



## A Study on Strategies-Based Reading Instruction at College Level

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### Abstract

This thesis intends to change the traditional English foreign language reading teaching pattern which focuses mainly on structural analysis, a representative in many Chinese universities. It studies the practical value of strategies in reading interaction and tries to explore a more effective way of teaching reading to students at college level.

The aim of the study is to find out (a) if a strategies-based teaching approach to teaching reading will improve reading comprehension. (b) if the reading strategies used interact with the level of English proficiency of the students.

The study investigates, with a questionnaire at the beginning of the experiment, the perceptions of college students in China in reading English. The experiment was carried out during a course, which was conducted under a 16-week period semester. The statistical analysis of a survey test on the effect of a strategic reading instruction indicates that strategies-based reading instruction aids in reading comprehension. The questionnaire for the experiment group after the survey test proves an improvement in students' reading attitude and proficiency. The result is of some help in choosing teaching materials and methods for the improvement and efficiency of teaching reading.

**Key words:** Reading strategies; Reading comprehension; Language proficiency; Teaching Approach

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### INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has come to be the essence of reading, essential not only to academic learning in all subject areas but also to professional success and, indeed, to lifelong learning (ZHANG, 2006, p. 31-36).

As an important language input, reading has been the skill most emphasized in traditional foreign language teaching, and even today is the mainstay of foreign language teaching instruction in China. The College English-Teaching Syllabus in China (2005) points out that the final purpose of language teaching is to train the students to have the ability to communicate in both the written and oral forms of language. And the revised Syllabus (2010) puts it in the first place to develop the students' reading ability. As an essential way of getting information, reading is paid more and more attention to in Chinese universities' programs.

However, the present practice of English foreign language reading teaching in China has not been particularly successful, considering the time and energy devoted to it (ZHANG, 2001, p. 268-88). It is common in most college classrooms that teaching lays much more emphasis on the mastery of the knowledge of the language itself. From the very beginning, the students with the help of the teachers, devote themselves to grammatical points, lexical items, and sentence structures. The teachers tend to analyze the materials into pieces so that the learners

can know the structure of each part. Students learn the second language by translating from or into it, word by word, and verb tense by verb tense. They are good at analyzing sentences, but do not know when and where to say what with what person. Some perceive reading as support skills for grammar. They think that modeling and practicing correct structures are paramount. In reading class, students are taught at the micro-skill level of word recognition, regarding reading as a way of practicing grammar to approximate correctness. They do discrete point exercises, for example, filling in the blanks, and decoding materials in their textbook with controlled or guided writing. This certainly limits students' language abilities and understanding at a sentence level. It is the so-called phenomenon of "not seeing the wood for the trees" in the process of foreign language teaching.

In order to meet the reading needs of college students, educators are pressed to develop effective instructional means for teaching reading comprehension. The following is a tentative study the author conducted in an attempt to change the traditional English foreign language reading teaching pattern.

## 1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 1.1 Aims

The study is a survey of the perceptions of college students in China in reading English, the effect of a strategies-based reading instruction and the feedback of teaching reading strategies.

The aim of the study is to investigate the following questions at college level:

- (a) If a strategies-based teaching approach to teaching reading will improve reading comprehension.
- (b) If the reading strategies used interact with the level of English proficiency of the students.

### 1.2 Subjects

Two classes of freshmen in Shandong University of Finance and Economics, China, participated in the experiment. Class A was designated as the controlled group, and the traditional teaching pattern was used. Class B was the experimental group, and received strategy-based reading instruction. Both the two groups contained 50 participants. In the Controlled Group, there were 32

males and 18 females, and 30 were from rural areas. In the Experimental Group, 34 males and 16 females, and 28 were from rural areas. Most of them came from the same province.

The average scores in the Entrance English Examination of Class A and Class B were 81 and 80 respectively. Most of them were between the ages of eighteen to twenty. They all had studied English at least for six years in the middle school. Some of them began to study English at primary school. They had been taught by the same methods, which focused on grammar instruction, texts translation, and vocabulary memorization.

### 1.3 Procedure

The students were learning all the four language skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening - in one course. The experiment was carried out during the course, which was conducted under a 16-week semester. The total class hours were 64, with four hours per week, among which two hours were devoted to teaching reading. The two groups shared the same teacher.

On the first day of the semester a questionnaire was made to find out the main problems in reading. On the last day of the semester all the subjects had a reading test and the experimental group was asked to answer the attached questionnaire on the feedback of the study.

## 2. RESULTS

### 2.1 The Questionnaire at the Beginning of the Experiment

To assess the problem of what to teach when teaching reading, we must try to identify the obstacles that restrict reading or to put it more positively, what must a learner know, beyond word recognition in order to read a material?

To make this case clear, a questionnaire was carried out on the first day of the semester, asking the students in the two classes to give an answer to the items with "Yes" or "No". All the one hundred students took the survey honestly. The return rate was 100%. The content includes reading habits, reading strategies, cultural awareness, reading interest, and etc.

The results of the questionnaire on the first day of the experiment are shown in the following table.

**Table 1**  
**Primary Questionnaire Results for both Groups**

Content		Yes%	No%	No answer%
The greatest barriers in reading	Vocabulary	43	56	1
	Long and different sentences	29	68	3
	Structures	22	78	0
Reading habits	Check dictionary whenever meeting a new words	41	57	2
	Be used to reading silently, rereading, reading with one's finger pointing to each word, translating word by word or sentence by sentence	49	45	6

To be Continued

Continued

Content		Yes%	No%	No answer%
Reading strategies	Pay enough attention to topic sentences or graphics, can identify supporting details	38	55	7
	Guess unknown words according to word formations or contextual clues	32	65	3
	Use logical connectors, dashes, parenthesis to guess the contextual meaning	28	71	1
	Use inference, synonym, comparison or contrast, exemplification, classification, definition, etc. to understand meaning	18	74	8
	Skim, scan while reading	24	70	6
	Have reading purpose or interest	15	75	10
Often do some reading except the textbook and the books for exams		3	97	0
Understand all the words and know all the structures of the whole passage but can not answer the comprehension questions		32	65	2
Can summarize the main idea or can work out an outline of the reading passage		43	53	4

The result of the first item shows that 43% of the students feel they have limited vocabulary; 29% have difficulty with long sentences; and 22% can not deal with the structures they are not familiar with. So enlarging the students' vocabulary in an effective way is a very urgent task. Vocabulary is the essential element in reading, and on the contrary, reading can serve as a good way to enlarge vocabulary.

The second item in the questionnaire shows 41% of the students rely too much on dictionaries. They can not go on with a passage if there are any new words lying in their way. We may clearly see from the result how greatly the teaching method has influenced our reading habit. Near a half of the subjects are used to translating sentences into Chinese while reading in English, with their focus on words recognition and sentence structures. Our college English syllabus states that students at the elementary stage should read with a speed of 40, 50, 70 and 90 words per minute, with different levels. The bad reading habits certainly slow down their reading speed.

The third item in the questionnaire indicates most of the students do not read with the help of reading strategies. 38% of them notice the topic sentence or the graphics; about a third can guess the new words through word formation. But only 28% use logical connectors, parenthesis, etc., and 18% of the subjects use reference, comparison, classification, and other reading skills to help understand contextual meaning. Only about a quarter know skimming or scanning.

As for reading purpose and interest, only 15% of the students state they have a purpose or interest in their reading. Reading is more interesting and text information is understood and recalled better when reading is purpose driven. Creating purpose in the classroom reading situation will enhance reader's interest and performance.

After-class reading is an important means to improve reading ability. It is almost pleasure reading. Chang argues that "pleasure reading is an important source of comprehensible input for acquisition" (Nation, 2009, p. 123-124). Unfortunately, only 3% of the subjects do this.

Under the great pressure of exams, they have no time to do the things which, they think, have not direct relation to their exams, or they have not formed the habit of after-class reading.

The last two items in the questionnaire have something to do with the students' communicative competence. 32% of the subjects do not think they can answer the comprehension questions while knowing all the words and the structures. More than a half can not work out a proper summary or outline of the passage they read. Our textbooks are stuffed with lists of language structures and lexical items which the teacher is to present, drill, and exploit. Classroom procedures focus on the teaching of structures and vocabulary. But knowing the language itself is not sufficient.

## 2.2 The Reading Test at the End of the Experiment

In order to get a more reliable result, the study provided a reading test as a survey, which was made on the last day of the semester. It contained four articles with questions on comprehension and vocabulary in context. Dictionaries were forbidden. The students were encouraged to guess vocabulary meaning by grammar cues and context.

The selected articles taken from the *college English Test Band Four* in China included comprehension check sections and vocabulary in context tests. They were questions about the messages of the articles, and the words' definitions according to the context. The students needed to locate the key concepts of the article and guess the meaning from the content of unknown words they encountered. There were about 300 words in each article, and the new words, according to present High School English Syllabus in China, were no more than 5% for the college freshmen. All the four articles, together with the comprehension questions, were expected to be finished within fifty minutes.

The students of both groups finished the reading test within the anticipated period of time. The return rate was 100%.

**Table 2**  
**Scores Variations of the Two Groups**

Group	Max	Min	Total	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mode
Controlled	92	18	3440	68.8	14.63	69	70
Experimental	95	29	3554	71.08	13.34	72	71
Variation	3	11	114	2.28	1.29	3	1

By contrast, from the statistic analysis, we can easily see the score variation of the two groups. The Experimental Group, get 114 scores higher for the total and 2.28 for the average than the Control Group, 3 higher for the maximum and eleven higher for the minimum. For the median and mode, the Experimental Group is 3 scores and 1 score ahead of the Control Group, respectively. The Experimental Group displays a significant improvement of 1.29 standard deviation.

### 2.3 The Questionnaire for the Experiment Group After the Test

There was a questionnaire attached to the test for the experimental students to answer. The questionnaire contained ten questions regarding the new teaching

approach. Questions included the students' feedback toward the reading strategies used in their class. The purpose of the questionnaire was

- (a) To identify if the students like the techniques used in the reading course .
- (b) To identify if the strategies help them in reading English articles .

It solicits students' attitude regarding the efficacy of teaching strategies in the reading class.

The students were asked to give an answer to the items with "Yes" or "No".

The return rate was 100% and the results of the questionnaire on the last day of the experiment are shown in the following table.

**Table 3**  
**Final Questionnaire Results for the Experimental Group**

Questions	Yes%	No%	No answer%
1. Do you feel the reading strategies learned in the course useful ?	86	12	2
2. Do you feel the practice in class interesting?	54	39	7
3. Do you feel the classroom activities helpful to your reading?	79	17	4
4. Are you comfortable with guessing the meaning of unknown words?	55	40	5
5. Do you rely less on the dictionary now?	57	37	6
6.Can you read faster and more accurately now?	74	22	4
7. Do you find any improvement in your reading ability?	73	20	7
8. Do you feel confident in continuing your reading in English?	68	29	3
9.Would you like to be taught by the same method next semester?	80	19	1

For the tenth question, "Now about how much time do you spend in reading after class each day?" 66% of the subjects spend more than 60 minutes in reading after class, 31% more than 30 minutes and 3% less than that.

Eighty-six percent of the subjects give positive feedback to the first question. It shows that a majority of students feel the reading strategies, such as finding the topic sentence, supporting details, word guessing, skimming and scanning, using logical connectors and inference, oral report, summary and so on are useful for their future English reading.

With the second and third questions, seventy-nine percent of the participants feel the classroom activities useful. And fifty-four percent of the students feel the

practices in the CLT reading classroom interesting. This result shows a demand from the students for more interesting classroom activities to practice the useful reading strategies.

The fourth and the fifth questions are on the reliance on the dictionary. Fifty-five percent of the subjects feel comfortable with the strategy of guessing the meaning of the unknown words and fifty-seven feel they rely less on the dictionary. This shows that although the strategies can save their time, it is difficult for the students to break the old habit which they are trained so well.

The reading ability is in proportion to reading speed. So as to Question six and Question seven, almost the same percent (73% and 74%) of the participants see

improvement both in the reading speed and reading ability. This shows that the teaching techniques in reading classroom can work.

About the seventh question, sixty-eight percent of the subjects feel confident in reading in English. They will not fear to read in English as they had felt before this course. This indicates a change in attitude towards reading.

When asked the ninth question, eighty percent of the subjects express their hope that they would like to be taught by the same method next semester. This proves a success of the course.

The tenth question shows that much more of the participants now not only spend time in reading their texts and materials for examinations but also they would spend some time in reading the materials they are interested in.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Williams (1999) states that the new cultures in which English has been or is in the process of being nativised have their own necessities for politeness, apology, persuasive strategies, and so on. Consequently, there are many norms of speaking. Reading teachers must not only be aware of cultural and socio-linguistic differences underlying the communicative behavior of native and non-native users of English, but also transmit such awareness to their students. The reader can be made aware of the values and cultural norms of a specific community through studying illustrations of speech acts in literary texts. Raising students' awareness of the cultural differences helps to improve their communicative competence.

We must realize that reading is a very complicated process. Windowson (1998) sounded the caution that reading comprehension is a process and testing is a result or product; it is difficult to research one activity and predict the success rate of the activity. This study is a preliminary one whose only aim is to examine if English reading comprehension improves using reading strategies on college students from similar background in China-similar in their previous manner of learning English. The present finding shows that students at college level benefit from strategic reading instruction. They need to recognize more fully that developing and applying reading strategies could improve English reading comprehension and proficiency. But we must interpret these results in light of the population under study and the experimental conditions. There are many factors that make the results considerably more tentative.

### CONCLUSION

Cultures not only speak in different ways but think differently. In studying a foreign language, one is undoubtedly presented with a different way of organizing thoughts.

Reading is an active skill, which constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions. The teacher should take this into consideration when teaching reading. It is possible, for instance, to develop the students' powers of inference through systematic practice, or introduce questions which encourage students to anticipate the content of a text from its title and illustrations or the end of a story from the preceding paragraphs. The ability of identifying cohesive devices and discourse markers should be well trained and emphasized.

Foreign language reading instruction is moving increasingly from teaching text to teaching readers. Readers are taught strategies for understanding such elements as content, textual features, rhetorical elements and cultural background. "Strategy - building" emphasizes skills for text comprehension, which makes reading more efficient. For many learners the formats have remained implicit and reading strategies make these formats explicit.

The strategies-based reading instruction has not only exerted positive influence but also made a positive change in attitudes in terms of reading in English. The significance of the study is that teaching reading strategies can work in helping college students improve their reading in both proficiency and attitude.

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