up a substantial credit.

III. Solutions Suggested

To solve these problems, the authority in FLC may set up a long-term program to train young teachers of reading course on a regular basis, having them equipped with necessary theoretical knowledge about EFL reading activity. However, it seems to be too slow an aid in coming to be of any help to the problematic teaching reality. A better expedient, in the author’s opinion, is to allow teachers to learn in teaching for improvement by following the general classroom approaches to reading as suggested below.

To begin with, teachers should consider students’ motivation throughout the whole teaching process. Whether students want to read to learn is crucial to the teaching of EFL reading. One ideal way to motivate students is to allow them to choose and work on texts of their own interests. But it is not feasible in reality for such a self-access scheme to work. Instead, the truth is that teachers and students have to use a
prescribed textbook. Reading activity is thus teacher-directed on a whole class basis. In this case, students’ needs have to give way to the text. Put another way, students have to find interests in reading the text, which is the very problem harassing most students faced with reading tasks. On this point, teachers’ role in exploiting the text efficiently becomes all-important in motivating students and hence arousing their interests in reading. Therefore, for teachers of EFL reading in FLC, the way out of the present troublesome situation should begin with the change of their attitude toward the way they use the textbook in teaching reading. From passive and rigid following to more active and flexible exploitation.

Naturally, how to exploit the textbook becomes the next question to deal with. According to Eddie Williams (1984), classroom teaching of reading falls into three phases: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. In the light of his ideas, the author proposes that effective exploitation of the textbook may fully come true, henceforth combining the syllabus-regulated general objectives with the teaching practice. Next, we will have a look at them respectively by fitting in corresponding reading strategies.

**PRE-READING**

Williams (1984) uses this expression to refer to the ways a reading teacher starts the lesson and all the corresponding activities in classroom before the actual reading process takes place. However, considering the fact that most teachers of EFL reading in FLC lack the knowledge of how to plan a lesson quite effectively as appropriate, the author suggests the pre-reading phase for the teachers begin with the moment when they sit down to prepare lessons at home rather than with much later the beginning part of the classroom teaching. At the planning stage, apart from doing language preparation, teachers should have to think about questions such as what the objective(s) of the lesson will be, what materials and activities will be used, what type of interaction will be encouraged, and how the learning will be monitored. (Farrell:2002)

As for the stage of lesson beginning in classroom, one major reading strategy is suggested, that is activating prior knowledge. Prior knowledge includes all text-related experience that a reader brings to comprehension, which covers the knowledge of text content and structure. Here, the author suggests activation focus better be placed on the content-based prior knowledge. As for that of text structure, it may be done right before the analysis of the text structure during the while-reading phase. Several classroom activities can be prepared to facilitate the activation of prior knowledge, including the teacher asking questions about the topic, students’ group discussion, topic-related key word association task, etc. The rationale behind the involved strategy is that EFL reading researchers indicate reading comprehension and reading skills enhance when appropriate prior knowledge is activated. (Anderson:1999)

**WHILE-READING**

In the case of an intensive reading lesson in FLC, this phase is seemingly an equivalent to rich vocabulary instruction for most reading teachers. Actually, vocabulary is not everything in EFL reading process. Rather it is only an integral part
of the while-reading process, which draws on the text from a comprehensive perspective. As a rule, while-reading work should begin with a general or global understanding of the text, and then move to smaller units such as paragraphs, sentences and words. (Williams:1984) In the light of the fact, the author sub-divides this phase into two stages: extensive reading stage and intensive reading stage. The former is responsible for a global understanding of the text while the latter deals with more detailed aspects of the text. Each stage will involve the practical use of some reading strategies. The extensive stage mainly includes skimming whereas the intensive stage covers more such as word recognition, guessing meaning of unknown words, recognizing text types and analyzing writing style.

Additionally, all these strategies are supposed to fit in the while-reading phase in an organic way. In the extensive stage, students are expected to look through the text rapidly for the general meaning. Then, bearing the main point in mind and directed by the teacher, students move on to the intensive stage and continue to deal with the same text in details from words, sentences, paragraphs all the way to more general and abstract aspects of the text: text structure and writing style. This is a facilitative process, deepening students’ comprehension step by step.

**POST-READING**

This phase may include any reactions to the text and to the while-reading work. Setting up and organizing post-reading work depends very much on all the objectives of the programme as a whole. Considering the objectives designed by the syllabus for English majors, the author thinks post-reading activities should focus on the consolidating use of all the strategies involved in the text reading alongside the text-related exercises in terms of comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, culture, etc. Such activities may be done in other supplementary forms mainly including speaking (individual report, pair interaction, group discussion, etc.) and writing (writing summary, paraphrase, translation, rewriting the text, etc.) For those activities, the target text may be the same text as in first two phases or some other texts of the same topical content the teacher/students has prepared and brought to the class.

**IV. Discussion**

The aforementioned solutions generally follow a three-phase framework of classroom approaches to reading. Next, the relationship between the suggested solutions and the perceived problems will be discussed. But the discussion will not follow the same framework to evaluate the solutions. Rather, the author would like to overview these three phases and involved strategies in a holistic way by relating them to the problems.

Let us begin with the first problem, reading teachers lack consciousness of directive and systematic lesson planning. The given suggestion is to think about some text-related questions. It is true that this will in great measure prepare teachers and make them more confident and more capable of effective classroom management. But lesson planning is an intricate job, which virtually attend to a wide variety of aspects such as text choice, students’ needs, class hours, teaching environment, to name but a few. Therefore, the suggested solution, far from enough, is only supposed to serve as a
trigger for teaching attitude change and paradigm shift.

In all these three phases, several reading strategies are suggested to be involved in reading teaching process. But one point should be noted that teachers are supposed to explain explicitly to students what is a particular reading strategy and how it can be used appropriately. They even have to model it themselves when definitional presentation of the strategy cannot be clear enough to make students follow. But all the explicit explanation and necessary modeling should be done in a time-conscious way. That is, teachers should not spend too much time on the strategies themselves since the ultimate aim of reading is comprehension and information acquisition. Therefore, what teachers should do in class is to usher some model strategies in the form of various activities in the hope that students may develop effective strategies of their own by following the models and eventually make substantial progress in comprehension ability. Moreover, the suggested strategies are only some widely acknowledged ones in the EFL reading literature, so teachers are well justified, in the author’s opinion, to investigate among their own students in a scientific way to generate and generalize some other strategies, effective and specific to the needs of their students.

The second problem is related to the while-reading phase, which has been dominated by rich vocabulary instruction in FLC teaching of reading. The suggested solution is to extend the range of detailed study from word level to much higher levels including sentences, paragraphs, text structure and writing style. It seems that vocabulary acquisition will have to retreat to the background. But in reality it is quite the reverse. All the higher level processing of the text will in turn provide much more contextual & informational aid for word study such as word meaning recognition and guessing meaning of unknown words. Thus, vocabulary learning will be no longer a decontextualized part of reading teaching. Instead, it will be done in a more systematic and orderly way.

Last but not the least, students’ needs and learning motivation can also find their place in the suggested solutions. As shown in psychological study, learners’ motivation comes from two sources. One is intrinsic in learners’ themselves, their internal interests; the other is external comprehensible input, which makes learning possible. In the light of such theoretical backup, the suggested 3-phase framework serves to have both aspects attended. The introduction to the use of various reading strategies can facilitate the comprehension and make the target reading text more comprehensible and some of them may as well function as interests-arouser. For instance, in pre-reading phase, activation of prior knowledge may not only make students’ background knowledge available for later comprehension, but also arouse their interests in learning by virtue of a wide variety of vivid forms such as group discussion, semantic mapping, visual realia, students’ hands-on experience of topic-related activities and so on. (Farrell:2002)

Of course, whether the teaching practice can go on smoothly lies greatly with the teachers’ role in implementing the suggested framework. In addition, the 3-phase framework is clear enough to make students know where they are in class, thus more easily devoting themselves to the reading process. However, teachers should note that
this framework is too general to be directly replicable in reality. They should try to adjust the proportion of each phase as appropriate as the teaching practice requires in order to meet the specific needs of a particular text. For example, the post-reading phase actually leaves much room for teachers to bring into full play their intelligence to integrate strategy use with language study to consolidate students’ comprehension.

V. Conclusion

This paper has proposed and evaluated some possible solutions to the problems perceived in the teaching of EFL reading in FLC. The author aims only to provide her fellow teachers with a general teaching model for reference and further research into the issue in question, thus leaving little space for detailed introduction to various kinds of reading strategies. Therefore, one point that must be added is that to have problems solved satisfactorily requires more than a general model, which is just a point of departure for more in-depth and systematic theoretical study in the reading literature.

References


