

Exploring Vocabulary learning in English Reading Teaching at Compulsory Education Level

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Abstract

This paper focuses on vocabulary learning in reading class at compulsory education level. Given the fundamental role of vocabulary in language learning, the research aims to enhance learning efficiency with practical and theoretical implications for English teaching. This study is mainly based on two theories: the Compensation Hypothesis and the Theory of Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition. These theories respectively explain learners use contextual information and existing knowledge to interact with language and incidental learning occurs during reading process. Accordingly, a set of reading-related vocabulary learning strategies are put forward. Firstly, the teacher can combine vocabulary and reading contexts in reading to create content-appropriate contexts in class as well as develop learners' predicative ability. Secondly, the teacher can guide students to guess meaning in different ways. Lastly, the teacher should facilitate their automatic learning ability for their lifelong learning. In a word, the research discusses the vocabulary learning strategies in reading class. In this way, students would hopefully improve the overall efficiency of English vocabulary learning during reading process.

Keywords

vocabulary learning; reading teaching; strategies training

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Research

It is known that vocabulary is the foundation and key part of communication and language learning in compulsory education. Under the current educational circumstances, the Ministry of Education put forward a new curriculum standards for compulsory education, *The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* (2022), which has stated that Grade 9 students should be exposed to and use about 1,800 words to communicate with others, and be exposed to and learn about 200 words found in related themes, as well as a certain number of idiomatic expressions and fixed collocations as needed, and carry out out-of-class English reading of 150,000 words in total.

It reflects the fact that students might encounter many new words while reading, especially for out-of-class English reading. However, some students encounter difficulties when they meet new words in reading process, and find it hard to comprehend the passage for they couldn't understand the unfamiliar words. Many students just give up reading long and difficult passage and lost their confidence to read it. Moreover, some teachers and students even regarded vocabulary learning as a mechanical and monotonous process. In this sense, both teachers and learners have spent much time and energy in teaching reading when they face many new words. To find out how to learn vocabulary effectively in reading is an ongoing project in academic circle as well as real classroom situation.

1.2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore effective vocabulary learning strategies in reading process, that is to say, how to deal with new words in English reading teaching at compulsory education. In order to have a better understanding on the vocabulary learning strategies used by students and teachers, the author explores some effective vocabulary learning strategy training methods and skills to help students read fluently even meeting some unfamiliar words. In addition, this study attempts to explore the relationship between vocabulary learning and reading teaching from multiple perspectives. After this study, the author hope to provide practical methods for learners and teachers to deal with unfamiliar words in reading process. English reading is a critical part of English in compulsory education, and learning and summarizing vocabulary in English reading teaching is also crucial. For language learners, only with a large amount of vocabulary can students more accurately comprehend the content of English reading. Similarly, students' mastery of English vocabulary deeply affects their own English proficiency (Xu Qingjiao, 2016). In fact, a solid vocabulary foundation is essential for students to improve their English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. For English teachers, understanding effective vocabulary learning strategies in reading teaching can help them design more suitable and reasonable teaching plans, select appropriate teaching materials and teaching methods. By guiding students to master vocabulary in the context of reading, teachers can not only make vocabulary learning interesting and effective but also cultivate students' autonomous learning ability and arouse their confidence to read a large amount of materials. Therefore, how to effectively learning new words in reading process has become a crucial issue in compulsory education for both learners and teachers.

2. Theoretical Basis

There are mainly two theories that the author put forward to find the relationship between vocabulary acquisition and reading, giving a correlation of vocabulary learning and reading. These two theories could hopefully offer practical and theo-

retical value to lay a sound foundation for further studies, and meet the needs of the educational construction in the long run.

2.1. The Compensation Hypothesis

In 2003, Wang Chuming put forward the compensation hypothesis, which holds that the organic connection of language and contextual knowledge is the prerequisite for fluently and appropriately using the language. It tells us the reason for Chinglish that we Chinese lack the real context in foreign language environment which matches with the expressions in foreign countries. Therefore, when we are acquiring and using the foreign language, we naturally activate and use the native language expressions that matches with the native language contextual knowledge to fill the gaps, and thus the native language transfer occurs and affects the learning of the foreign language (Wang Chuming, 2003).

It stressed the significance of the effect of contexts to language acquisition. For vocabulary learning, Wang Chuming also expounded it based on compensation hypothesis.

Wang Chuming (2006) claimed that an important use of reading in a foreign language is to learn and expand vocabulary. In order to learn vocabulary effectively, we need to find out what constitutes mastery of a word. In the process of acquiring our native language, many of the words we master are supported by a wealth of life experience and contextual knowledge. These supports are gradually incorporated into native words in ever-changing contexts. The more common a word is, the richer and more subtle its contextual meaning becomes. Therefore, for most foreign words, it is not enough to memorize their forms and one or two literal meanings; their meanings and uses must be constantly experienced, reflected upon, enriched, and expanded in changing contexts, and there is no end to the learning. Furthermore, Zhu Xiuquan (2011) pointed out context includes situational context and linguistic context, and situational context plays a very significant role in vocabulary learning. Both of them finds the crucial role of contexts and they notice the impact on vocabulary learning, drawing forth the enlightenment of the interaction between vocabulary learning and contexts.

2.2. Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Research by Nagy, Herman & Anderson (1985) has shown that a large proportion of vocabulary growth in school-age children is through incidental acquisition. They argued that language learning is fundamentally a subconscious activity. Nagy & Herman (1987) presented their theory of incidental vocabulary acquisition. In order to acquire communicative competence, language learners are faced with a huge vocabulary acquisition task. There is no doubt that such a large vocabulary cannot be accomplished through direct learning alone. Their research found that many words are acquired through listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating and other ac-

tivities. Furthermore, Krashen (1989) conducted a relevant study on incidental acquisition. He argues that incidental acquisition is the most effective way for language learners to master the vocabulary they have learned. The theory suggests that vocabulary should be acquired by reading itself, by guessing the meaning of unintelligible words from the context or setting, and that vocabulary acquired in this way is incidental.

Empirical studies have shown that incidental acquisition is superior to direct learning in terms of effectiveness. For example, Shelton & Newhouse (1981) noted that learners exposed to stimulus material in an incidental acquisition context performed significantly better on subsequent memory tests than subjects who learned only the same material. Similarly, Gass (1999) found an even better learning effect from incidental acquisition in that these incidental learners not only performed reasonably well on the relational clauses to which they were exposed, but also performed admirably in spite of their prior ignorance of the structure of certain aspects of the language.

Both the conclusions drawn by researchers and the results generated from empirical studies amply demonstrate the importance of incidental vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, the syntactic information contained in the words in incidental acquisition and the large amount of information processed by the words in that process have led to an increasingly focus on incidental vocabulary acquisition itself.

3. Effective vocabulary learning strategies in English reading teaching

Many students have been devoted large amounts of time and energy to learning vocabulary and find difficulties when they meet new words during reading process, which impedes their reading speed and increases anxiety while reading long and difficult passages. Therefore, it is essential for language teachers to explore methods out of this dilemma. In this sense, the author discusses some feasible ways to help teachers improve their pedagogical methods.

3.1. Design Learning Contexts and Develop Predicative Ability

When teaching new words in reading class, teachers should focus on combining the vocabulary in the reading materials with specific reading contexts, and promote students' vocabulary acquisition by simulating life-like situations related to the teaching content. This teaching strategy can not only effectively attract students' attention, but also stimulate their interest in learning, which will help learners to obtain learning objectives and complete tasks more efficiently. Xu Qingjiao (2016) noted that context can be divided into two aspects: one is the context and situation in English reading; the other is the real life situation that English teachers themselves create when they prepare the teaching content in connection with English reading, or the life scene that teachers arrange for students according to the teach-

ing content in class. For example, when teaching Unit8 First aid, Reading DR ABC, the teacher can ask a student to play the role of an injured person in a car accident, and ask two students to play the roles of a doctor and a nurse, and demonstrate how to rescue the injured person in the class. At the same time, the teacher will introduce the vocabulary words, such as catch fire, ambulance, response, circulation, bleeding, presenting them in a more vivid way. By dealing with the vocabulary in this way, students will have a deeper impression of the newly learned vocabulary.

By encouraging students to predict the content and thematic meaning of the text before reading, they can begin to form mental schemata related to the topic. This approach not only enhances their ability to anticipate reading material but also facilitates smoother comprehension of the reading text and the vocabulary it may contain so as to form a more effective learning process. For instance, the teacher can initiate a brainstorming activity by writing the topic-related word on the board. The students are then encouraged to share any related words that come to mind upon seeing these topic word. This task not only allows them to independently expand their word knowledge but also paves the way for their newly-learned words related to the topic. For example, when teaching Unit 11 Reading The Sounds of the World, the teacher writes the theme word “music” on the blackboard a few minutes before the class and lets the students freely associate and list the words related to it through brainstorming. This activity activates students’ existing vocabulary knowledge and introduces the core vocabulary in the text, such as perform, record, instrument, blues, musician, jazz, rhythm and so forth. In this way, students connect their existing knowledge with new knowledge, which not only enhances their perception of the content of the text, but also actively acquires vocabulary in the process of cultivating their interest in reading.

3.2. Cultivate Guessing Words Strategies

Students should cultivate different strategies to guess new words they read in the passage so as to read fluently and quickly. There are some viable ways to help them develop learning skills.

3.2.1. Guessing by Word-formation

Teachers can guide students to use word-formation rules to recognize and guess the meaning of some newly meeting words. The most common ways of word-formation is to use prefix, suffix and compound words together. When this kind of words appear, the teachers should emphasize it and reinforce repeatedly in learning process. In most of the cases, prefix can change the meaning of a word. For example, “dis-” is a common prefix signifies the meaning of negation, such as dislike, disapprove and disappear, etc. On the other side, suffix can determine the part of speech of a word. For example, “-ness” usually adds at the end of adjectives to form nouns, like kindness, sadness and darkness, etc. Compound words like schoolbag, bookshelf and

sunbathe can deeper students comprehension of these large amount of words. Therefore, to learn the rules of word-formation is conducive to form a large word-base for students.

3.2.2. Guessing from Contexts

Words should be used at least in phrases, phrases at least in sentences, sentences at least in parts of speech, and all these linguistic components should be used in dynamic situations of interpersonal interactions as much as possible to enhance understanding (Wang Chuming, 2009). The discourse can provide dynamic contexts for a word and deepen students understanding of words. Context plays an important role in English vocabulary teaching to determine the meaning of words, memorize words and use vocabulary through context. Guessing word meaning by using contexts means guessing the meaning of a word based on the intrinsic connection or logical relationship between a word and the phrases or sentences that appear before and after it (Huang Qun, 2010). Taking the reading section “High School Hints” from Unit 1 of the high school textbook (Compulsory Book 1), the “Developing Ideas” section as an example, the teacher can pose a question about the first sentence of the passage: “Today I’m joined by a former student of our school. What does the word former mean in this sentence?” Moreover, the teacher guides students to read the following sentence “I’m very glad to be back. I feel as if high school was only yesterday!” By analyzing the phrases “be back” and “as if high school was only yesterday,” students can infer the identity of the person, thereby understanding the meaning of “former” by its context. Guessing meaning about a new word from contexts is a effective way for students to read independently and cultivate their ability to read between the lines.

3.3. Promote Automatic Learning Strategies

When teachers are conducting different teaching methods in class, it is also crucial to tell some strategies contributed to learners automatic learning so as to be conducive to students’ lifelong learning. There are some ways for learners to apply when they meet new words in reading process.

3.3.1. Using Bilingual Dictionary

The teachers can invite students to use bilingual dictionary when necessary, encouraging them focus on English explanation of the word. The English explanation is more natural and accurate. It can help learners think in English and use it logically as well as appropriately. When they meet new words in reading process, it is useful to have a bilingual dictionary handy. The dictionary contains different aspects of a word, such as pronunciation, example sentences, part of speech, meanings, related idioms and phrases, etc. From the comprehensive explanation of the word can provide different sides of a word and deepen students understanding as well as prolong

the retention of the word.

3.3.2. Keeping Note-taking

It is necessary to consolidate vocabulary after recognizing words. Students can do note-taking to review it regularly in order to enhance their memory. Moreover, the teacher can guide them to use mnemonic strategies that relate to the word, such as making word lists by categorizing, grouping words and so forth. Recording new words in the reading material is a good way for language learners to acquire new words and store it in a sensible way. Besides, the teacher could also ask them to write down some advanced words, related phrase and sentences, which benefits for their writing task as well. With the strategy of note-taking, students could reflect back to their vocabulary notes from time to time, enhancing their memory and enriching their vocabulary lists. Naturally, it can hopefully benefit for their learning strategy in the long run.

3.3.3. Fostering Extensive Reading

Extensive reading can broaden students' horizons, increase their knowledge, cultivate their temperament and develop their interest in learning. And indirect or accidental acquisition of vocabulary through extensive reading is a good way to expand vocabulary (Leech, 1990). In reading process, the memory of aspects of the vocabulary knowledge gained from a single exposure is undoubtedly not long-lasting. Therefore, the retention of new word knowledge depends mainly on the timely recurrence of new words. Therefore, learners need to be exposed to new words in different contexts in order to deepen their vocabulary knowledge and ensure the effective acquisition (Zhang Nana, 2013). Long novels use limited words and sentence patterns repeated throughout the text. According to language learning theory, this repetition and exposure are key to mastering a language, reinforcing correct usage and generalizing structures. Reading more reduces new vocabulary encounters, and repeated words in various contexts make meanings easier to infer or remember after looking them up (Wang Chuming, 2009). Extensive reading allows learners to read similar words repeatedly so as to reinforce the words that are once unfamiliar to the learners.

4. Conclusion

Teachers should thoughtfully leverage the scenarios and contexts provided in reading materials to design engaging lessons that foster students' predictive thinking, word inference skills, and independent learning abilities. By integrating these materials into their teaching, educators can help students not only build a robust vocabulary but also develop reading habits and strategies. Establishing a strong vocabulary base and develop vocabulary learning skills while reading during compulsory education period is a crucial step in equipping students with the tools they need for

lifelong learning and academic achievement. This foundation not only supports their immediate educational goals but also prepares them to tackle more complex texts and challenges in the future. Therefore, this study could hopefully lay a foundation for further exploration in reading for vocabulary learning and provide ideas for both learners and teachers to initiate innovated and effective learning and teaching methods, which can meet the needs of the construction of the modernized society in the long run.

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