

Primary and Secondary School English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of English Subject Key Competencies

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Abstract: The National English Curriculum puts great emphasis on developing students' key competencies through a certain thematic context around different types of texts. This article elaborates English reading instruction in the light of key competencies, which covers the definition of reading, four classical reading models and several lighting-like reading theories. Through the analysis of several classical theories, the author manifested the status quo of English reading in junior and senior high school, reading has gained underestimated importance in the classroom teaching, showing an urgent need to make improvements in reading teaching. Some specific implications are given: teachers should adopt activity-based approach to guide the instructional design, following three levels of design: learning and understanding, practicing and applying as well as transferring and innovating; reorganise the teaching content based on the big idea so that students can learn in a logical and comprehensive way, six-element-integrated curriculum content should be recognised and analyzed clearly in text analysis.

1. Introduction

Since the new curriculum reform, English reading instruction in primary and secondary schools in China has entered a new period in its ideas and methods. Previous scholars mainly focus on the definition of reading, from a passive recognition task to an active process involving cognition. Several reading models have also gained attention, the bottom-up model, top-down model and interactive model. Accordingly, reading efficiency is given its priorities these days. How to improve the effect of reading is quite a hard nut to explore. It is necessary to elaborate the main changes and new methods. Teachers should be willing to take risks to tailor teaching and learning, expanding reading for knowledge points to reading for developing literacy. This essay tries to dig out the way to promote English reading efficiency, then transferred from static knowledge to dynamic skills and finally to life-long literacy under the National English Curriculum published in 2017 in China.

The intended meaning lies in providing some practical suggestions for English teachers in Chinese teaching context, guiding them to reflect the current situation of reading teaching, reflecting the potential reasons and implementing the solutions based on the theories present in the essay.

2. English Subject key Competencies

A competence is more than just knowledge or skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context (OECD). The key competencies achieved through the learning of a school subject are the concentrated reflection of the educational value of the subject, which consist of correct values and attitudes, indispensable qualities, and key abilities^[1]. The goal of English language teaching changes from developing students' basic knowledge and skills to overall language ability and to English subject key competency. There is a gradual shift in language teaching from the instrumental aspect to humanistic aspect.

3. Reading

3.1 Definition of Reading

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines reading this way: To read is to look at and understand the meaning of written or printed words or symbols. Different researchers put different understandings on "reading". The earlier researcher defines reading as "the process of elaborate thinking and organizing of texts"^[2]. The definition proceeds when Day and Bamford regards reading as "the construction of meaning from the printed or written message"^[3]. In that sense, reading is an interactive process where knowledge from the printed page interact and integrate knowledge the readers have already known. Further, The framework for the NAEP reading assessment conceptualizes reading as a dynamic cognitive process that includes understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning; and using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation^[4]. Reading which is a complex psycholinguistic process, involves mastery of the language signals such as letters, words, sentence structures and also such psychological factors as readiness and motivation. Reading involves communication. Reading involves mental contact and how peoples' minds can meet one another through interacting with written material even though the people may be far apart physically.

3.2 Classical Reading Models

The Simple View of Reading holds that "reading equals the product of decoding and comprehension"^[5]. Construction-integration Model shares the similarities with Schema Theory Model^[6], which views reading as a combination of text base and situation model^[7]. In this process, knowledge gained from the text is integrated in our existing schema in the long-term memory. A Heuristic for Thinking About Reading Comprehension defines reading as three elements in social and cultural context: reader, text and activity^[8], which shed light on reading instruction. To be specific, the "reader" part can give us some thoughts on student analysis, "text" on text analysis and "activity" on activity design.

Conclusion from the above three models can be as follows: from the perspective of individuals, reading involves both the bottom-up decoding process and the top-down comprehension-inquiring process. All these elements interact each other and compensate for each other in the process of reading.

There are multiple teaching methods being over and over again throughout the history of English education. Grammar-translation method, in which students translated by using the learned structures and obtained grammar knowledge by the subsequent practice, have primarily and traditionally included in English instruction. Later, the audiolingual method emerged, it is formed by combining the structural view of language with the behaviourist theory of learning, according to this theory, students regard language as a linguistic system made up of various subsystems, without knowing how

to use language to achieve communicative purposes. Later, communicative language instruction (CLT) grew a following, by emphasizing develop communicative competence as the goal of English language teaching. Then task-based language teaching expands the goal by listing the form-focused instruction in order to bridge the gap: turning a blind on language itself.

Chinese education officials are currently promoting task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is described as "an approach to the design of language courses in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks"^[9]. TBLT is a more open framework in which learners assume an active role and teachers select instructional tasks and instruct students to their successful completion^[10].

Although education officials have strongly promoted TBLT, there have been limitations of the approach, and TBLT has not been widely adopted by Chinese English teachers. Despite its potential drawbacks, it is a worthtrying approach which is also adopted and stressed in the National English Curriculum(2001), but displaced by activity-based approach recently.

4. Issues on English Reading Instruction

4.1 Issues on English Reading in Primary and Secondary Schools

At present, some primary and secondary schools do not carry out reading classes that can be called the "real reading instruction"^[11], this can be explained in terms of the teaching goal, the content and the teaching approach. The goal of instruction is mainly to develop students' overall language ability, while turning a blind eye to the cultivation of cultural awareness and development of thinking capacity, though it does help students use language to do things in social context. As to content, these reading classes teaching still focuses on knowledge-oriented teaching, teaching materials morph from the carrier of value, culture and thoughts into a knowledge-embeded intermedator, which makes the idea of "educating people" is only at the slogan level. Task-based Language Teaching is communication-oriented, empathazing simulation of real context but less care about students' long-term development and poor practicality.

4.2 Current Situation of English Reading in Primary and Secondary Schools

English reading instruction in many primary schools has not received enough attention as required, for teachers feel it hard to implement the new ideas from National English Curriculum Standards(2017) and students are confused and less interested in English reading as a result. Currently, English reading in both primary and secondary schools is highly lagged behind, which can be illustrated as: (1) At the post-reading stage, reading instruction for students at advanced level is still stacked by activities targeting speaking and listening skills excessively, lacking sufficient written reception. (2) The curriculum emphasizes product-oriented approach while neglecting the development of fundamental reading skills. (3) Many teachers claim that too much energy is given for low-grade students, owing to their limited vocabulary, some measures should be taken.

Limitations above leave reading instruction in a predicament in primary and secondary schools. The malpractices of the practical classroom teaching, however, have spurred learners to improve their reading skills. Teaching less is learning more. Definitely, it is possible to integrate overall unit instruction into teaching reading in primary and secondary schools as long as teachers have a comprehensive understanding of the correlation between big idea and English reading instruction in primary and secondary schools. It is assumed that the big idea will come to be assistance to English educators to enhance learners' reading proficiency.

5. English Reading Instruction from the Perspective of English Subject key Competencies

The National English Curriculum (2017) emphasizes developing students' subject key competencies and implementing the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education. The counterpart teaching goals, content and approach also in exceed above knowledge itself, but expanded to a combination of language, culture and thinking. The key competencies achieved through the English subject include language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity and learning ability. In order to achieve the goals. The content of the English curriculum includes six components: thematic contexts, text types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies. The six components of the curriculum content are interconnected. Reading instruction should be based on the framework of Activity-based Approach to English Learning, which advocates that students learn English through a series of integrated, relevant, and practical theme-based activities, where they undergo learning processes such as perceiving and understanding, applying and practicing, and transferring and creating. One of the theoretical basis of the approach is Bloom's taxonymy, conforming to students' cognitive development.

Under the background of English key competencies, scholars have put forward the concept of reading literacy, endowing a new understanding to the meaning of reading instruction. Then there are some lightening-like reading instruction theories that are worth-trying in teaching practice: Picture Tour, sustained silent reading, jigsaw reading, reading circles. Picture Tour is a kind of guided and shared reading, during this process, teachers are expected to perform the printed story to real life story, helping students "learn to read" and "read to learn" so that they eventually become independent readers. Sustained Silent Reading is one type of extensive reading, it aims at developing students' reading habits and improving their reading ability by independent "entertainment reading". Sufficient exposure to comprehensible input is essential to second language acquisition, while independent reading is a good way to improve foreign language ability. Jigsaw reading is a cooperative model based on text. Reading circles is also a cooperative learning activity in which students read deeply the same text based on different roles as a group. Also, the unit holistic teaching design of a unit can be defined as: teachers combine the English teaching objectives and requirements of the English Curriculum Standards, based on the analysis of textbooks and learners' learning needs, with the theme as the core and the unit as the basis for lesson preparation. The unit is the process of presetting the teaching unit of the textbook as a whole around the four aspects of the teaching goal, teaching content, teaching process, and teaching evaluation.

All these reading instruction theories can be applied in our teaching practice. Most importantly, they are not exclusive to each other, rather, it is expected to combine two or even more theories together so as to tailor the teaching design based on students' different needs and levels. We cannot simply choose the best or worst teaching patterns and methods, because each model and method has its own advantages and disadvantages. Only when we combined our teaching design with students' needs, abilities and other related factors will teaching be effective.

6. Conclusion

The fact is undeniable that reading is not simply obtaining the lexical and grammatical knowlwdge, so reading teaching under the goal of key competencies should be redefined. The National English Curriculum provides us with resourceful new approaches and methods, but how to put it into practice is still a nut.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Based on all the above, teachers should adopt activity-based approach to guide the instructional

design, following three levels of design: learning and understanding, practicing and applying as well as transferring and innovating; This process is not only an integrated development process of learning language knowledge and language skills, but also a continuous process of enhancing cultural awareness, improving thinking capacity, and improving learning ability.

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