Teaching Students to Read More Effectively

Introduction
Most of my students, both junior and senior forms, have problems in reading. They found reading rather difficult to handle and have no way to improve. I believe one of the reasons that explains this situation is teachers in Hong Kong rarely have time to teach students reading strategies in class. In this action research, I would like to investigate whether or not the reading strategies can improve students’ reading ability.

Action Research in Teaching Reading Skills
Referring to some common reading approaches, they require the readers to master certain skills in order to read effectively. My students’ main deficiency in reading is that they lack those skills and it avoids them from reading effectively. Many studies suggest “good readers constantly make predictions about what they are reading while they are reading, and that these predictions are based on semantic, syntactic, and punctuation cues” (Hawkins 1, 1991, p.175). Therefore, I devised several strategies that my students could learn to help improve their reading. Four reading strategies are selected to go over with my students. These strategies are: skimming, identifying referents, guessing difficult words through content, and scanning. It is believed that these strategies will increase their reading power and their interest in reading.

Ten voluntary students from my English class joined this research. I conducted three sessions of reading class with them after school. Also, I had to select reading

---

materials carefully so that they were not too difficult for my students. I also devised some games to play with them in order to practise the four techniques they had learned in class.

In the first class, I gave my students a pre-test. This assessment consisted of a reading comprehension passage. Students are asked to answer all the questions. The questions ranged from long questions, fill-in-the-blanks, and true/false questions. Some difficult vocabularies appeared in the passage and students needed to use the cues to guess the meaning of them. Then, the results were recorded. After students finished the three sessions, they were asked to do that test again. This post-test helped me to evaluate whether those reading strategies helped students in reading or not.

Since scanning and skimming are two important techniques and they need plenty of practice, I decided to introduce them to my students in the first reading lesson. Then, I allocated about 10 minutes to let my students practise these two techniques in the following lessons. They were given exercises and they needed to scan for a single item or answer for a particular question. Similarly, I prepared some skimming activities that students could work in groups of two to have a race. For these activities, I had set time limit and emphasized the need for speed to my students.

In the second and third sessions, students were taught to guess difficult words through content and identify referents respectively. The worksheet included many short paragraphs and they were asked to guess the meaning of a difficult vocabulary by referring to the cues within the paragraph. I asked them to draw a “map” with
all the cues, so they could easily guess the unknown words. They enjoyed working with the assigned exercises and felt satisfied at guessing the meaning accurately.

Reflection

In the reading sessions, I asked students to share their reading habit with me. Most of them tended to use dictionary to check all of the unknown vocabulary in the reading passage first, and then tried to comprehend the content of the passage word-by-word. It seems that students have not exposed to any reading strategies in their previous education. If students can accurately identify words that are vital to their understanding of the text, then they do not need to check every single vocabulary and can save more time. Then, reading can definitely be more interesting. Their sharing reminds me that it is necessary to spend time to teach students “reading for main ideas of whole sections and paragraphs, looking for details which offer supporting evidence, and reading as rapidly as possible in order to understand the overall theme of a passage” (Dubin and Bycina, 1991, p.197). These skills are not emphasized in the current syllabus and teachers often neglect the importance of teaching these strategies. Besides, when students are exposed to authentic texts, they are required to have extensive knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, teaching them reading strategies is just the first step; helping students to build up their vocabulary and instructing the grammatical elements are also important.

In the process of this action research, I got opportunities to come across with many reading studies. They gave me plenty of ideas in teaching reading in the future.

---

One of them is setting “a top-down task” at the beginning of the reading session. Nuttall\(^3\) suggests that it is often a good idea for students “to get a global impression of the reading passage and a rough idea of the way it is organized” (1996, p.158). This kind of preparation is often ignored in my English class. The main reason is the lack of time. I often replace the preparation stage with a monologue introduction by me and there isn’t any student involvement. In the future reading lesson, I can start by asking for predictions about the text based on the title, or getting the class to skim the text for the answers to simple global questions. A good introduction can help students to read more effectively and attract them to continue reading.

After comparing the results from the pre-test and post-test, most students did improve and get a better result in the post-test. Although the reading strategies can contribute to students’ improvement, the psychological effects shouldn’t be ignored. Students who joined this research were volunteers; they wanted to improve their reading strategies and worked hard in the whole process. Before they came to the class, they must expect to gain some new skills that would be beneficial to their studies. Such belief might enhance their performance and play a role in their improvement.

**Conclusion**

I believe this action research is just a starting point. It is necessary for teachers to keep working on this area. Teaching students the reading strategies in class can facilitate their reading comprehension. At the same time, I need to improve my teaching skills, so that students can enjoy the reading process.

---
