

Vocabulary Teaching in Chinese EFL Reading Class in Universities--- A Case Study

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Abstract: Taking the reading course of English majors in Xingyi Normal University for Nationalities as an example, this study tries to identify the problems and effects of vocabulary teaching in reading class, analyzes the reasons for the poor effect of vocabulary instruction from the perspective of teachers and students, and puts forward practical suggestions to improve the teaching effect.

Keywords: Vocabulary instruction; The teaching of reading; Effectiveness

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1. Introduction

Reading course is a very important course for English majors in colleges. Reading comprehension requires students vocabulary foundation and reading strategies. Taking the reading course of English majors in Xingyi Normal University for Nationalities as an example, this study tries to find out the problems and solutions on vocabulary instruction. According to the teaching curriculum, students have two hours of classroom teaching each week; all teachers who teach the course are expected to follow the same teaching schedule and they use a textbook. It takes about five hours to finish one unit.

When talking about the importance of reading comprehension competence for language learners, Keith Folse (2010) cited Grabe (1991) and Johns (1981) by saying that ‘For academic success, many experts agree that the single most important skill is reading’ (p. 139). There is no doubt that reading ability is a major part that is to be tested for college English students. For English majors, their short-term goals in learning English is to pass exams like final exams for different courses, College English Test Band-4. In any of these tests, reading ability is an essential part that will be measured, and it often occupies a relatively large percentage of the total score.

Though the primitive aim of reading course is to develop or train students’ reading comprehension competence, vocabulary teaching should not be overlooked by reading teachers for obvious reasons. Firstly, to language learners, vocabulary knowledge is essential for any other skills like listening, speaking, and writing. Secondly, vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension. One can not understand a text without knowing what most of the words mean. Many scholars (for example, Nation, 2006; Grabe, 2009) have demonstrated that readers need to know about 95%–98% of the words in a passage in order to be able to comprehend it.

2. Problems

Like has been pointed out, it is important to teach vocabulary in reading classrooms; we are fully aware the necessity too. Therefore, much emphasis has been placed on vocabulary teaching in reading classrooms. Usually, among the five hours allotted to each unit, two of which will be devoted to direct vocabulary teaching or exercises on vocabulary. The problem is that though much time has been spent on the teaching of vocabulary, the results have been unsatisfactory, and outcomes have been poor. Evidence for this hasty conclusion mainly comes from the performance of students on final exams and CET-4. In designing papers for final exam, reading teachers have been ‘suggested’ by department leaders to make sure most students can get to the pass scores. And recent years, the rate on passing CET-4 among English majors has been very low.

It has been noticed that teaching methods in vocabulary instruction have been dull, tedious, and ineffective. The common practice for most teachers in the department is like this: Before come to the text, the teacher would first lead students to read the new words for the unit. Without explanations on any new words, they come to the passage itself and begin to teach the text. When encountering the new words in the text, teachers usually will stop reading activity and begin to explain the meaning and usage of the new words by translating them into their L1, or give sentence examples in which the new word is used, some teachers may even ask students to make sentences by using the new word. This method, according to some experts on teaching reading, is dangerous and undesirable because it changes a reading class to a vocabulary class; what’s more important is that this practice interrupts students’ understanding

on the text itself. Furthermore, after finishing one unit, teachers usually will continue to teach the next unit, with little assessment or other ways to strengthen students' understanding of the text and remembering of the new words.

It is shocking that we have been teaching our students like this year after year without knowing the dangerous effects of such methods. One of the reasons may be that we, as language teachers, are either not pedagogically trained on teaching reading, or do not receive adequate training.

On the students' part, it can be said safely that some of our students are not highly motivated in learning, and many of them are not strategic learners either. It is not surprising if you see many students in some corners of the campus, holding a mini dictionary or a textbook, murmuring out the spellings of words and memorizing them. It is also noticed that some students would turn to their electronic dictionaries whenever they come across a new word in reading. Obviously, students need to change their learning strategies too. But, here again, they need to notice first that their ways of learning are problematic, and it's their teachers' job to make this clear.

3. Solutions

There are many reasons for the ineffectiveness of vocabulary teaching in reading classrooms, but possible solutions may mainly come from two aspects: one is from the perspective of teachers and teaching strategies, the other is from the students.

From the teachers' perspective, some changes could be done.

Firstly, the present in-service teachers should update their knowledge on teaching methodologies. For many senior teachers, they have been teaching in almost the same way for many years; and their chances to go for any training to update their knowledge are slim. Therefore, teachers should get training regularly while in service.

Secondly, teachers should be aware of the importance of dynamic vocabulary instruction, adopting a combination of different teaching strategies to achieve good teaching results. For example, they can use different ways to deal with different words, or employ different teaching strategies according to different texts. To do so, teachers may refer to relevant literature, which is already well-established so far. For example, Nation (2004) provides ten ways of dealing with words in intensive reading with descriptions of the principles of how to decide what way is appropriate for a particular word. Many other researchers have also offered us very useful strategies and techniques for quality effective teaching of vocabulary in reading course (e.g. Nagy, 1988; Manyak, 2010), which can be mainly summarized to the following: encouraging wide reading, emphasizing learning from context, using morphological knowledge such as word parts, using graphic organizers, developing students' word consciousness, encouraging students' use of learned words, etc..

From students' perspective, they should realize the important role of vocabulary in their language learning, actively participate in classroom activities. They also should learn to adopt different learning strategies in steady of consulting new words in dictionaries and memorizing them.

The above solutions may be effective in improving the teaching of vocabulary in reading class for the following reasons:

Firstly, it is commonly recognized that training for in-service teachers in any institutes is necessary and important. It is a major way to update staff's professional knowledge.

Secondly, many scholars have advocated that effective teaching of any language skills should involve combination of several methods. No single teaching method can achieve successful teaching.

4. Conclusion

In a word, the problems observed in the teaching of vocabulary in reading classrooms are discussed; possible solutions are suggested to improve the situation of ineffective vocabulary instruction. But due to the limitation of the author's knowledge and perspective in language teaching, the solutions could be limited too. Nevertheless, in teaching reading, teachers should try to adopt different teaching strategies and find out ways that can work effectively.

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