

HOW CAN OUR TEACHERS HELP STUDENTS BECOME EFFICIENT READERS OF ENGLISH

我国教师如何帮助学生成为熟练的英文读者

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A simple definition of reading is that it is a process whereby one looks at and understands what has been written. The key word here is “understand” — merely reading aloud without understanding does not count. Efficient reading is one of the important aspects of a learner's ability to use English, or any language. Essentially, an efficient reader should be able to do two things; to comprehend well enough and to read fast enough.

1 SOME POSSIBLE REASONS

Reading has received increasing attention in recent years in China. But the result is not satisfactory. Why most Chinese students' reading ability is far from being efficient? Small vocabulary seems to be a most obvious obstacle. We can not read fast if there are too many new words in a piece of writing. Donn[1983] held that some words even had “socio-cultural meaning” (the evaluation which people of his own culture attach to the words). In fact, many an everyday life word is unfamiliar to our students. This is hardly surprising, since a native speaker is growing up among English words whereas our students have to learn everything new. Limited vocabulary certainly hinders reading speed, because lexical difficulty will block our comprehension.

Small vocabulary is not the single cause, not even the essential cause for slow reading. What else? Our students are unfamiliar with the content, the background, the culture that are embedded in the writings they are reading. A native speaker can anticipate what comes next in his reading, but Chinese students cannot do because they do not have the necessary knowledge. Why do our Chinese students lack the necessary background knowledge? The reliable answer seems to be: they read too little. The best way to increase their background knowledge is to encourage them to read more. But they can not read more if they read so slowly. Now we have a vicious circle: they can not read fast because they read too little; they read too little because they cannot read fast. In fact, background knowledge helps a student increase his reading speed and the increase of reading speed widens his background knowledge. Perhaps equally important is the fact that the background knowledge that helps the students solve the cross-cultural problem can only be gained by extensive reading. A student living in a country where English is spoken picks up the language naturally through listening and imitating. But the Chinese students do not have the natural environment for learning English. Therefore, apart from the limited amount of English they hear in their English class, and sometimes outside their class, extensive reading is the best means for learning the language and the major source of their knowledge of English. In short, reading more sharpens our insight and vision, enables us to expand our knowledge, and to improve our skills in many different ways.

I think that both the lack of background knowledge and slow reading are the co-effects of somethings else. What are the other possible reasons or causes then? It may be instructive to see what happens when our students read English. Some students say the words to themselves, or move their lips. Some students follow the line with their fingers. Some students are doing mental translation while they read. No wonder they read so slowly. Most students are always tempted to look up the new words in the dictionary, because without the Chinese version of a new word they feel uncomfortable and insecure. Anything that demands their imagination and independent thinking makes them at a loss or even panic. The students' reading is entirely passive. I think it is beyond doubt that any fast reading requires an active mind and involves organization, discrimination, and anticipation. And this is precisely what our students lack.

2 ONE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

The possible reason why Chinese students read slowly studied above are these: (1) limitation of vocabulary. (2) lack of background knowledge. (3) bad reading habit. What can a Chinese teacher do to help the students to solve the problems? I think that the best way is to ask the students to read, to read more. Students can acquire background knowledge through reading and accumulate vocabulary through reading. Reading more, especially that under timed conditions, students have to be active in reading, students have to correct their bad

habits by and by. And eventually, they will quicken their reading speed and greatly improve their comprehension.

3 SOME SUGGESTIONS

So far we have solved the three problems. But a skillful teacher can do something else to help the students acquire reading efficiency

(1) Two useful skills. To help the students acquire reading efficiency, the Chinese teacher must never neglect the two useful skills: scanning and skimming. Scanning is to glance rapidly through a text to locate the specific information. Skimming is to glance rapidly through a text to determine its gist. The two skills help students to understand; they can read much faster if they try, it is not necessary to read every word. With the two skills, the students can obtain necessary information in less time. So a Chinese teacher should purposefully train his students in these two skills.

(2) Selection of materials. The most important thing is that the students enjoy reading something interesting. Where there is interest, there can be speed, accuracy, and progress. The teacher must select materials that are interesting and not too difficult. The vocabulary level must be appropriate, the grammatical structures not too complex. Wherever possible, fresh and unfamiliar books should be chosen first. These books will provide students with interesting topics and background knowledge as well. Thus, we can see the students are motivated, because the materials meet their interests and the materials are not too difficult. And usually the motivated students tend to work hard, and this will help them to perform well in reading.

(3) Two techniques: anticipation and surveying. In order to help the students improve their reading ability, the Chinese teachers should also teach the students two techniques: anticipation and surveying. Anticipation is to form our expectation of what messages we are likely to get before we begin our actual reading. As Holden[1986] suggested that materials "should be designed to promote the students' ability to guess." If a student knows what will happen in the text, he can surely read fast and get more from the text. The title may not be reliable indicators of its content, but, from this starting point we can make inference and deduction. Such mental effort will benefit us a lot, because we can read fast to satisfy our curiosity and get information. Sometimes the students can use anticipation to select materials for themselves which meet their particular interests. Surveying is to get an overall idea of the text through quick glance of the reading passage. Often if not always, the first or last paragraph of the chapter may have special significance. So we can get a general view of the text through quick glance of these two paragraphs. And this economical process will save the students a lot of time and help them to comprehend well.

(4) Logical thinking. The Chinese teachers often forget to train the students' logical thinking ability in reading. This negligence can be disastrous. No doubt, the lexical difficul-

ties will block the students' reading comprehension. However, if they consult the new words in the dictionary again and again in their reading process, their stream of thought will be broken. How to solve the problem? Personally, I think logical thinking can provide significant assistance to our comprehension.

I hold that the articles we select for the students are generally considered good. Yet a good piece of writing must be logically unified and coherent. Moreover, each individual word must be closely related with its neighbours in a logically consistent piece. Therefore, with enough input of the context, we can nearly guess the meaning of the new words. This mental process is not always safe, nevertheless, it is exciting! By and by, with more practices, we will surely arrive at the right meaning of the new words. Semantic markers (cohesive devices such as conjunction and substitution) are designed in logical sequence, too. "They indicate the relationship of utterances in the mind and in the world and are thus in a way contextual." [Cook, 1989] In my opinion, these markers are just like mirrors which reflect the writer's attitude besides their usual function of linkage. If we can follow the logical sequence, we will have no difficulty in interpreting the writer's true attitude.

As logical thinking is not a passive action, students can be motivated. If ever they are motivated, they will surely apply logical thinking in their reading. Consequently, they will acquire a lot through long practice.

When lexical difficulty occurs, logical thinking will equip the students with the power to shorten the distance and bridge the gap in their reading. Therefore, the Chinese teacher should deliberately ask the students to exert mental effort, to use logical thinking, and to think independently. Consequently, the students will be able to free themselves from the dependence on the dictionary. Also, the students will read well and read fast. And so long as the students do well in the beginning, they will surely do better later.

4 COCLUSION

To sum up, a Chinese teacher can do many things to help the students to become efficient readers of English. First, the teacher must demand his students to read more. Second, the teacher must train his students two skills. Third, the teacher must select proper materials. Fourth, the teacher should teach his students two techniques. Fifth, the teacher should train his students' ability in logical thinking. If what stated above can be achieved, at least, the problems in Chinese students' reading can be partially solved.

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