Reading Strategies in English Teaching and Learning

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1. Introduction

Reading dominates most college English curricula, Students learn to understand and interpret written materials. It tends to become central task for the college students. But this type of reading rather complicated to learn. So a great deal of research effort has tried to identify a catalogue of strategies that can improve students’ reading, in other words, using the least effort to obtain satisfactory results. Teacher wants his students to use their time and energy to best effect. Therefore the reading strategies is apt to occupy much of our language teachers’ attention. The strategies to be covered are diverse in the course of teaching.

1.1 First, if the communication between the students and the writer is to take place they should have some certain things in common. They should have similar command of the language. If the learner’s vocabulary is far smaller than the writer’s, it will be hard to understand. So the students should acquire strategies for dealing with the words that really block comprehension;

1.2 Second, language as a means of communication, not only loads
the information of syntax and semantics but also carries the attached one of pragmatics. Owing to the dissimilar cultural background and different shared knowledge, if a student doesn’t have any strategies to deal with the context of the reading, it is hard for him to understand the author’s purposes of writing the article, and it is even more difficult to precisely catch the overloading implication. Hence, the strategies that deal with the context will be necessary for the students to improve their reading ability.

1.3 Third, the familiarity of the reading skills is equally important. Some approaches should be provided to help students be aware of them so as to read more efficiently.

2. Some misconceptions in teaching

Some of the activities that happen in reading classes may interfere with reading rather than promoting it, at least the kind of work that leads to misleading, such as testing instead of teaching and giving too much help and so on.

2.1 Testing instead of teaching

The aim of a test in a classroom is to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses so that teachers may alter their teaching planning according to what they have found out. So it is widely acceptable nowadays that English teachers should spare some time for testing in class and it is regarded as the common practice in English teaching in
China. Usually testing accounts for some time each term according to different purposes and in the last semester of the English study, it even holds more than the half of the total periods. Some students have the misconception that English learning should be testing since the ultimate aim of the study is to pass some certain tests. Therefore some students may ask “what’s the use of learning the Text books when there is not much connection between the book and the test?” And some English teachers echo too. However, there are differences between teaching and testing. What are the reasons for the persistence of a “testing” rather than a “teaching” approaching in many classrooms? If perceptions can be clarified, we may have a better change of charting a way forward.

Then what are the major difference between teaching and testing? First, students generally receive little or nor support during test in contrast to what we expect during good teaching. Second, many tests are designed to discriminate, that is, to be difficult for some students, whereas teaching is intended to lead to successful learning for everyone. The other important differences are that tests are only samples and that they often have consequences that teaching does not.

Education change is a slow process. Much like the development of a child, students demand a great deal of nurturing before they
become truly independent. For most purposes, teaching will certainly be very long process which requires teachers to use the essential attribute of the complex systems to help students get it, while in a test, on the other hand, students are expected to show how they can perform without outside assistance. Moreover, in class a good teacher does not simply present a text, and expect students to understand it in a short period of time. He spends time repeating lesson points or activities for the benefit of those who are confused and gives all students enough time to absorb what is to learn. A test does not have enough time to complete all the required activities, even though it is similar in design.

It is very common for us to test instead of teaching and it seem to become the tendency of the English study due to the national tests each year. Most of the English teachers, though may complain about it, have to sacrifice the real purposes of the teaching for the tests.

2.2 Doing what the students must do for himself.

The role of teachers is to provide some key characteristics of a learner who can take responsibility for learning: an ability to define one’s own objectives: awareness of how to use language material effectively, careful organization of time for learning, and active development of learning strategies. It is true that in class support is normal when students find something difficult and the teacher’s role is
to make it simpler by means of scaffolding. But it also true that the ultimate aim of the scaffolding is to be independent from the help of teachers for the students. Therefore teachers often encourage their students to make sense of the text by themselves, namely, with little or without the outside support and the teachers should be quick in the judgment of the obstacles, whether it is a problem of lexical, syntax, context or culture. Teachers provide the students with what they need in the attack of the article. But if, as the lesson proceeds, as soon as a student encounters a problem and the teacher at once explains or translate it to him, this is the wrong kind of help, because the student barely has time to think it over and to see whether it is within his reach to settle it by himself with the prior knowledge or the other means. If a teacher begins by explaining or summarizing the text before his students read it, he is defeating the object of the lesson. He is doing what his students should have found out by themselves. It seems that a large number of the teachers perceived a need to fulfill the general roles of instructor, and helper and, indeed, these are common to a range of classroom methods. However, a good teacher often acts more as an organizer and counselor than helper, allowing himself to stand back a little, that is, remaining at some distance from students and takes on a less dominant role while his students organize themselves in work.
2.3 Paying too much attention to every detail of a text

Sometimes teachers make the problems worse by detail of a text. In English class it is likely to strengthen student’s belief that they ought to pay this sort of attention when they read on their own. Certainly they must do so when their purpose demands it. But they must also acquire strategies for dealing with text that need not be mastered so completely. It is important for students to understand that for many purposes, a rough idea of the meaning is all we need, the demand for a hundred per cent certainty is what drive them to their dictionaries.

3 The reasons that make the reading material difficult

3.1 The lack of the vocabulary

Students often complain that the English vocabulary seems the only source of difficulty, since one can translate it into extremely simple English and the message is not challenging intellectually. For students whose vocabulary is limited, this is more like the problem.

3.2 Lack of the schematic knowledge

A schema is a mental structure. It is abstract because it does not relate to any particular experience, although it derives from all the particular experience we have had. The way we interpret depends on the schemata activated by the text; and whether we interpret successfully depends on whether our schemata are sufficiently similar to the writer’s.
3.2 Lack of the previous knowledge

Some articles, even without any difficult vocabulary, is not easy to understand. So it would not help if one looks up some of the words in a dictionary, because what he should understand is not the definitions, but the information, such as science concerned with the article. The difficulty here depends on the amount of previous knowledge the student brings to the paper, that is to say, students do not share the relevant schema with the writer. The writer will not waste time spelling out facts and relationships that he assumes are already in the reader’s mind. So the student may be left with too little information to make sense of the text.

3.4 Lack of the contextual knowledge

Teachers frequently encounter such instance over the reading class: Some sentences do not have any new words, however, students find it difficult to understand. What they usually resort to is to adapt the following strategies: such as the analysis of the grammar, paraphrase or translation. These strategies sometimes work, but most of the time not. In such circumstance, the trouble does not lie in the language itself, but due to the lack of understanding the contexts of the situation and culture, in other words, the meaning a sentence can have only when in context.
4. The strategies to deal with the difficulty article

4.1 Reading can be divided into three parts according to the sequence of reading: pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading

Pre-reading phrase,

Before reading the text students can be encouraged to do a number of things: predicting from the title; expressing an attitude about the topic; reviewing their own experiences in relation to the topic; activating existing cultural knowledge; becoming familiar with some of the language in the text. In this way the teacher can prepare them in terms of both schematic and language knowledge, and ensure purposeful reading.

The pre-reading activities are essentially schematic preparation. Traditionally, English language learners have been prepared for reading through a focus on langue knowledge, vocabulary usually, but sometimes structures. More recently, people pay more attention to the schematic knowledge than the langue.

While-reading phase
The main purpose of the while-reading activities is to encourage students to be active as they read. Students can be given activities which requires them to do to predict the unknown words and figure out the cohesive devices.

Vocabulary is often the unavoidable problems for the students. A
major strategy in helping students to build vocabulary for reading is to encourage them to develop strategies for guessing word meaning from contextual clues and background knowledge. Students are capable of guessing 60-80 per cent of unknown words in a text if the density of new words is not too high.

Students start with finding what the part of speech of the unknown word is, then they will look at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context. If failed, they will resort to looking at the wider context of the unknown word. This means looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences, guessing the meaning of the unknown word.

The next process is the cohesive devices. Clearly second language readers are going to have difficulties in processing texts which contain unfamiliar aspects of the English language, especially the cohesive device. The inability to understand them in a text will impede understanding of the functional relationships of sentences. Cohesive devices include such things as reference item; lexical cohesion or deletion of items.

A reader may also use discourse signals of various kinds to get through a text. These may be connectives such as “moreover “ which signals addition, or “whereas “, which signals contrast. Or they may
be words that organize discourse. Of course, a teacher can also ask his students to react to the opinions; make note; confirm expectation or prior knowledge; or predict the next part of the text from various clues.

Post-reading phase

The aim of post-reading is to check the output of what they have learned in reading. The activities can either be oral or written and as varied as the text they follow, but ideally will tie up with the reading purpose set, so that students check and discuss activities done while reading and make use of what they have read in a meaningful way, for example, by discussing their response to the writer’s opinions or by using notes for a writing activities. After that, a wide range of activities focusing either on the content of the text can be undertaken, for example, debate, role-play, reading of contrasting text, or focusing on its language competence by concentrating on some linguistic features.

4.2 Reading can also be divided into bottom-up processing and top-down processing with the different purposes.

If a student constantly find there are some lexical barriers to comprehension, then he may choose the bottom-up processing. This processing can be used to describe the decoding of the letters, words, and other language features in the text. A student can make conscious
use of it if an initial reading leaves them confused and the writer’s point of view is very different from his own he would better to scrutinize the vocabulary and syntax to make sure he has grasped the plain sentence correctly. Moreover the term of the bottom-up processing has also been used to describe the application of prior knowledge to working on the meaning a text. Thus bottom-up processing can be used as a corrective to tunnel vision.

If a student has some trouble in interpreting assumptions and drawing inference ,the top-down process should be applied .One can make use of it when one tries to see the overall purpose of the text, or get a rough idea of the pattern of the writer’s argument in order to make a reasoned guess as the next step. This process can be employed both in the paragraph and the text. A reader adopts an eagle’s eye view of the text when he considers it as a whole and related to his own knowledge and experience. This enables him to predict the writer’s purpose ,the likely trend of the argument and so on , and then use this framework to interpret difficulty parts of the text.

4.3 We often define English study as the intensive and extensive reading.

Intensive lesson usually takes up the most time of our English study and some students regard it as the only approach to learn English. Intensive reading involves approaching the text under the guidance of
a teacher or a task which focus on the text. The aim is to arrive at an understanding, not only of “what” the text means, but of “how” the meaning is produced. The intensive lesson is intended primarily to train strategies which the student can go in use with other text.

The intensive reading requires students to understand the text as fully as necessary and try to use all the skills they have acquired whereas the extensive reading, different from the intensive reading, is to understand it without grasping every part of it. It is very important for the students to develop the facility, difficult as it is. The approaches of the extensive reading involve scanning and skimming, scanning and skipping.

Scanning and skipping mean to glance rapidly through a reading material either to search for a specific information or to get initial impression of whether it is suitable for a given purpose. The idea that some part of a text may be ignore or skipped is strange to some students.

Scanning and skimming are important techniques; they do not remove the need for careful reading, but they enable the reader to select text, or parts of texts, that are worth spending time on. And skimming to get a top-down view is valuable as a way of approaching the difficult text.

Skimming means to requires closer attention to the reading material
than scanning does it. Have times limits and emphases the need for speed, but be cautious about race. The tasks must not ask for subtle comprehension, otherwise they cannot be answered by skimming. Tailor the task to make sure it can be completed by skimming rather than careful reading.

5. The roles can teachers and learners play in the learning process

5.1 The teacher’s roles and responsibilities

In the previous paragraph we talk about the misconception of the teacher’s role. Then what a teacher should do in a reading class? What level is suitable to a student? In reading class you will often find that if you don’t push your student to move ahead, he may stay where he is. If you push him too far, he will fall, become discouraged and perhaps stop trying. But beyond his initial levels, there is a level which he can reach, not by himself but with your help. We call it as scaffolding. So the teacher’s task is to push the learner that one step at a time beyond where he is now. To do this, he provides scaffolding to support him until he can stand on his own feet. So a teacher’s role will be as following:

a. Encouraging: urging students to have a try, praising them for they get right, not blaming, helping students to enjoy and value reading.

b. Prompting: helping students complete the original task by giving cues, asking easier questions, setting supplementary tasks.
c. Probing: finding out why a student has given so that if need be you can help him to see where he went wrong, finding out what the students can and cannot do, and working out a programme to develop the skills they lack.

d. Modeling: choosing or devising effective tasks and activities. demonstrating appropriate ways of doing things so that the students will understand what is wanted, understanding what reading involves, how language conveys meanings and how texts are put together.

e. Clarifying: giving examples, explaining a particular answer.

Of course, a teacher will play a different role during the different activities in the class. During language-focused activities the teacher might well assume the more traditional role of instructor, but when it comes to the reading itself, the teacher’s role will be to provide materials, design activities and then step back. In this way the teacher will acts as organizer, guide and evaluator of how successfully students have tackled a text and of what further work might be needed.

5.2 The students’ role and responsibility

a. Taking an active part in learning

First and foremost. We have said that reading is learnt rather than taught, and only the learners can do the learning. So their first responsibility is to be activated and take charge of that they do.
b. Monitoring comprehension

Students can able to monitor their own comprehension and recognize that they do not understand a text. Find out why and adopt a strategy that will improve matters.

c. Learning text talk

An effective way to promote the skill is to talk about texts in class; teachers can plan activities for this purpose, and model the text talk, but it is the students who have to make the most opportunities by joining in.

d. Taking risks

Joining in means that they have got to take risk of making mistakes. They won’t learn much if they don’t do this. The sooner students realize that a mistake is an opportunity to learn, the better.

6 Conclusion

Reading ability is the main purpose in college English teaching. What a teacher should do is to make a conscious attempt on his part to equip the students to find out what help them to read so that they can adopt successful strategies for the reading. What we can do is to give students techniques for approaching texts of various kinds, to be used for various purposes. We should also keep in mind the teacher’s role and
responsibility. We should not do what students should do and try to avoid providing students with the wrong help.

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