On the Choice of Reading Materials in TESL

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The choice of reading materials partly decides the effectiveness of classroom reading instructions in TESL. This paper analyses the cognitive process of reading and some problems in classroom reading instructions of reading course, and suggests three basic principles for choosing reading materials, including the principle of comprehensibility reading materials, readers’ familiarity with the topics of the reading materials, and the sufficiency of reading materials.

Keywords: reading materials, comprehensibility, familiarity, sufficiency

Introduction

For language learners, especially those who do not have real language environment, classroom instructions are of great significance for language improvement. Reading, a basic skill for language learning and one of the main courses of language teaching, provides students not only language input but also opportunities to test their language application ability. Reading largely decides the language proficiency while choice largely guarantees the success of reading teaching. This paper will analyze the cognitive process of reading and the common problems in English reading teaching, and put forward the basic principles of choosing reading materials.

Principles for the Choice of Reading Materials in ESL

Principle of Comprehensibility

The degree of difficulty of reading materials needs to match the language proficiency level of the students. Krashen (1986) suggests in his Input Hypothesis that language acquisition occurs only when input is comprehensible. In his famous “i + 1” formula, “i” represents the learner’s current language level and “1” represents the language information a little bit beyond the learner’s current language level. When the second language proficiency of learners has developed from “i” to “i + 1”, the appropriate language input has become “i + 1 + 1”. In short, one basic principle is to choose reading materials comprehensible, that is, a little bit beyond the students’ current language proficiency.

To meet the principle of comprehensibility, teachers should test students’ overall English level. English graded readings are a time-saving and an effective way.

The types of reading tasks affect the degree of difficulty as well. Compare the task of understanding the general idea of the reading material and analyzing how a main idea is elaborated or translating every sentence, it is evident that the latter can be much more complicated and difficult to accomplish.

In addition, language style and type also affect students’ comprehension. An article about philosophy and
a narrative story about everyday life can generally not be of the same difficulty.

**Principle of Familiarity**

Familiar or interesting topics are especially appropriate for beginners of low language proficiency. Undoubtedly, interest is a good motive for further reading. Interest helps push students forward in reading. In addition, familiar or interesting topics often mean students are likely to have more relevant background knowledge, which makes reading easier and faster.

Reading is a cognitive process and cognition relies on past knowledge and experience. Perceptual information is the result of the interaction between stimulus information and memory information (Wang & Wang, 1996, p. 38). If students lack the necessary background knowledge, that is, memory information, they tend to rely on external stimuli heavily in their reading process; that is, they have to decode each language information to understand. They will have to analyze the smaller perceptual units, then the larger perceptual units, until the whole stimulus information is analyzed, which is called “bottom-up” process. Whether this bottom-up processing can go smoothly depends on every step of the process. Strange words or complex sentences may become cognitive barriers. It is especially evident when students’ language proficiency is much lower than that of the reading materials.

A top-down cognitive process can help learners in reading comprehension. The precondition for a top-down cognitive process is the general knowledge from which the learner can form a prediction about the content of the reading material, and then use the prediction to adjust his cognitive focus and guide the cognitive process. The learner will be less likely to be stuck in decoding every language words and expressions; instead, he makes bolder guesses about the meaning of the text and forms expectations for the content of the text. Reading process thus becomes a process of testing and adjusting his expectations.

**Principle of Sufficiency**

The third principle is to provide sufficient and diversified reading materials. Nuttall (2002) points out that the best way to learn a foreign language can be being in target language environment and reading widely in the target language. A rich variety of language materials can better ensure opportunities for the learners to repeatedly come across the same language information in reading. Sufficiency of input is a necessary condition for acquiring language (Krashen, 1986). Larsen-Freeman (1983) also points out that the basic and easiest language learners can depend on in second language learning is language input they are most exposed to.

Moreover, the background knowledge of the students in the same grade or class varies from each other. If the teacher chooses the reading materials of similar topics, only those students who are familiar in this aspect benefit from the background information. Diverse topics make up the defect there.

In addition, a large number of extensive readings can provide students with more and richer language input: In reading, students can learn vocabulary, grammar, sentence-making, paragraph, and text writing skills (Harmer, 2000). Experiments have shown that students who are good at using reading as a learning strategy achieve higher scores in English vocabulary test than those who memorize words by rote (Zhang, 2004, p. 22). Of course, the effect of reading on second language vocabulary learning is related to the frequency of vocabulary appearing in reading materials, students’ familiarity with the contents of the reading materials, and students’ current level of second language.

Extensive reading helps not only enlarge vocabulary, but also improve language skills. Extensive reading is effective to supplement language materials and background knowledge especially for language learners who
do not have authentic target language environment. Besides, the knowledge in diversified reading materials, natural sciences or humanities, arts or history, will be stored as background knowledge which will in turn lend clues for students’ future reading.

**Common Problems of and Related Suggestion for Reading in ESL**

At present, formal classroom instruction still takes the leading role in English teaching, teachers’ explanations, and priority of intensive reading, including explanation of grammar and practice of language difficulties. But seldom is the analysis of the article or background knowledge introduction included. The intensive reading class for English majors in my university takes four hours a week and extensive reading class takes two hours a week. But the length of six hours a week is not fully used for reading. In intensive reading classes, teachers usually spend 1/2 to 2/3 of the total time on explaining, and part of the rest time on doing exercises. In extensive reading classes, teachers also spend nearly half of the time on introducing reading skills and explaining language difficulties. At the that rate, students read merely about 16 articles in intensive reading class no more than 100 to 150 pages of a book in extensive reading class during one semester. The limited time of reading and limited amount of reading materials cannot guarantee the improvement of language proficiency.

In the selection of reading materials, teachers tend to provide students with classic, fluent writing, which is of course justifiable. But the point is that students sometimes lack interest in some classical works. When classicality and interest cannot be met simultaneously, students’ preferences should take the priority. Interest often means that students are more motivated and are more likely to have related background knowledge for the topic. As a result, more focused reading and highly motivated reading is expected.

For beginners of English learning or younger language learners, teachers may help them choose storytelling materials. The interlocking narrative plots attract students to continue and concentrate on reading to explore the development of stories. Difficulty level is another factor in choosing reading materials for them. If the reading materials are hard to understand for the students, they will be distracted by too many difficulties in understanding and will have a sense of frustration or fear of reading, which will in turn disrupt the construction of interest in reading. Laufer (1997) suggests that when students know 95% or more of the vocabulary in the article they are reading, it is a possible and not too demanding a task for them to guess the meaning of unknown words in the context. The figure Laufer puts forward may be open to debate, but there is no doubt that the language difficulty level should suit students’ second language proficiency level. To come to read the original English texts and to infer information beyond the text in reading is a gradual training process and cannot be accomplished overnight.

Challenging reading tasks are more helpful to keep students’ interest in reading for those who already have a good command of English. At this stage, it is possible and necessary for students to read the original English text without simplification. It would be better if students once read the abbreviated version of the original. First of all, familiar content helps students employ the top-down reading mode more readily. Secondly, re-understanding the works from a new perspective is not only fresh, but also easier to make students feel satisfied (Ur, 2000, p. 155). In addition, students can also learn to evaluate literary and understand the information conveyed by writers beyond the text.

**Conclusions**

More preparation may quicken the speed. To obey the basic principles in choosing reading materials is the
precondition for good reading training and instructions. In short, the language of reading materials should conform to the students’ English level; the content of reading materials should be diverse; students’ interests and background knowledge should be taken into consideration.

Admittedly, the selection of reading materials is part of the complex process of reading instruction. Classroom instruction on reading depends on the class hours allocated to the course, the selection of reading materials, the types of reading tasks, the training of reading skills, the way teachers explain, the classroom atmosphere, etc. All the related factors are interrelated and need to work jointly. For example, the vividness and interest of a passage can be destroyed by teacher’s dull and inappropriate questions, and the reading tasks full of imagination and challenges can transform the plain words interesting enough (Harmer, 2000, p. 70).

Besides, teachers should guide students to understand and discover the author’s writing purposes so that students can gradually realize that reading is one of the communicative ways and the communication can only be fully accomplished through the cooperation of writing and its readers (Ma, 2002, p. 106). It is the task of teachers to guide and cultivate students’ habit of active reading, and to help them be willing to read, good at grasping information from reading, and to improve the students’ language proficiency.

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