

Original Paper

Evaluate the Effectiveness of Teaching Reading Strategies in Chinese EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

In Chinese EFL classrooms, a large amount of time is spent reading. However, rarely would students admit that their reading ability has been improved through reading classes, while teachers think their students should become strategic readers by teaching them various reading strategies. To understand why there is such a divergence, it is of significance to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching reading strategies. This essay will mainly focus on the effectiveness of prediction, skimming and scanning method and put forward solutions to the problems I have spotted during my reflection. In the following paragraphs, I will first analyse unsuccessful prediction method and offer suggestions for improvement. What teachers should bear in mind when teaching skimming or scanning strategy will be discussed in the second paragraph and the third paragraph is about the sequence of skimming and scanning, which might also confuse teachers. Therefore, instructors are advised to flexibly adjust the teaching order based on student proficiency in the last paragraph.

Keywords

reading strategies, EFL classroom, prediction, skimming, scanning, teaching effectiveness

Enhancing Prediction Through Scaffolding and Background Activation

At the beginning of a reading class, various lead-in activities can be used to activate students' prior knowledge and motivate them to read the passage. As Anderson (1999, p11) claims that "A reader's background knowledge can influence reading comprehension skills." And Grabe (2009, p182) points out that "Students with higher reading motivation performed significantly better on a number of reading-comprehension measures (Guthrie et al., 2004, 2007; Unrall & Schlackman, 2006)." Among all of these activities, "prediction is a major in reading" (Harmer, 2017, p101). However, not all predictions can effectively arouse students' background knowledge and interest to participate in the reading activity. Students might not be able to predict successfully just through a title or a picture, if so, they might feel

nervous and frustrated, thus losing passion in the following reading activities. In my opinion, it would be better for the teacher to ask a series of related questions, thus reducing the difficulty of prediction and motivating the students to continue to read. Harmer (2017, p. 102) demonstrates that “In class, teachers should give students ‘hints’ so that they also have a chance to predict what is coming.” More specifically, some easy questions can be directly answered by the students together while more time should be allowed to discuss the difficult ones, which offers students chances to speak English and share ideas with each other. Meanwhile, the teacher walks around the classroom to listen to their discussion, and then nominate students to share their ideas with the whole class. In this way, “most students will get engaged with what they are reading” (Harmer, 2017, p. 101). Besides prediction, other lead-in activities like brainstorming around a topic and words description and guessing are all positive methods to activate schema and motivate reading. However, to guarantee the effectiveness of these activities, the teacher necessarily designs the activity wisely and accordingly in a student-centred way.

Clarifying Skimming and Scanning: Purpose, Practice, and Common Pitfalls

It’s vital for the teacher to train students to read fast. According to Grabe (2009, p. 289), “the ability to read accurately and rapidly is so fundamental to read success that it just has to be right.” Anderson (1999, p. 59) also points out that “By reading faster, the reader is encouraged to read more and, with more reading comprehension improves.” To achieve that goal, Skimming and scanning strategies are widely adopted by teachers to help students increase their reading speed. However, it seems that these two strategies are not as effective as the teachers have thought because the students don’t think their reading speed has improved through skimming or scanning training. However, According to Oxford (2017, p. 272), “L2 reading strategies are teachable, dynamic thoughts and behaviours ... to improve their self-regulated, autonomous L2 reading development for effective task performance and long-term proficiency.” As far as I’m concerned, it would be better if the teacher can make students clearly aware of the significance and concrete procedures of those two strategies to encourage this ability to use them independently. First, “students will not skim and scan unless they are frantically pushed for time.” (Maxwell, Martha J., 1972, p. 55) If the teacher is not strict in time controlling, tending to allow students more minutes every time they can’t finish reading in given time, it would be hard for the students to learn and to push themselves to read fast. Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to be able to evaluate how long it will take the students to finish reading and make it clear to students. Second, “good readers do not take action to solve comprehension problems that do not endanger their reading goal” (Schramm, 2001, p. 237) This is easier said than done, because students tend to look for the answers to what confuse them rather than just skip the questions and focus on the reading goal. As a result, before the students master the skill of skimming or scanning, the teacher needs to remind the students to focus on the information they are searching for and there is no need to panic or begin to reread if they can’t understand some part of the passage. Moreover, it is crucial for the students to learn to skim or scan silently. Sometimes, students will read aloud out of habit when they skim or scan. However, Parrott (1993, p. 188) states that

“it is important to bear in mind the fact that reading is normally a silent activity.” Therefore, the teacher had better stop the students reading aloud when they are asked to skim or scan, thus helping them form the habit of skim or scan silently, which will contribute quite a lot to speeding up reading rate. Most significantly, the teacher’s clear instruction is vital when the students are learning to skim or scan. It’s not an efficient way to instruct students to read the passage as quickly as possible (Anderson, 1999, p. 54). In addition, explicitly using the words skim or scan will make students more aware of the reading strategies.

Adapting Teaching Sequence to Learner Proficiency Levels

In terms of teaching reading strategies, teachers can be confused at the sequence of skimming and scanning. Because according to a course book, which believes it is good for the students to get the frame of a text first and then the details, skimming is usually followed by scanning. However, when this sequence is conducted in the classroom, the process will possibly not go smoothly, in which case, the students seem to be motivated to do scanning practise but struggle with skimming for the reason that it is easier to look for particular details than get a general idea. As Buzan (2003, p. 111) claims in his book *the Speed Reading Book* that “Scanning is a simpler process than skimming...” Accordingly, teachers don’t have to follow the sequence in the course books rigidly. Grabe (2009, p. 198) argues that “At one level, it is not possible to directly teach main-idea comprehension... However, the reader can demonstrate main-idea comprehension on the basis of task outcomes...”. Evaluating the level of the students and the material first is of greater significance than rigidly following course books. Adjusting the sequence of the tasks properly will help to build up students’ reading confidence, increase their interest and reduce their fear about reading. In addition, it’s crucial for the teachers to bear in mind that the purposes of skimming and scanning are different. Skimming is reading for general ideas while scanning is reading for particular information. Therefore, it makes no sense to design questions about details in skimming practice, which may also get students confused about the two strategies.

Long-Term Development of Strategic Readers and Future Research Directions

In conclusion, although students may not be quite clear of their progress in reading class, which may not be displayed in short term, reading strategies will help them to become skilled readers. My essay shows that effectively teaching reading strategies is teaching those strategies in a suitable and systematic way, which asks for more time, patience, skill and intelligence. Teachers’ belief and attitude towards those reading strategies will have a great influence on what they do in the classrooms and on their students. Meanwhile, because of the limitation of time and the size of this essay, there are still more reading strategies that needs further consideration. For example, how can critical thinking be taught effectively in class? What can teachers do to help students successfully infer between lines? How to maintain students’ interest in reading? I will continue my research with the hope of working out practical solutions to make my reading class productive and effective.

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