

Using Intensive and Extensive Reading to Strengthen Reading Comprehension Skills in English Classroom Teaching

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Abstract

Reading plays a significant role in academic development and it's one of the four most important skills when students study a second language. This paper discussed both intensive reading and extensive reading approaches and how to use them to strengthen reading comprehension skills. However, in English teaching classrooms, both intensive reading and extensive reading approaches have limitations as well.

Keywords

Intensive reading; Extensive reading; Reading comprehension skills.

1. Brief Introduction about Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading

1.1. Brief Introduction to Intensive Reading

Reading is one of the four most important skills when studying a second language. The other three skills are listening, speaking, and writing. Reading is also a very complex process including mental and physical change. In Cambridge Dictionary, reading refers to the skills and activities of getting meaning from print.

Intensive reading (IR) involves reading in detail with specific learning aims and tasks in class (Day, 2015). After reading, maybe the teacher would give some comprehension questions and other activities to help students to strengthen their knowledge. The process or approach like this might be called intensive reading because the students study the short text in detail under the teacher's guidance, the students have to check and recheck their comprehension through lots of class activities.

There is usually four-centeredness that could happen in IR. The first center is the teacher. The teacher is regarded as a model and students need to follow the instructions. The second center is the reading material in the textbook and students learn new knowledge from textbooks. The third one is grammar-centeredness. Students could learn grammar rules through instructions from textbooks. And the last one is vocabulary-centeredness. Usually, one short text could have 50-60 new words and one of the important goals of IR is to learn more new words (Yang, Dai, Gao, 2012).

However, it has been argued that intensive reading is not a lot of fun for students. Because the focus of IR is word by word and the material chosen by lecturers is usually difficult (Day, 2015). What's more, although sometimes the texts used for intensive reading are realistic, sometimes the texts might have to adapt to the teaching goals and are often created by textbook writers.

1.2. Brief introduction to Extensive Reading

IR is sometimes compared with extensive reading (ER). ER generally involves quantities of reading and longer materials. The learners are supposed to read them and be exposed to an authentic environment. Compared with IR, this approach is more likely a student-centered approach and students could decide which part, which book and what time they could read. It

has been argued that ER could probably translate the responsibility and center from teacher to students and students can decide their own reading.

What's more, the priority of ER is fluency rather than accuracy, which means students, do not have to read every word but they need to understand the overall meaning of it. Since the students have different choices, they might be able to find out the materials they feel interested to read and they could stop reading whenever they think the materials are not interesting or too difficult to read. Unlike IR, ER often relates to pleasure reading and developing a life-long reading habit. According to Bamford, ER could be used in any kind of second language learning classroom regard of their age, their language level under the condition that the students have basic knowledge of a foreign language.

1.3. The Relationship between IR and ER

Although IR and ER are both reading approaches, they just emphasize different aspects of reading. For IR, the focus of reading is on learning vocabulary and grammar from the short text while the IR is likely to focus on the overall meaning of longer material. What's more, the biggest difference between IR and ER maybe is that they have different aims. IR tries to use reading to learn. When students are ready to learn, they could only read the language itself and the text is usually created. Take the past tense for an instant, the passage would give a lot of tense sentences to make students understand what the tense is and how to use it.

However, ER tries to make students "learn to read" (Ro, 2013). The students may not have the consciousness to know what they are learning. When reading a longer material, many reading skills could be used. Take a storybook, for example, ER aims to build up speed-reading, and students could not only improve their reading skills but also expose to the L2 language environment.

Overall, both ER and IR are important and necessary. And it is undeniable that both approaches benefit reading skills and reading comprehension. Paran (2003) and Hill (1997) have argued that both extensive and intensive reading is necessary and interwoven together and both types of reading could be beneficial in university.

2. What are the Reading Comprehension Skills

2.1. Reading Comprehension Skills

Reading comprehension skills are the ways that could help learners to gain much better reading experiences. Summarizing is one way to conclude the main idea from the reading materials. The learners need to understand the meaning of the text and use their own words to repeat the idea. Sequencing skills are also helpful for reading comprehension. Learners need to find out the relationship between different paragraphs and understand the reasons and the results in the text.

According to Kembo, the term "inferencing" is widely used in the reading and implies the process of filling the gap (Kembo, 2010). It has been argued that interfering skills are to use two or more pieces of message to understand the third piece of the message. It should be noted that the third pieces of information are usually implicit. Take "she" for example, an inference is related to the information about her, a female has been mentioned in the text before. Also, inferencing skills could need the learner's background message to figure out the implicit information in the text (Kispal, 2008). By relying on the reader's own background knowledge, they could understand a subtle implicit message. Inferencing skills are important for reading comprehension, and it also used in other study approaches.

Comparing and contrasting skills need learners to compare the similarities and differences in one text. What's more, contrasting is more like application in the real world.

Problem-solving skills are including three main steps in solving a problem, that is to define what is the problem and then to generate different alternatives and the final step is finding solutions (Beecroft, Duffy, Moran, 2003).

The problem-solving skill could not only require learners to find out the problem by themselves but could ask learners to find out the answer in the text for excising questions as well. When learners read the text and try to understand the text, they might raise some questions from the text. Maybe they could discuss it with others and find out the answer by themselves.

2.2. Reading Comprehension Skills and Reading Comprehensive Strategies

Reading comprehensive strategies are also called Reading comprehensive instructions which means plans or steps to achieve reading comprehension. It is noticeable that reading strategies and reading skills are different. Just as mentioned before, reading comprehension skills are more like a large of techniques that need learners to study to make good comprehension in reading while the strategies are the steps that to achieve reading goals. Because both skills and strategies have the same goal, some writer just mixes these two words as to how to make good comprehension in reading. Although they are different, they have a connection as well.

Reading comprehension skills could be seen as an individual whose ability can comprehend text. One of the abilities is to make inferences as we mentioned in 2.1 before. However, comprehension strategies are sets of steps that readers use to get the meaning from the text. One of the most noticeable advantages of reading comprehension strategies is that these instructions help learners to become more purposeful, in addition, some learners could even be in good control of their reading comprehension. Reading is a whole process and reading strategies are the steps to achieve reading skills that could help readers to get a good understanding of a book.

3. Using Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading to Strengthen Reading Comprehensive Skills

3.1. The Benefits of Intensive Reading and How to Strengthen

Intensive reading is possibly the fastest way to build vocabulary. When students read a short, relatively difficult passage, they could probably learn more words. However, Yue has mentioned that because of the short text, the words students could learn are limited. Even though they have been learning everything in the text, the knowledge is not enough. And this could restrict the ability of students how to understand and how to use language (Yue, 2005).

Reading difficult material forces a learner to use their brains and critical thinking to choose a different strategy or learn different strategies to deal with the text as well. And in this way maybe they can have a relatively quick and comfortable reading. Also, the whole class has to read the same materials and different students have different levels, thus, it is too difficult for some of the students and too easy for the small part of students to read.

According to the characteristics and advantages of intensive reading, the author uses intensive reading to improve students' reading comprehension skills in college English classes. The usual method is to read key paragraphs multiple times, with each reading goal focusing more and more on a specific problem. After reading, students should be asked questions from easy to difficult, such as the details, the structure of the article, and the text type. And students are asked to have critical thinking based on the article. At the same time, the mind map is used to sort out the logical structure of the article. After one semester, first year students' vocabulary level and language input have been improved.

3.2. The Benefits of Extensive Reading and How to Strengthen

When learners are starting to read extensively, they read easily and enjoy the books. This could speed up their fluency and they do not need a dictionary. Grabe in 1991 has discussed some of the advantages of extensive reading. He suggests that when learners have read a whole book or a longer story, a long and silent period could “build vocabulary and structural awareness” (Grabe, 1991, p396). And it could enhance a lot of background knowledge to improve comprehension skills. What’s more, it could promote confidence and motivation of reading.

ER also could increase the knowledge of the world, which is quite good for the building of inferencing skills. It will give readers a great reading experience and provide a kind of pleasure so that learners could have a more positive attitude towards reading. Moreover, once the interest has been improved, they might have more possibility of developing a good reading habit.

Extensive reading is used in the pre-class and after-class, take College English Book 2 Unit 7 Culture, for example, students will assess various materials talking about a different culture in a different country. ER could help students to increase world knowledge and students have more initiative to choose the materials they are interested in. At the same time, extensive reading helps students to read more quickly, and to a certain extent, solves the problem that students don’t have enough reading time for the exam.

4. Conclusion

4.1. How to Balance Intensive and Extensive Reading in Teaching

IR and ER are interwoven together and they cannot be separated. The benefits of IR like to build vocabulary quickly, using their brains and critical thinking to choose different strategies, and learning different strategies to deal with the text. IR, on the one hand, could encourage slow reading and could increase students' dependency on teachers and dictionaries. These could be a lot of help for reading comprehension skills like inferencing and solving the problems.

ER, on the other hand, could hence the language learning in vocabulary and text structure. It could increase the knowledge of the world and is quite good for reading inferencing skills. Also, the longer material could help students to improve their summarizing skills. IR is very popular in the classroom because it could help students to learn the rules of grammar and build up vocabulary. Also, in the classroom, the classroom time is limited, and following the teacher’s instructions could be time-saving.

However, that does not mean ER is not useful in the Chinese Reading classroom. ER gives learners a good reading habit, which could become a lifelong habit. Because books have different aspects and after reading, students might have some parts that do not understand, thus, ER can help students to find out the questions and try to solve the questions.

4.2. The Limitations of IR and ER in Helping Reading

It is undeniable that IR and ER could strengthen reading comprehension skills, however, many other aspects can influence reading. The first one is the other three skills, listening, writing, and speaking. They could influence each other. Also, although IR has some benefits, it could have some limitations as well. Reading text is usually quite difficult; thus, learners have little chance to do with fluency. Because of the short text, learners have little chance to meet the target languages and the whole class could read one text at the same time, which is too easy for some learners and quite different for others.

For the ER, it is quite difficult for students to choose good and authentic material and they are hard to evaluate by themselves which right level of reading they are in. It also should notice that when students read extensively, they are in an enjoyable environment and the environment might be another factor to influence reading skills and understanding. Thus, some

further research will be conducted to find out some of the solutions and limitations of IR and ER in classroom teaching.

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