

Methods of Teaching Reading Skills: A Case Study at Ferris University

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Abstract

In order to increase the speed and comprehension of reading in a foreign language, it is crucial to acquire appropriate reading skills. At the university level, where there is an increase in both quantity and quality with regard to reading, acquiring those skills is indispensable. In order to find some effective ways to teach reading skills, questionnaires were given to first-year students in the “Yomu” [reading] course at Ferris University, at the beginning and end of the semester. Based on the results of the questionnaires, this paper will propose suggestions for effective methods of teaching reading classes focused on reading skills.

Introduction

Many researchers have described reading as an “active” process (Goodman 1967; Smith 1971; cited in Silberstein 1994). Anderson offers three models of the reading process: “Bottom-up, Top-down, and Interactive models” (1999). The Bottom-up models are the “lower-level” reading processes, such as word recognition and identification of grammar rules; whereas the Top-down models correspond to the “higher-level” reading processes, where fluent readers tend to integrate textual information with their schemata. Finally, the Interactive models, according to Anderson, constitute the most comprehensive description of reading processes, including both the Bottom-up and Top-down models. Grabe claims that there are two aspects of the Interactive approaches to reading, with one involving the interaction between the reader and the text, and the other the interaction between Bottom-up and Top-down processes (1991). Skilled readers seem to constantly rely on

both types of interaction, in a complex manner.

When readers can interact well with the text, they can better comprehend it (Hosenfeld 1979). Therefore, it is necessary to provide the students useful “tools” for interacting with texts, such as reading skills.

<Statement of Purpose>

It is clear that students need to acquire appropriate reading skills to develop their reading speed and comprehension. Despite the importance of these skills, however, many students seem to lack an awareness of them. Instead, students blame a lack of vocabulary or grammar knowledge as the cause of their difficulty in reading English.

Is it true that a lack of vocabulary or grammar knowledge is the cause of the difficulty? In order to better understand the students’ awareness of reading skills and their problems in English reading, a questionnaire was given to them at the beginning of the semester.

The entire Pre-Semester Questionnaire is listed in Appendix 1, but here the discussion will center on the following three questions in particular:

1. Did you ever learn reading skills in junior/senior high school?

If so, what kind of skills did you learn?

2. Do you have any difficulty in reading English?

If so, what kind of difficulty do you have?

3. Do you enjoy reading in English? Why or why not?

These questions were intended to reveal the students’ knowledge of reading skills, their problems in reading English, and their general attitude toward English reading. Based on the results, some of effective approaches for teaching reading skills were incorporated into the lesson plans of the course.

At the end of the semester, the same students were asked to answer a follow up questionnaire in order to gauge the result of their reading study. The exact wording of the

Post-Semester Questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 2, but the three questions posed were basically the following:

1. Which reading skills that you learned were the most useful?
2. Which reading skills were the difficult to use and why?
3. Which reading skills do you need to improve in the future?

These responses provided great insights on how to improve the reading course in the future.

Although this research was conducted on a small scale, it is meaningful to have feedback directly from the students before and after the semester regarding the target subject (reading skills). This process made it possible to formulate the most effective approach for teaching reading skills based on the students' needs. At the same time, the results of teaching could be observed in the feedback, which serves as an excellent source of information for improving the reading course.

Method

The subject of the research was the "Yomu" course at Ferris University in spring semester of the 2009 academic year. The class was attended by 33 female first-year students from four different departments. The research was based on two questionnaires: a questionnaire was given to the students in the first class of the semester (Pre-Semester Questionnaire); and a questionnaire administered at the end of the semester after 12 reading-skills lessons and various reading activities had been provided (Post-Semester Questionnaire). Both questionnaires were written in English and Japanese, and students could answer in either language. Japanese (L1) use was allowed because the aim was to gather the most precise information from the students possible, rather than evaluating their English writing skills. The students were given 10 minutes to fill out each questionnaire and their responses were anonymous. There were cases where students either provided more than one answer for a

question or did not answer a certain question.

Analysis

The Pre-Semester Questionnaire consisted of eight questions, but the research focused on the three topics — experience of learning reading skills, difficulty in reading English, and attitude toward English reading — that were most closely related to the central aim. Based on the feedback from students, the teacher designed the semester’s 12 lessons in a way that better satisfied their needs. This was followed by the Post-Semester Questionnaire intended to gauge their progress in acquiring reading skills by determining which useful skills were learned; which skills were difficult to use; and which skills they need to improve in the future.

The next section will present the results of the Pre-Semester Questionnaire, briefly describe actual lesson plans for the “Yomu” course, and then discuss the results of Post-Semester Questionnaire.

1. Results & Discussion: Pre-Semester Questionnaire

Q1: *Did you ever learn reading skills in junior/senior high school?*

If so, what kind of skills did you learn?

Of the 33 students, 18 answered “Yes” (54.5%) to Q1. The responses indicated that students had the experience of timed reading practice followed by questions to gauge comprehension (5 students); instruction that required attention to be paid to specific sentence structures during reading, such as subject-verb connection, tense, and conjunctions (4 students); and approaches that encouraged extensive reading (2 students). These are useful practices for increasing the speed and comprehension of reading English texts to some extent; however, students need to develop a more diverse array of reading skills to attain the level required at university. The remaining 15 students, who answered

“No” (45.5%) to the first question, clearly need to acquire reading skills from scratch. Therefore, it seemed necessary for the instructor, when introducing various reading skills, to explain to the students the importance of those skills and how to use them in certain situations.

Q2: *Do you have any difficulty in reading English?*

If so, what kind of difficulty do you have?

All the 33 students answered “Yes” to Q2, with most pointing to a “lack of vocabulary” as the source of the problem (24 students). As Lono points out, students “usually complain that their poor vocabulary hinders reading” (1987). This seems to be a common belief (or complaint) among students, but is it really a key cause of the problem?

It is often said that approximately 5,000 words are necessary for reading in English at the university level (Sauzier-Uchida, 2008).

In this sense, most of the students do need to work hard to acquire vocabulary. In terms of reading, however, students can easily facilitate that effort by employing appropriate vocabulary strategies, such as adapting what Lono calls the “three sub-skills: word analysis, lexical range, vocabulary in context” (1987); or what Nuttall defines as “word attack skills: structural clues and inference from context” (1996). Such vocabulary strategies seem far more effective and practical than spending an enormous amount of time looking up every single unfamiliar word in a dictionary. Along with vocabulary strategies, it is also important for students to learn “when to ignore difficult words” (Nuttall 1996). Although this seems to contradict the idea of “vocabulary” strategies, it is nonetheless a useful skill when it comes to actual reading situations. If students know when to ignore difficult words, they would also be likely to identify the important words (information) within the text. This ability is necessary when employing other reading skills, such as skimming, scanning and summarizing. Therefore, students should be encouraged to practice these vocabulary strategies through various reading tasks.

For Q2, the second source of difficulty identified was the length and complexity of

sentences (14 students). Students said that they tend to be discouraged and get lost when they encounter such sentences in a reading text. Many of them had also been instructed in junior or senior high school to read sentences from the left to right without going back to the earlier part of a sentence. What can we tell from these responses? They show how frequently the students had to read long complex sentences as English texts. In such a situation, it is “natural” for the students to have difficulty in reading English. The problem, in other words, seems to be related to “readability.” When choosing a text, the teacher needs to consider several factors, such as text organization and motivation to read (David and Norazit 2000); and readability is one of the factors. According to David and Norazit, the shorter the sentence, the simpler it is to decode; and they suggest readability should be measured by some formula (e.g., Rudolph Flesch’s “Reading Ease” Formula, Edward Fry’s “Graph for Estimating Readability - Extended”, or the Fog Index). The task of reading is likely to be less stressful for students if factors such as readability are taken into consideration when choosing a reading text.

Q3: *Do you enjoy reading in English? Why or why not?*

In response to this question, 13 students said that they enjoyed reading English, for reasons that included the enjoyment of learning new things, a sense of achievement, and an interest in English itself. This result suggests the importance for teachers to choose appropriate reading topics that reflect students’ interests, while also providing meaningful reading tasks to keep students motivated. Some of the students seemed to have good reading habits already in their first language, with 11 of them saying that they enjoy reading in Japanese. As Ediger cited in an article (2001), there is a positive relationship between L1 literacy and the development of English literacy (Lucas and Katz 1994; Cummins 1991). Therefore, such students have a great potential to expand their reading ability in English.

Meanwhile, 17 students said that they did not enjoy reading English, for reasons that included there being too many unfamiliar words and the higher level of frustration and

time required as compared to Japanese (L1) reading. The first problem, concerning unfamiliar words, could be dealt with to some extent through the acquisition of vocabulary strategies, as discussed in the previous section; but the second problem might need to be examined in more detail. Interestingly, 12 students among those answering “No” to Q3 (70.5%) said that they enjoy reading in Japanese, which suggests that they probably have adequate reading skills in their L1 but could not apply those skills in L2 (English) reading. In other words, these are students who might enjoy reading in both English and Japanese if provided appropriate instruction and practice. How can such students bridge the gap between L1 and L2 reading? As a first step, they should realize what kind of reading skills they are using in L1 reading so that they can adapt or adjust those skills for use in L2 reading. There are similarities between L1 and L2 reading strategies (Barnett 1988), so students can take advantage of already acquired skills. Another possible approach to this problem is to encourage students to use their “schemata (singular form, schema).” The term “schema” refers to prior knowledge and experience regarding a certain topic that can be used to interpret a text (Bransford 1985; Norris & Phillips 1987; cited in Alvargez & Risko 1989). Regarding the role of schema, Nuttall explains that, “whether we interpret successfully depends on whether our schemata are sufficiently similar to the writer’s” (1996). If the students fail to use their schemata appropriately, they might misunderstand the text or become confused.

It is therefore important to provide students with adequate opportunities to activate their schemata as a pre-reading activity, such as sharing knowledge or exchanging opinions about the topic in a group discussion and using visual aids to bring about a clearer image of the topic. These sorts of activities can help increase students’ comprehension, while decreasing their stress related to the challenge of new reading material.

The remaining 3 students gave “semi-Yes” answer to Q3 based on the condition that text is easy enough to understand or that the topic is interesting. Despite this small number, such responses underscore the importance of choosing an appropriate text in relation to readability and topics, as discussed earlier.

Lesson Plans

The syllabus for the “Yomu” course was designed (Appendix 3) was based on the analysis of the Pre-Semester Questionnaire. The target reading skills for the course were: previewing & predicting, scanning, skimming, vocabulary strategies, identifying main ideas and details, making inferences, and summarizing.

Each lesson consisted of following four parts:

(1) Introduction of a reading skill

At the beginning of each lesson, a new reading skill was introduced, focusing on “when, how, and why to use the target skill.” Some examples were also used that could be familiar to the students.

For instance, the students were asked how to choose a magazine at a bookstore. Their answers were: to check the title, price, cover design, index, photos, featured articles, publisher, etc. This is precisely the sort of information they need for the skill of previewing and predicting. When students realized that they were actually using the reading skill in their daily life without noticing it, they seemed to have more confidence to learn the skill and to use it in reading tasks.

It is equally important to give the students an adequate explanation of why a certain reading skill is important, which seemed to be the best way to motivate their learning.

(2) Pre-reading activities

As already discussed in the previous section, sharing the students’ background knowledge or experiences regarding the topic made it possible to activate their “schemata,” which helps them get ready to read a text. If the topic was not so familiar to the students, providing visual aids or adding brief explanation seemed effective to motivate them to read.

(3) Tasks during reading

For this stage, it is important to give the students clear and meaningful tasks. In other words, the students need to be given a good reason for reading. As a technical aspect,

for instance, setting a time limit for reading can increase their concentration, while reducing the number of times they can consult a dictionary might encourage them to use vocabulary strategies. Information on annotation methods, such as underlining main ideas or circling key words, was also introduced to enhance students' comprehension.

By identifying the organization of the reading visually, they were ready for the activities of the post-reading stage, such as the comprehension questions. Needless to say, reading texts were carefully chosen for the students so that they would find them interesting and employ their reading skills in the target language.

(4) Post-reading activities

At the end of each lesson, students were asked various types of questions to gauge their comprehension, such as true or false questions, ordering questions, or WH-questions. It is essential to present appropriate comprehension questions (Lono 1987). Some types of comprehension questions can even provide good hints that help the students focus on the reading task. These are called "Signpost questions," which are supposed "to guide the readers, directing their attention to the important points in the text, preventing them from going off along a false track" (Nuttall 1996).

Another post-reading activity was a mini-discussion about the topic. The students shared their opinions based on the reading text. This activity was encouraged in the class because it is necessary for the students not only to receive information from a text but also to interpret it in order to form their own opinion as a final goal of the reading activity (Yáñez 1987).

2. Results and Discussion: Post-Semester Questionnaire

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to fill out a second questionnaire aimed at gauging the results of their study, which posed the three questions listed below. (It should be noted that the total number of responses for each question is not equal to the total number the students because some students did not answer certain questions.)

Q1: Which reading skills that you learned were useful?

The useful skills most frequently mentioned were “scanning” and “vocabulary strategies” (9 students for each). It seems relatively easier to acquire scanning skill compared to the other skills. As long as students can focus on an appropriate part of the text, they can quickly find the answer, which must give the students a sense of satisfaction.

According to the result of Pre-Semester Questionnaire, the biggest problem the students faced in reading English, according to their own view, was a lack of vocabulary. Therefore, learning vocabulary strategies seemed help them sufficiently.

Q2: Which reading skills were difficult to use and why?

There were 7 students who said that “skimming” was difficult, followed by “previewing and predicting” (6 students), “scanning” and “vocabulary strategies” (4 students for each). In all of these cases, upon closer examination, the reasons cited for the difficulty seem to have a similar source. Namely, the students were not sure where to skim or scan, which part of the text should be used for making a prediction, or which unfamiliar words should be guessed. According to Nuttall, it is necessary for students to be able to identify what is important and what is not important for the understanding of a text. In order to develop this ability, she suggests the need to acquire “text- attack skills,” such as simplifying sentences, interpreting discourse markers, or recognizing text organization (1996). For this purpose, it seems effective to use annotation — such as underlining, circling, or the insertion of margin notes — to help visualize the structure of a text. If the text has a clear structure with a topic sentence followed by supporting details and a conclusion, the students should be able to identify the important information. The problem, however, is that not all reading texts have a topic sentence or clear organization, which often results in confusion among students. Rhetorical organization is also a “source of trouble” for the students since the style of rhetoric is specific to each culture (Eskey 1979; cited in Lono 1987). Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to provide students with various types of reading texts as their level of comprehension improves.

Q3: *Which reading skills do you need to improve in the future?*

More than half of the students (18 students) chose “skimming” as the skill that required the most improvement in the future. This seems to suggest that the students realize the importance of this skill with regard to grasping important information from reading materials. This is a meaningful discovery in terms of the future English study of the students because skimming is one of the most useful skills for any type of academic course, even those conducted in their L1.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the two questionnaires, it can be said that two crucial factors for an effective reading class are “careful preparation” and “appropriate guidance.”

The factor of “careful preparation” includes the following two aspects:

- (1) Offering appropriate reading materials on the basis of considering readability and selecting topics that enhance student motivation.
- (2) Preparing various types of reading materials, in terms of genre, organization, and writing style, so that the students can employ a diverse range of reading skills.

The factor of “appropriate guidance” involves the following points:

- (1) Enhancing students’ comprehension by familiarizing them with various reading skills (e.g., explaining when, how and why to use a reading skill).
- (2) Providing a good reason for reading in terms of creating clear and meaningful tasks.
- (3) Making the best use of students’ schemata to boost their confidence and understanding.
- (4) Encouraging students to annotate a reading text so that key information can be visualized.
- (5) Asking appropriate comprehension questions and discussing the topic so that the students can see the results of reading.

The ultimate goal of any reading class should be to help the students become independent readers, who can comprehend and interpret a text, while also forming their own opinions based on their reading. For this purpose, the factors of “careful preparation” and “appropriate guidance” seem to be very important. In particular, teaching reading skills can be the first, effective step for students’ developing their reading ability.

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Appendix 1: Pre-Semester Questionnaire

1. Did you ever learn reading skills in junior/senior high school in order to read an English text faster or to understand it better?
(英語のテキストをより早く読んだり、より良く理解するためのリーディング・スキルを中学校や高校で学んだことはありますか?)
2. If so, what kind of reading skills did you learn?
(もしある場合、それはどのようなスキルでしたか?)
3. Did you ever learn reading skill in junior/senior high school in order to read a Japanese text faster or to understand it better?
(日本語のテキストをより早く読んだり、より良く理解するためのリーディング・スキルを中学校や高校で学んだことはありますか?)
4. If so, what kind of reading skills did you learn?
(もしある場合、それはどのようなスキルでしたか?)
5. Do you have any difficulty in reading English? If so, what kind of difficulty do you have?
(英語の文献を読むときに難しいと感じることがありますか? もしあるとすればどのような点が難しいですか?)
6. Do you enjoy reading in Japanese? Why or why not?
(日本語の文献を読むのは楽しいですか? それはなぜですか?)
7. Do you enjoy reading in English? Why or why not?
(英語の文献を読むのは楽しいですか? それはなぜですか?)
8. How do you want to improve your reading skills in English through this course?
(この講座でどのように英語のリーディング・スキルを伸ばしていきたいですか?)

Appendix 2: Post-Semester Questionnaire

1. Which reading skills that you learned were the most useful and why?
(これまでいくつかのリーディング・スキルを学習してきましたが、どのスキルが役に立っていますか? それはなぜですか?)
2. Which reading skills were the difficult to use and why?
(リーディング・スキルの中で使うのが難しいものはありますか? それはなぜですか?)
3. Which reading skills do you need to improve in the future and why?
(今後もっと伸ばしたいリーディング・スキルがありますか? それはなぜ必要ですか?)

Appendix 3: Syllabus of the “Yomu” Course (Spring 2009)

1. Course Objectives

The students will be able to use reading strategies such as previewing and vocabulary strategies, to be able to comprehend the main points of authentic essays and articles. The students will read strategically and find the information they need to know through skimming and scanning. The students will be able to summarize the main points of article and write about their reaction in paragraph form.

2. Textbook: Strategic READING 1-Building Effective Reading Skills

3. Criteria for assessment:

- ↓ (1) Mid-term examination
 ↓ (2) Final examination
 ↓ (3) Attendance & Participation



Your **final grade** will be the cumulative average of (1+2+3).

4. Lateness & attendance: 20 minutes or more late = absence, 6 or more absences = “F”

Date	Reading skill	Unit	Assignment
April 13	Introduction		
April 20	Predicting & Previewing	Unit-1	
April 27	Scanning	Unit-2	
May 11	Vocabulary strategies	Unit-3	
May 18	Skimming	Unit-6	
May 25	Main ideas/ details	Unit-12	
June 8	Mid-term examination		
June 15	Making inferences	Unit-11	
June 22	Summarizing	Unit-10	
June 29	Review	Unit-13	
July 6	Review	Unit-14	
July 13	Review	Unit-15	
July 20	Final examination		
July 27	Wrap-up		
July 30			