

TEACHING ADVANCED READING TO CHINESE EFL LEARNERS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: *Reading class should include both language instruction and reading instruction, but the instruction focus will be different with students of different English proficiency. Even at the advanced level, if students still have language difficulties, teaching reading cannot be a mere task of reading instruction. This study is an action research conducted at Shandong Normal University in China. Through a preliminary investigation problems were identified. Some students did not have an appropriate aim in learning Advanced Reading. Vocabulary and background knowledge caused major difficulties for reading comprehension. They obviously lack the awareness of reading strategies. In order to solve these problems, action was taken in teaching with a focus on training the use of reading strategies. At the end of the ten weeks' training, data were collected and analyzed. The results show that the training has achieved positive effects.*

KEYWORDS: Advanced Reading, Chinese EFL Learners, Reading Strategies, Strategy Training

INTRODUCTION

The goals of teaching EFL reading may vary with learners of different levels. Generally, we want our students to learn language knowledge, to comprehend the text, and as importantly to learn reading skills. Reading class should include both language instruction and reading instruction, but the instruction focus will be different with students of different English proficiency. At intermediate and advanced levels we can assume that students possess a basic competence in English and that our primary task is to teach reading (Clarke and Silberstein, 1987). However, learners are different in their proficiency, and some do not show the expected performance. This is true in universities in China. Because of this, teaching advanced reading cannot be a mere task of reading instruction. There are more problems to tackle. This study was aimed at identifying the problems in advanced reading with the students at Shandong Normal University in China and working out solutions so as to improve the students' English reading ability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the earlier language teaching approaches that laid emphasis on reading, we will move our attention to the grammar translation approach and the reading approach. When those approaches were prevalent, reading was the only language skill emphasized and classroom teaching centred on the study of language. Focus was on grammatical parsing (Celce-Murcia, 1991) and on matching words in the foreign language text with meanings in the student's native tongue (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). The process of understanding a text was not the concern of researchers and teachers. Failures to comprehend a non-defective communication were always

attributed to language-specific deficits (Carrel & Eisterhold, 1987). In the 1960s and 1970s scholars such as Goodman and Smith (cited in Silberstein, 2002) developed a psycholinguistic perspective of reading, focusing on its active, cognitive processes. More recently, literature on reading has widely used the terms bottom-up and top-down to refer to the two modes of information processing. And schema theory, which emphasizes the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension, has been applied as a theoretical support for designing reading activities. In addition, researchers have focused on readers themselves and have sought to identify the strategies employed by successful readers as they interact with a text during reading (Richards, 2002). This section will be devoted to the theories and concepts related to the teaching of reading.

Models of information processing

An older view of information processing is known as bottom-up model, according to which reading is a process of decoding starting from letters, words, phrases, sentences, and the text. Bottom-up processing, therefore, is data-driven. This processing is also called text-based processing (Silberstein, 2002:7) where comprehension is evoked by recognizing and interpreting the incoming data from the text. It relies on one's linguistic knowledge at all levels.

Top-down processing is a more recent view holding that reading is more a matter of reconstructing meaning using only partly the grapho-phonetic, syntactic, and semantic systems of the language (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). Readers use their prior knowledge to guess meaning from large chunks of the text while reading, not bothering the separate small units of sentences.

As a matter of fact, when we read, we comprehend information using both bottom-up and top-down processing simultaneously. In the 1980s an alternative model was proposed that puts together the two views (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). Since comprehension is based on the interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing, this model is called interactive processing model.

Schema theory

Schema theory emphasizes the importance of one's background knowledge during reading. According to this theory, linguistic knowledge alone does not lead to successful comprehension of the text. Only when readers relate what they read with the previously acquired knowledge in their minds, can comprehension be achieved. Bartlett, Adams and Collins, and Rumelhart (cited in Carrel & Eisterhold, 1987) call this previously acquired knowledge the reader's background knowledge and the previously acquired knowledge structures schemata.

Schemata can be divided into two types: formal schemata and content schemata. Formal schemata refer to the background knowledge of the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of texts; content schemata refer to the background knowledge of the content area of a text (Carrel & Eisterhold, 1987). The two kinds of schemata are complementary to each other in reading comprehension.

The model of teaching reading

Based on the information processing models and schema theory, the teaching of reading currently adopts a three-stage model: pre-, while-, and post-reading stages. Activities are designed at different stages with different purposes. Pre-reading activities are to prepare students linguistically and schematically. These can be presenting important vocabulary,

supplying background knowledge, introducing new concepts, and so on in order to decrease language difficulties and build up or activate students' schemata.

The aims of the while-reading stage are to help students understand the specific content and perceive the rhetorical structure of the text (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). Activities at this stage can be asking comprehension questions, information transfer tasks, taking notes, drawing diagrams (Wang Qiang, 2006:194), problem solving tasks, and analyzing the structure of the text, etc.

At the post-reading stage, activities such as answering questions, discussion, reconstructing the text and role-play can be employed to provide students with opportunities to further understand the text and to use what they have learned from the text for language production.

Reading strategies

Learning strategies are special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of the information (O'Malley & Chamot, 2001:1). In the context of EFL learning, Richards defines strategies as "ways of managing the complex information that the learner is receiving about the target language" (2002: 45). Language learning will be facilitated if students become aware of the range of possible strategies that they can consciously select during language learning and language use (Cohen, 2000:65). Successful language learners use a variety of strategies in learning different aspects of language. Obviously, EFL learners who can use appropriate reading strategies when approaching a passage will make good readers. Therefore, it becomes the teachers' responsibility to help students improve their reading strategies. O'Malley and Chamot conducted a range of research on learning strategy instruction in first language contexts and with students of English as a second or foreign language, and found positive results.

In the area of reading, researchers have identified a range of strategies that readers need to develop. Here is a list by Grabe and Stoller (2002, cited in Wang Qiang, 2006:181).

- Specifying a purpose for reading
- Planning what to do/what steps to take
- Previewing the text
- Predicting the contents of the text
- Checking predictions
- Skimming the text for the specific information
- Distinguishing main ideas from supporting details
- Posing questions about the text
- Finding answers to posed questions
- Connecting text to background knowledge
- Summarizing information
- Making inferences
- Connecting one part of the text to another
- Paying attention to text structure

Rereading

Guessing the meaning of a new word from context

Using discourse markers to see relationships

Checking comprehension

Identifying difficulties

Taking steps to repair faulty comprehension

Critiquing the author

Critiquing the text

Judging how well objectives were met

Reflecting on what has been learned from the text

This list of reading strategies can be used as guidance for teachers to help students improve their reading skills and finally become independent readers.

METHODOLOGY

Research method

Action research was adopted in this study. The procedure was based on the action research model worked out by Gerald Susman (1983, cited in O'Brien, 1998). O'Brien interprets the model as follows:

Initially, a problem is identified and data is collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective postulation of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved.

Susman's model was utilized for reference in this research.

Statement of the problem

The students were 48 third year English majors from Lishan College, Shandong Normal University. I was assigned to teach them Advanced Reading for 12 weeks. They had been in this course for one term already. The class met twice a week, two hours each time. The first text for this term was *Marrakech* by George Orwell. As pre-reading activities I encouraged the students to raise questions and predict the content according to the title and then introduced background information: the city Marrakech, the history of Morocco, and the author, hoping that this would help them understand the text. Unexpectedly, in the process of reading comprehension the class was quite quiet with only a few students responding to my questions. However, whenever I explained the meaning of a lexical item, they took notes immediately. I found that the students had difficulty guessing meanings of new words from context and grasping the main idea of each paragraph and the central theme of the article. Some students' failure to understand the text was obviously due to overlooking the background knowledge and

not knowing the relationship between the sentences in a paragraph. I felt that the students did not know much of reading strategies. In order to identify the real problems, I put forward three hypotheses.

Hypotheses

1. The students do not have an appropriate aim for studying Advanced Reading.
2. There are too many new words in the text, which is the major difficulty in reading comprehension.
3. The students do not have the awareness of reading strategies.

Preliminary investigation

To verify the hypotheses, I selected 12 students randomly for a group interview at the end of the first week. The interview was around three questions:

1. What do you expect to learn from Advanced Reading?
2. What are your difficulties in comprehending the text?
3. Do you preview the lesson? How do you do that?
4. What reading strategies do you use?

The results of the investigation are summarized as follows:

1. Most students thought that the major aim of learning Advanced Reading was to learn vocabulary. Some also mentioned grammar. Two of them believed that one aim of learning advanced reading was to obtain topic-related information from the article and understand the ideas conveyed by the author. One said she also wanted to learn the writing skills.
2. The major difficulty in comprehending the text lay in vocabulary. Other difficulties were insufficient background information, unfamiliar grammatical structures, long sentences, figures of speech, and the organization of long articles.
3. Most students previewed the text. Over half of them relied on the teacher's manual when doing the preview. Some went through the text just to underline new words and then found out their meanings from the Chinese translation in the teacher's manual. Some even read the Chinese translation first before reading the English text, which they thought could help them get a general idea of the article. Two students said that they read the teacher's manual first just for the part of background information and then read the text focusing on its contents. One student said he previewed the article trying to understand the main ideas and referred to the teachers' manual only when necessary.
4. For reading strategies, the students were familiar with skimming, scanning, and guessing the meaning of a new word from context. But since the articles in the textbook contain too many new words, in many cases they were unable to guess the meaning right.

The results of the preliminary investigation verified my hypotheses, but revealed more information which I had not imagined, such as too much dependence on the teacher's manual

and too much focus on individual words instead of the contents of the text. From the way of preview we can see that many students did not realize the importance of background knowledge to reading comprehension.

Action Planning

Faced with the recognized problems, I decided to make changes.

1. To communicate the general goals of the Advanced Reading course to the students.
2. To introduce reading strategies and conduct training in the use of specific strategies.
3. To pre-teach important vocabulary and provide post-reading vocabulary use activities.
4. To assign pre-reading tasks of searching for background information, either in English or in Chinese, depending on the students' own English proficiency.

Taking Action

The first two weeks of the course were devoted to the preliminary investigation and action planning. From week 3 to week 12, action was taken to change the situation. I first communicated the general goals of Advanced Reading to the students: to learn cultural knowledge and topic related knowledge, to expand vocabulary, to develop reading strategies, to form an ability of analyzing the text organizations of different genres, to appreciate the writing skills of different authors, and to get some knowledge of discourse features of the articles.

For reading strategies, due to time constraints I specified the most needed ones for the students and reminded them that they would be trained to use these strategies in the following 10 weeks: Previewing the text, predicting the contents of the text, checking predictions, distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, connecting text to background knowledge, summarizing information, paying attention to text structure, rereading, guessing the meaning of a new word from context, using discourse markers to see relationships, and reflecting on what has been learned from the text. In terms of guessing words, I decided to train them to use context clues summarized by Nation (2004: 160): definition, learners' experience and common sense, grammar, punctuation, contrast, inference, word analysis, connectives, and reference words.

In the following ten weeks, the class dealt with four more articles—two pieces of exposition, one speech, and one piece of descriptive writing. The following measures were taken in instruction.

The pre-reading stage

Before starting every article, I guided the students to predict the contents and then introduce the important concepts and vocabulary that would cause difficulty for self study. As homework I assigned tasks of searching for background information of the article either in English or in Chinese and previewing the article to get the main idea. When the class met the next time, the students shared what they had found. Finally I made summary and gave supplementary information in English.

The while-reading stage

At this stage, my general aim was to help students comprehend the text by applying reading strategies. In the process of instruction, I guided them to practice the following:

Remember the background information and relate it with what you read.

Understand the genre of the article and find out its features through analysing the article.

Bear the title in mind while going through the text and see how the article is written around the title and if this is an appropriate title.

Always predict what the author will say next.

Remember that some paragraphs do not have a topic sentence and you need to summarize the main idea.

Find out the key word/term and its synonyms to help them grasp the main idea of a paragraph.

Separate the central sentence from supporting sentences.

Recognize discourse markers to see the relationship between sentences.

Guess the meaning of a new word using context clues.

Recognize the main idea and sub-ideas of the article and the central theme.

Analyze the text organization.

Post-reading stage

At this stage, I wanted students to reread the article for further comprehension and to do some production activities. One activity I utilized for every text was reproducing the text based on vocabulary. I projected on the screen key words and phrases from every paragraph, and had students use them to retell the text. The purpose was to review vocabulary in context and retrieve main contents of the text. Other activities included summary of the text, comment on the author's point of view, re-examination of text organization, appreciation of the writing style, and reflecting on what has been learned from the text. Some were done orally, and some in the written form.

INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Questionnaire

After the ten week strategy-oriented instruction, a questionnaire survey was carried out among the 48 students to get the general view of its effectiveness. For the convenience of understanding to students, the questionnaire was written in Chinese. The English version is presented in the Appendix.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 6 students to learn detailed information of feedback about the instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire contained 10 questions. Each was provided with 5 choices: SA (Strongly agree), A (Agree), N (Neutral), D (Disagree), and SD (Strongly disagree). The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. The general view of the effectiveness of instruction

Question	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1. The goals of this course were made clear.	62.5	37.5			
2. The reading strategies were introduced clearly.	58.3	41.7			
3. You had sufficient practice of reading strategies in class.	20.8	35.4	22.9	16.7	4.2
4. You use more reading strategies now than before.	50	45.8	4.2		
5. You have clearer aims of learning Advanced Reading now than before.	47.9	52.1			
6. Strategy training has increased your confidence in reading.	29.2	39.6	16.7	12.5	2.0
7. Strategy training has improved your ability to understand the text.	37.5	58.3	4.2		
8. Now you can consciously use all the strategies the teacher has taught.	31.2	41.7	14.6	8.3	4.2
9. Awareness of reading strategies has helped you in becoming an independent reader.	47.9	47.9	4.2		
10. You hope to learn more reading strategies.	62.5	33.3	4.2		

From table 1 we can see that the effect of instruction was positive. The results for questions 1 and 5 show that through strategy-oriented instruction the students became clear about the aims of learning Advanced Reading. The results for questions 2, 4, 7, 9 and 10 indicate that they got to have better awareness of reading strategies and have benefited from it.

The results also reflect some problems of the instruction. Question 3 and result show that the practice of reading strategies was not enough. From questions 6 and 8 we can see that the instruction did not fully build up the students reading confidence and the ability of conscious use of the strategies taught in this program.

In order to learn the feedback on specific aspects of instruction, I interviewed 6 students randomly around two questions:

- (1) What class activities have benefited you most? You can list up to three.
- (2) What are your suggestions for improving instruction? You can list up to three.

The results of the students' answers to question 1 are summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Most beneficial class activities

Student	answer
1	Preteaching vocabulary, searching for background information in Chinese, reproducing text with given vocabulary
2	Preteaching vocabulary, using context clues to guess words, reproducing text with given vocabulary
3	Preteaching vocabulary, identifying key words to summarize main idea, identifying discourse markers to see relationship between sentences
4	Identifying key words to summarize main idea, identifying discourse markers to see relationship between sentences,
5	Preteaching vocabulary and concepts, identifying key words to summarize main idea, searching for background information
6	Relate background information to what is read, analysing text organization, identifying discourse markers to see relationship between sentences

From the interviews I learned that preteaching vocabulary was a most beneficial activity to the students because it reduced their major difficulty for reading comprehension. Identifying key words to summarize the main idea of a paragraph was also a very helpful activity, which was felt by the students to be a very useful technique both in academic reading and in exams. The students benefited from reproducing text with given vocabulary for the reason that it helped recalling the contents of the text and at the same time provided an opportunity to use vocabulary in context. According to the students, identifying discourse markers to see relationship between sentences raised their awareness of the functions of discourse markers and improved their ability to see how sentences are put together. One student said that she benefited from searching for background information in Chinese because this made her understand background information better and helped relate it to the text.

Answers to question 2 are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. Suggestions for improving instruction

Student	answer
1	Translate difficult sentences into Chinese, analyze grammar in difficult sentences, provide reading aloud activity to improve pronunciation
2	Explain more figures of speech, analyze grammar in complicated sentences, provide more vocabulary exercises
3	Translate sentences into Chinese, analyze sentence structures, provide more practice of reading strategies
4	Teach translation skills, analyze writing skills, provide more practice of reading strategies
5	analyze unfamiliar grammatical structures, do more discourse analysis, provide vocabulary exercises
6	Analyze writing skills, provide writing tasks, teach how to write a summary

Most students suggested translating sentences into Chinese because this can help understand the text. Analyzing grammatical structure of difficult sentences was also needed by most students since some structures were unfamiliar to them and caused difficulty for reading comprehension. Some suggested providing more practice of reading strategies. This need is also reflected in the questionnaire survey. Some suggested providing vocabulary exercises, which shows from another perspective the importance of vocabulary study to students. The

mention of discourse analysis, reading aloud and writing indicates that the students wanted to learn more about language through Advanced Reading.

Based on the data above, the findings of this action research can be drawn as follows:

1. Early communicating the general goals of the course to students effectively helped them form clear learning aims in Advanced Reading.
2. Introducing reading strategies and providing appropriate practice contributed to students' awareness of learning strategies and improved their reading abilities. However, at the end of the term not all students could consciously use all the strategies introduced because they had not had enough practice.
3. Preteaching vocabulary was welcome by students because it successfully reduced their difficulty for reading comprehension.
4. Searching for background information either in English or in Chinese proved effective since it made students of all English levels understand the background information and the experience of searching enhanced the students' awareness of using background information while reading the article.
5. There are still some aspects that need improving. The students' suggestions show their further needs in learning Advanced Reading.

Implications to Research and Practice

This research indicates that action research is a practical research method for solving real problems in teachers' own classroom practice. Teachers are constantly faced with problems of various kinds. We can not solve all of them at one time, so we need to identify the major ones and concentrate on them at a certain period of time. When these are resolved, we can move to our next target and start another cycle. Like in this research, the next cycle would be focusing on the problems found at the end of the first cycle and taking measures such as providing more practice for reading strategies and providing more vocabulary exercises, etc. The teaching and learning would be improved through one cycle after another.

CONCLUSION

This action research aimed at solving the problems of some third year college English majors in China in learning Advanced Reading. Through the preliminary investigation the problems were indentified. Some students did not have an appropriate aim in learning Advanced Reading. Vocabulary and background knowledge caused the major difficulties for comprehension, so some of them over-relied on the teacher's manual for the Chinese translation. They obviously lacked the awareness of reading strategies. In order to solve these problems, action was taken in teaching with a focus on training the use of reading strategies. At the end of the ten weeks' training, data were collected through a questionnaire survey and interviews. The results show that the training has achieved positive effects. The students now have clear aims of learning Advanced Reading and have formed an awareness of reading strategies which have helped improve their reading abilities. The activities of preteaching vocabulary and searching for background information by students have proved effective in overcoming the major difficulties in reading comprehension. The results also show that there are still other problems. These will be dealt with in further research.

Further Research

This cycle of the action research has resolved only the major problems, but some other problems still exist. The students will continue to have the Advanced Reading course in their fourth year. Further research will still be around language instruction and reading instruction. According to the students' suggestions, more activities need to be provided in vocabulary, grammatical structure, translation, and discourse analysis. More reading strategies will be supplied, especially critical reading strategies. It is hoped that through another two terms' training the students can become independent readers.

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APPENDIX QUESTIONNAIRE

A Survey into the Effectiveness of Strategy Training in Advanced Reading

This questionnaire provides you with an opportunity to evaluate anonymously the effectiveness of strategy training in this course in the past 10 weeks. Your responses will be used for the improvement of teaching. Please tick the response closest to your view in each item.

SA = Strongly agree

A = Agree

N = Neutral

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly disagree

	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. The goals of this course were made clear.	A	B	C	D	E
2. The reading strategies were introduced clearly.	A	B	C	D	E
3. You had sufficient practice of reading strategies in class.	A	B	C	D	E
4. You use more reading strategies now than before.	A	B	C	D	E
5. You have clearer aims of learning Advanced Reading now than before.	A	B	C	D	E
6. Strategy training has increased your confidence in reading.	A	B	C	D	E
7. Strategy training has improved your ability to understand the text.	A	B	C	D	E
8. Now you can consciously use all the strategies the teacher has taught.	A	B	C	D	E
9. Awareness of reading strategies can help you become an independent reader.	A	B	C	D	E
10. You hope to learn more reading strategies.	A	B	C	D	E