

A Research on Improving Reading Competence of Junior High Students

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Abstract

Now, English teaching has attracted more and more attention, and reading is the main means to examine student's ability of using English. It takes a large proportion in the current senior high school entrance examination of English volume. So it requires that students must have a certain speed and accuracy, thus to improve your reading ability is particularly important for students. To improve the reading ability effectively must master certain reading skills. How to improve middle school students' English reading ability is always a common concern of researchers and teachers. However, in the present process of teaching English reading, many problems affect the cultivation of Junior high school students' English reading ability, which exist in teachers, students and reading materials.

Key words: Junior high students; reading competence; strategies

1. Introduction

Reading is considered to be one of the most important skills for junior high students in English learning. Unfortunately, their reading ability is quite poor. For different reading purposes, the students do not know what strategies to use and how to use. Some of them even do not have reading strategies. This study aims at developing students' reading strategies and improving their reading ability as well as their reading scores in the exam.

This thesis, on the basis of a brief introduction of the current problems in English leaning and the classification of reading strategies and the training of learning strategies. At the same time, the author proposes her own reading strategies training methods based on Oxford's learning strategies training methods and Anderson's Active Teaching. It is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is the introduction. There is a brief introduction of the significance of the study of reading strategies. The second chapter is literature review including the training of learning strategies at home and abroad. The third chapter is the problems in English reading .The fourth chapter is solutions of improving reading ability. The last chapter is the conclusion.

1.1 The Motivation of the Study

As is known to all, reading plays a crucial role in English learning. But how can students read quickly and effectively, and how to make the reading easier for the students, is a big headache for most English learners and instructors. Unfortunately, their reading ability is quite poor. Here are some possible reasons. They may have a poor vocabulary or a frail grammatical foundation. They may lack interest in reading and foreign culture or don't have good reading habits. They may fail to use reading strategies or get good marks in reading comprehension. In fact, in daily teaching activities of reading comprehension, teachers spend most of their time and energy in guiding students to grasp the language knowledge and grammatical items. Most teachers expect that students can acquire reading skills and strategies naturally through the accumulation of language knowledge and massive exercise. Nevertheless, according to the survey, quite a number of students are not confident in their reading strategies.

This study aims at developing students' reading strategies and improving their reading ability as well as their reading scores in the exam.

1.2 The Necessities and Significances of the Study

In "English Curriculum Standards" (The following refers to as Standards) for full-time compulsory education of ordinary high school which Ministry of Education promulgated in 2001, the descriptions of objectives in reading for junior high graduations are as follows:

1. The ability to infer and understand the meaning of new words according to the context and morphology
2. The ability to understand the logical relationship between each sentence in a paragraph
3. The ability to find out the topic of the article, to understand the plots of the story and to predict the development of plots and the possible ending
4. The ability to understand reading materials with common genres
5. The ability to use simple reading strategies to get information according to different reading purposes

It's obvious that Standards guide teachers' direction to improve the students' reading ability. In addition to linguistic skills, there's another important aspect named learning strategies which includes reading strategies. Application of reading strategies to reading comprehensions can enhance students' awareness of autonomy learning. (Zhou, 2009) In order to let the students find the English reading easier, teachers should make them aware the importance of applying the reading strategies to their reading comprehension; teachers should also make suitable designations of the given material according to the characteristics of the students.

The exam instructions in 2010 said that the part of reading comprehension examined students' reading ability. It required students to be able to read materials of common genres with new words no more than 3%. Reading speed should be 50 to 70 words per minute. Students should have the following abilities:

1. To identify the theme of the article and to understand the plot of the story and to predict the development and the likely outcome of the story
2. To use simple reading strategies to acquire information according to different reading purposes
3. To infer and understand the meaning of the new words according to the context and word formation
4. To understand the logical relationship between sentences in the paragraph
5. To make a simple judgment and reasoning

6. To acquire the author's intention and attitude

Now reading strategies have such a close relationship with the exam to the extent that it will be highlighted and force teachers to re-examine the importance of reading strategies. There is practical significance rather than theoretical significance in this study.

2. Literature Review

As to reading strategies, experts have a similar definition. Li Lijuan (2010): reading strategies mean that the readers read and think or take a specific act in order to solve the problems encountered in the reading process and to help them remember the content of the article. Johnson (1989): reading strategies referred to the course of conduct taken by the learner to solve the difficulties in reading. Regardless of any kind of statement, reading strategies are strategies that readers adopt to finish the target. It is an important part of learning English reading well.

2.1 Studies Abroad

Over these years, many authors abroad have done a large number of researches to find that different researchers give different definitions and classifications of reading strategies. However, since the 1980s, a series of results of the study make the researchers reach an agreement that the strategy-oriented instruction help to improve students' reading ability and proficiency.

2.1.1 Active reading.

Anderson (1990) summed up the eight kinds of reading strategies in the second language teaching: 1. Activate prior knowledge 2. Cultivate vocabulary 3. The Teach for comprehension 4. Increase reading rate 5. Verify reading strategies 6. Evaluate progress 7. Build motivation 8. Plan for instruction and select appropriate reading materials. The first letter of the first six strategies makes the word "Active". Therefore Anderson's reading strategies' training is called "Active Reading".

In the first strategy, prior knowledge includes two kinds. One is world knowledge that general reader's process and the other is readers' familiarity of specific things. In teaching, teachers should try to do the following three points. Firstly, in order to make students develop good habits, the teacher should help students to connect the knowledge in reading materials with their own existing knowledge actively.

About vocabulary, Anderson mentioned that not only the vocabulary size but also vocabulary skills have a profound effect on reading comprehension. He believes that in second language teaching, teachers should be straightforward to teach students the basic vocabulary and instruct students how to guess the meaning of the vocabulary which is rarely used according to the context.

About reading skills, Anderson mentioned a misunderstanding that is "the testing distribution reading comprehension rather than teaching readers how to comprehend". In order to understand students' reading process, it must be cleared that two kinds of mental activities involved in reading comprehension. One is cognitive activity and the other is meta-cognitive activity. Cognitive activity is thinking and meta-cognitive activity is "thinking about thinking."

To improve the reading speed, Anderson came up with four effective methods: "1. Rate buildup reading. Students are given sixty seconds to read as much the material as they can. They then the begin reading again

from the beginning of the text and are given an additional sixty seconds. They are to read more for the second time. 2. Repeated reading. Students read a short passage over and over again until they achieve criterion levels of reading rate and comprehension. 3. Class-paced reading. This activity requires a discussion regarding a class goal for minimal reading rate. Once that goal is established, the average number of words per page of the material being read is calculated. 4. Self-Paced Reading. During this reading rate activity the students determine their own goal for reading rate. They then determine how much material needs to be read in a sixty second period to meet their objective rate. "

2.2.2 Oxford's category of learning strategy.

Oxford has provided us with a comprehensive and systematic classification of learning strategies. And it is worth noting that terms Oxford has chosen are quite familiar to us for they are mainly borrowed from literature of the prior studies, by which her new taxonomy can be better accepted and comprehended. Furthermore, Oxford's classification is taken to be as the framework of the study on learning strategies.

Memory strategies

Memory strategies have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information. The human mind can store some 100 trillion bits of information, but only part of that potential can be used. Memory strategies can be powerful mental tools for the learners. Memory strategies have to deal with the materials meaningful to the learners. That is, the material itself is of certain significance and the study of it should be useful for the learners. Otherwise, the memory strategies are not applicable. As for the learners, to use their memory to full potential, it is worthwhile to figure out their individual differences in learning habits at the first opportunity.

Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies are used for linking new information with existing schema and for analyzing and classifying it, which are responsible for deep processing, forming and revising internal mental modes and receiving and producing messages in the target language such as repetition, note-taking and summarizing, which enables learners to understand and produce new language by many different means and have a more direct impact on the performance of learning tasks.

Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies are applied when learners find their inadequacy in vocabulary, or expression or grammar has blocked their way for further learning. Compensation strategies are employed by learners to make up their inadequacy in reading, listening, speaking and writing and pave the way for them to go further. Compensation strategies for production are used for overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. Learners are encouraged to use whatever methods to keep a conversation going. And such strategies help learners to keep on using language, thus obtaining more practice.

Indirect strategies

Indirect strategies are divided into meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies. Meta-cognitive strategies allow learners to control their own cognition that is to coordinate the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating. Affective strategies help to regulate emotion, motivation, and evaluating and help students learn through interaction with others. Indirect strategies are useful in virtually all language learning situations and are applicable to all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

2.2 Studies at Home

Nowadays, many authors at home also have done researches on English reading and they have realized great achievements. Their achievements give us useful theoretical base to do this study.

2.2.1 Common learning strategy training modes.

Cheng Xiaotang(2002) mentioned that common learning strategy training modes have the lecture-style, seminar style, textbooks immersion and teaching activities immersion.

Lecture-based learning strategy training is actually not a specific training in how to use learning strategies, but to cultivate a strategy of awareness. Generally, experts and experienced teachers on learning strategies will be invited to give seminar. The advantage of lecture-style is its large-scale and time-saving and it does not take up class time. However, the learners can not personally experience the learning strategies combined with learning activities.

The seminar style is a short-term intensive training. Its main purpose is to develop learners' strategy awareness. Seminar style, which is quite different from the lecture-style, combines lectures, seminars and practice organically. In this way, learning can be combined with the actual language learning activities or tasks and new learning strategies can be tried.

Textbooks immersion means to infiltrate learning strategy training into each unit of the textbook. There are two kinds of immersion as usual. One is the embedded strategy training which a lot of learning strategies are penetrated in the teaching materials in a hidden way. The other is the non-hidden one.

Teaching activities immersion means to penetrate the learning strategies to the whole teaching. In this mode of training, teachers first introduce to the students directly and demonstrate some of the learning strategies and let students try to use these strategies. And in other teaching activities, the teacher also penetrates in a hidden way. Cohen pointed out that students improve their efficiency of the completion of learning activities and learning tasks and self-management ability and self-confidence in learning and using a foreign language through strategic training.

3. Some Problems in English Reading

Christine Nuttall says reading is a process in which readers select, classify and interpret information according to experience, information and knowledge they have in their minds. Reading is a communicative activity between writer and reader in written form. But in English reading, there are many problems in students, teachers and reading materials.

3.1 Students' Problems in English Reading

Language skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. Reading is a mental process to draw information from the source texts and to form new information.

Many students find it is hard to do the reading comprehension. The problems students have can be concluded as;

- (1) Reading word by word, phrase by phrase, or line by line, usually at a very slow speed;
- (2) Insufficient vocabulary resulting in too many new -words as obstacles in the process of reading;
- (3) Too much consulting of new words in the dictionary in the process of reading causing the lack of the ability of inferring the meaning of some new words with the help of the context or the rules of word-building;
- (4) The lack of sufficient cultural understanding of the target language or the background of the materials being read;

To solve the problems mentioned above, this paper discusses how to adopt appropriate strategies to improve the students' reading ability.

3.2 Teachers' Problems in the Instruction of English Reading

Some students consider that teaching methods are not new, and other students consider that the current teaching methods are not helpful to improve their English reading ability. The reasons are in the follow:

(1) Teachers are eager to correct answers. In the process of learning new knowledge, students will inevitably have many errors. Some teachers are afraid to affect teaching schedule, in order to save time, they will directly tell the correct answers to students. As a result, it may influence student's ability to explore issues.

(2) The dominant position of middle school classroom is not obvious. Teachers read and then students follow. As a result, students do not receive effectiveness with hard work. After a long time students will have the psychological weariness to English.

(3) Teaching methods are simple and interactive activity is poor. But some of our teachers in the classroom always centered on their religion, which can not be found the interaction point, so it does not produce interactive effects. (Liu, 2011)

3.3 Problems in Reading Materials

First, the themes of reading materials should be various and novel. Then, the text is too difficult and it requires students to have more vocabularies. Next, the reading materials are so hard that can not be understood easily. Last, students have no time to have much reading so the number of the reading materials is limited to them.

4. Solutions of Improving Reading Ability

Almost all the English learners know the importance of the English. Nowadays English test constitutes a high proportion of all the tests. And English reading has a high proportion of the test. So it is necessary to command some ways to improve English reading ability and skills. Here some practical solutions.

4.1 Enlarging Vocabularies

It has been suggested that a vocabulary of about five thousand words is needed to start independent reading. Students who meet a word they can not interpret are first likely to ask what it means, which is fine as long as information is available, but not practical as the basis for independent study. After that, most of the students turn to dictionaries. This is very natural. But in fact, one of the first things to be said about a dictionary is “Do not use it too much”.

4.2 Improving Grammar Ability

Grammar is an important tool for weak readers to help them see through the fog. So knowing how to study grammar and have a good knowledge of grammar is essential. First, try to get an overview of English grammar from a textbook. Note the grammar points you need to work on and plan to work on each for at least a few days. Second, find some grammar exercises. To learn English grammar well, you need to practice each grammar point until you can use it easily. Third, pay close attention to grammar when you read English. When you read a sentence, ask yourself if can make similar sentence. If you can not, find the grammar points in book and then practice.

4.3 Changing the Reading Habits

Lots of students complain that the reading is so hard. It can not give them any benefits or useful information. They often say that their reading speed is slow; they can not understand the meaning of the sentences; their reading abilities are poor. But if they have good reading habits, they will flexibly use reading skills in a test to get a high mark, and they also can improve reading abilities. So it is a good idea that you compel yourself to finish the job in the limited time. It can both get the information quickly and improve one’s reading ability. Noting down some notes is also a good reading habit. When you are reading some material, you can write down some new words or good phrase in margin or your note book.

4.4 Enriching and Enlarging Background Information

The lack of the readers’ cultural background hinders their comprehension in reading. Interactive reading model proposed by a famous American artificial intelligence expert named Rulnelhart stressed that effective reading should connect bottom-up mode with top-down mode thus the knowledge in readers’ mind and text materials achieve optimum interaction. So students should improve their cultural awareness. There are some approaches to develop their cultural awareness. First, teachers should seek cultural information concerned in textbooks and other study materials then sort out and present them to learners at a proper time and under proper situation. Second, let students read some books about western culture under the teachers’ guide. Third, let students have discussion about the differences between Chinese and western culture and make them know the importance of culture in English reading. Last, but not the least, people should correctly handle the contradictions between language and cultural teaching.

4.5 Reinforcing of Learning Motivation

As the saying “Faith moves mountain.” Learning motivation can also be interpreted the desire to learn knowledge. Once one has the learning motivation, he will study autonomously. Then he will take efforts to

get the goal. They will use various skills and strategies to learn English well. The school teachers can arrange some interesting reading materials or video to the students so as to reinforce their learning motivation. The reading material which is close to students' life can also arouse their learning interests.

5. Conclusion

Reading is a basic skill in learning English. With the development of the globalization, we have to read some English papers. It is helpful for us to read English paper efficiently. Though there are many obstacles in English reading, we can use proper ways to overcome them. The more you practice, the more you memorize, the better you read.

In order to improve the students reading ability, the author introduces some practical reading strategies. Though this thesis, we can draw some conclusions. Firstly, only by spending much time and doing enough exercises can the students employ these reading strategies in their reading comprehension subconsciously. Secondly, apart from the subjective reasons, some objective reasons should be emphasized. Last appropriate materials should be chosen for strategy training.

And, teachers can make a deeper and broader research in this field; they can also encourage the students to share their positive experience of these strategies and to construct their own reading strategies according to their ex-experiences of learning their first language. Teachers' interventions and initiatives in the process of instruction will facilitate students' use of these reading strategies.

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