A Study on Senior High School Students' English Reading Barriers and Strategies

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Referring to the questionnaire surveys and literature materials, this paper tries to discuss the causes of high school students' English reading barriers and its possible strategies to improve their English reading ability. This paper used a questionnaire survey to collect data with 188 grade one high school students as research subject. The result shows English reading barriers are mainly divided into two parts, language factors and non-language factors. Language factors include vocabulary barriers, grammar barriers, discourse barriers and culture background barriers. Non-language factors mainly include psychological factors, reading habits, reading interest and reading strategies. It is suggested that joint efforts from teachers and students are needed to solve the reading barriers. Teachers should help students increase vocabulary accumulation, strengthen grammar knowledge, develop their discourse comprehension skills and teach culture knowledge in class. Students need to overcome psychological factors, develop good reading habits, do a series of trainings on reading, give immediate feedbacks and sum up reading experiences.

Keywords: high school students, English reading, reading barriers, reading strategies

Introduction

Reading skill always plays an important role in English learning compared with listening, speaking and writing skills for Chinese students. The cultivation of reading ability can not only improve reading skills but also have positive effect on improving writing and speaking ability. Nowadays, English reading class has been the top priority in most Chinese senior high schools.

"The senior high school curriculum standard (experiment version 2003)" defines reading skills as important parts of language competence. As an important way of language input, reading has great significance in language learning. "The senior high school curriculum standard (experiment)" describes the goal of reading as follows:

(1) Students can acquire and process information from the general articles;

(2) Students can understand the main idea and the author's intent;

(3) Students have the ability to overcome the difficulties and new words barriers from context and understand the textual meaning;

(4) Students can reason through the clues in the article;

(5) Students can get the information and resources through the Internet;

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(6) Students can read high school English newspapers and magazines;

(7) Extracurricular reading should be accumulated to more than 230,000 words.

Although schools and teachers are making active effort to improve students' reading abilities, the current situation is not optimistic (Chen, 2013). The reasons are various, such as bad reading habits and traditional lecture method of teaching-expository method. It also includes language factors like limited vocabulary, weak grammar knowledge and weak discourse comprehension and so on. Time goes by, it would become harder and harder to improve students' reading ability. What's more, it would discourage English learners' interests and confidence. This paper mainly talks about why students have reading barriers and try to raise some solutions to deal with those problems.

Theoretical Background

Definition of English Reading Barriers

"Reading is a complex intellective ability from the written stuff. It is a process to earn knowledge from textbook" (Hu & Wang, 1996, p. 78). Reading process is the readers using the knowledge to percept what they read. As for the reading barriers, it is the problems that the readers meet when they read.

Zhuang (2010) supposed reading ability is mainly limited by the vocabulary. In addition, the readers are lack of the culture background knowledge of the target language. They usually have weak logic inference ability. And they do not use the proper reading skills. All these make it hard to improve reading ability.

Harmer (2007) mentioned that reading comprehension is the background knowledge, generalization ability and processing strategy interact and reading barriers refer to the inability to combine these three aspects very well.

Here, different ideas of reading barriers can be seen from the above definitions. It is not hard to understand the connotation of reading disorder through their descriptions. In short, reading barriers are problems mainly produced by language knowledge, generalization ability and processing strategy.

Empirical Studies on English Reading Barriers

Wen (2002) pointed out reading is the main way to learn English for high school students. Also reading is the main way to obtain information, language knowledge and improve the ability of using language. Cultivating students with strong English reading ability is one of the main goals of English teaching in middle school.

Bo (2011) carried out a research on English reading barriers with 900 participants from high school in Changchun City. She concluded high school students' English reading barriers are mainly divided into two parts: the visual information barriers and non-visual information barriers. In order to overcome the visual information barriers, students need to expand vocabulary, strengthen grammar and so on. As for the non-visual barriers, students should read more books to know more about western culture and overcome the psychological problems.

Yang (2012) did a research about after-class English reading in Yantai No. 1 High School, No. 2 High School and No. 4 High School. It was found 79.9% students (N = 230) read English articles (except textbooks) less than 2 hours per week. It is far less than what they should read as the "The senior high school curriculum standard (experiment)" required.

Nevertheless, none of them have done the research on reading barriers in terms of language factors and non-language factors for Chinese high school students, so this paper will discuss the reasons for Chinese high school students' reading barriers and suggest some possible solutions.

Research Design

Research Questions

There are three research questions in this paper. They are:

(1) What reading barriers do high school students have?

(2) What are the causes of students' reading barriers?

(3) What are the possible strategies to solve students' reading barriers?

Research Participants

The research participants are 188 students from Yanbian No. 2 High School, which is one of the key high schools in Yanji City, Jilin Province. All participants are chosen from Grade One.

Research Instruments

A questionnaire was designed to collect data. The questionnaire was designed to contain two main parts in terms of language factors and non-language factors, which includes eight reading disorders that may be produced in English reading activities. They are vocabulary, grammar, discourse comprehension ability, culture background knowledge, psychological factors, reading habits, reading interests and reading strategies.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two hundred and four questionnaires were delivered to 4 classes of Yanbian No. 2 High School. Among them, 188 questionnaires were valid. SPSS 12.0 was used to collect and analyze the data.

Result and Discussion

According to the data of questionnaire survey, it is not difficult to see high school students have reading barriers in the process of English reading in terms of language factors and non-language factors.

Language Factors

The language factors are about language knowledge and language communication. It is seen as the main reason to cause high school students' reading barriers (Bo, 2011). Specifically, it can be divided into four parts: vocabulary barriers, grammar barriers, discourse barriers and culture background barriers.

Vocabulary barriers. Questions about vocabulary barriers are designed as follow, shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Vocabulary Barriers

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I feel difficult to understand the passage due to the vocabulary.	6 (3.2)	12 (6.4)	22 (11.7)	72 (38.3)	76 (40.4)
2	I feel reading barriers when there are lots of new words in a passage.	8 (4.3)	9 (4.8)	22 (11.7)	76 (40.4)	73 (38.8)
3	I can't understand articles accurately when there are words with similar spelling or meaning.	10 (5.3)	37 (19.7)	31 (16.5)	60 (31.9)	50 (26.6)
4	Although I can guess the meaning of the new words, there are still barriers on details.	5 (2.7)	9 (4.8)	37 (19.7)	84 (44.7)	53 (28.2)

Table 1 shows that 38.3% students (N = 72) agree and 40.4% students (N = 76) strongly agree reading efficiency, which is affected by vocabulary. It can be concluded vocabulary is a main factor in English reading.

31.9% students (N = 60) agree and 26.6% students (N = 50) strongly agree, they will confuse the spelling or similar meaning words so that they cannot understand articles accurately. For example, there are some

similar words like principal (校长) and principle (原则); purpose (目的) and propose (建议). These words are similar in spelling but have definitely different meanings. The students still do not know how to explain the words they know in different discourses.

Last, 44.7% students (N = 84) agree and 28.2% students (N = 53) strongly agree, they may guess the meaning when they meet new words, but it is still difficult for students to understand the details.

Grammar barriers. Questions about grammar barriers are designed as follow, shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Grammar Barriers

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
5	When facing with long sentences, I feel difficult to understand the structure.	10 (5.3)	32 (17.0)	43 (22.9)	67 (35.6)	36 (19.1)
6	I can't understand the sentences due to the subordination relations.	11 (5.9)	30 (16.0)	55 (29.3)	60 (40.4)	32 (38.8)
7	I can't understand articles due to the complexity of tense.	17 (9.0)	47 (25.0)	51 (27.1)	49 (26.1)	24 (12.8)

Table 2 shows that 54.8% students (N = 103) can't figure out the sentence structure and they feel difficult to understand the meaning.

48.9% students (N = 92) pointed out they can't understand the sentences due to the subordination relations. Sometimes, the paragraph was designed as long sentence. This adds difficulty to reading comprehension.

38.9% students (N = 73) said they are confused about the tenses so that they can't understand the whole article. There are some difficult grammar points such as subjunctive mood in 2015 college entrance examination (Jilin Province). The grammar brings difficulty in dealing with reading tasks.

Discourse barriers. Questions about discourse barriers are designed as follow, shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Discourse Barriers

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
8	I can't find the topic sentence of the article.	18 (9.6)	62 (33.0)	45 (23.9)	37 (19.7)	26 (13.8)
9	I can't find the main idea of the article.	18 (9.6)	65 (34.6)	51 (27.1)	32 (17.0)	22 (11.7)
10	I always forget the former information when reading to the end of the article.	25 (13.3)	63 (33.5)	46 (24.5)	32 (17.0)	22 (11.7)

Table 3 shows that 33.5% students (N = 63) claimed they couldn't find the topic sentence of the article. Only 42.2% students (N = 80) supposed they can find the topic sentence.

28.7% students (N = 54) said they couldn't find the main idea of the article, while 44.2% students (N = 83) think they can find the main idea of the article.

28.7% students (N = 54) proposed they always forget the former information when they almost finish reading the article, while 46.8% students (N = 83) disagree it.

Though discourse barriers are not as serious as vocabulary and grammar barriers, there are still about one third of students who have discourse comprehension barriers.

Culture background barriers. Questions about culture background barriers are designed as follow, shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Culture Background Barriers

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
11	I often do extra English reading training after finishing homework.	26 (13.8)	40 (21.3)	59 (31.4)	42 (22.3)	21 (11.2)
12	I don't understand the profound content of the article due to lacking of cultural background information.	8 (4.3)	27 (14.4)	40 (21.3)	77 (41.0)	36 (19.1)
13	I feel difficult to understand western idioms.	15 (8.0)	25 (13.3)	41 (21.8)	59 (31.4)	48 (21.5)

Table 4 shows that 33.5% students (N = 53) do extra reading after school, while 35.1% students (N = 66) do not.

60.1% students (N = 113) can't understand the profound content of the article due to lacking cultural background information. Some English words have no corresponding words in Chinese.

Table 4 also shows that 56.9% students (N = 107) said they would feel difficulty in reading western idioms since the symbol of some English words and expressions are quite different from those in Chinese.

Non-language Factors

According to Lei (2005), non-language factors also affect English reading, which mainly include psychological factors, reading habits, reading interests and reading strategies.

Psychological factors. Questions about psychological factors are designed as follow, shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Psychological Factors

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
14	I think English reading is very important.	11 (5.9)	4 (2.1)	18 (9.6)	53 (28.2)	102 (54.3)
15	I like reading English articles.	19 (10.1)	34 (18.1)	71 (37.8)	36 (19.1)	28 (14.9)
16	I feel hard to continue to read long and difficult passages.	18 (9.6)	18 (9.6)	47 (25.0)	55 (29.3)	50 (26.6)
17	I read carefully at the beginning, but it is hard to continue when I meet new words and difficult sentences.	21 (11.2)	36 (19.1)	40 (21.3)	56 (29.8)	35 (18.6)

Table 5 shows that 28.2% students (N = 53) agree and 54.3% students (N = 102) strongly agree English reading, which is very important. Only 8.0% students (N = 15) disagree with the idea.

34.0% students (N = 64) like reading English articles, while 19.2% students (N = 36) don't like reading English articles.

The data show when facing with long and difficult articles, 55.9% students (N = 105) said they don't want to contain to read.

48.4% students (N = 91) mentioned they read articles carefully at the right beginning. But with the increase of new words and complex sentences, they found it is hard to continue reading.

Reading habit factors. Questions about reading habit are designed as follow, shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Reading Habit Factors

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
18	I just translate the passages without using any strategies while reading.	21 (11.2)	48 (21.5)	49 (26.1)	40 (21.3)	30 (16.0)
19	I usually read aloud, point to text, look up new words in dictionary while reading.	25 (13.3)	48 (25.5)	44 (23.4)	42 (22.3)	29 (15.4)

Table 6 shows that 37.3% students (N = 70) did not use reading strategies while practicing reading. This is not a habit as there is much useless information.

37.7% students (N = 71) said they usually read aloud, point to text, look up new words in dictionary while reading. Those habits may greatly affect the reading speed.

Most students are not trained reading in unit time. And they can't use strategies such as skimming, scanning and catching the keywords. So it is not hard to explain why a number of students cannot finish the examination papers in a certain time.

Reading interest factors. Questions about reading interest are designed as follow, shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Reading Interest Factors

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
20	I feel encouraged when meeting familiar topics.	10 (5.3)	23 (12.2)	47 (25.0)	64 (34.0)	44 (23.4)
21	I am not interested in exposition.	18 (9.6)	37 (19.7)	53 (28.2)	43 (22.9)	37 (19.7)
22	I am not interested in argument.	21 (11.2)	42 (22.3)	49 (26.1)	40 (21.3)	36 (19.1)
23	I only read for tasks.	25 (13.3)	49 (26.1)	62 (33.0)	26 (13.8)	26 (13.8)

Table 7 shows that 57.4% students (N = 108) said they feel encouraged when they meet familiar topics and they agree they have interest in certain parts. On the contrary, 89.2% students (N = 148) claimed when they meet difficult articles with a large number of new words they would feel less interested.

Different article styles will also cause the difference to the students' reading interest. 42.6% students (N = 60) are not interested in exposition. 40.4% students (N = 76) are not interested in argument. 27.6% students (N = 52) only read for task.

Reading strategies factors. Questions about reading strategies are designed as follow, shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Reading Strategies Factors

No.	Questions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
24	I never think about what I should do before reading.	16 (8.5)	32 (17.0)	35 (18.6)	70 (37.2)	35 (18.6)
25	I am better at intensive reading than scanning.	13 (6.9)	38 (20.0)	52 (27.7)	59 (30.9)	27 (14.4)
26	I seldom forecast the following passage while reading.	15 (8.0)	37 (19.7)	45 (23.9)	56 (29.8)	35 (18.6)
27	I am not good at looking for the key words.	22 (11.7)	48 (25.5)	55 (29.3)	39 (20.7)	24 (12.8)
28	I am not good at looking for the main idea.	15 (8.0)	51 (27.1)	60 (31.9)	41 (21.8)	21 (11.2)
29	I rarely ask others even though I don't understand the article.	13 (6.9)	41 (21.8)	42 (22.3)	64 (34.0)	28 (14.9)
30	I rarely accumulate new words after reading.	17 (9.0)	32 (17.0)	48 (25.5)	59 (31.4)	32 (17.0)

Table 8 shows that 55.8% students (N = 105) agreed they never think about what they should force on pre-reading and while-reading.

45.2% students (N = 85) agreed they are better at reading word by word than skimming. High school students may be not trained how to do skimming before. But there is not enough time for them to read word by word in college entrance examination. They have to learn reading strategies to improve reading speed.

Predictive ability can help the students reading more efficiently. However, 48.4% students (N = 91) are not used to forecasting the following passage. Almost half of the students do not know how to predict the following passage. The bad reading habits will bring barriers in the process of learning.

Finding the key words is the most important task of reading. However, 33.5% students (N = 63) said they are not good at looking for the key words while reading.

32.9% students (N = 62) thought it is hard for them to find the relationship between paragraphs. Even the top students in high school are not good at pointing out the structure.

Feedback is a quite essential part of reading. However, 48.9% students (N = 92) supposed they rarely ask others when they don't understand the article.

As for the reflection of reading training, 48.4% students (N = 91) rarely accumulated new words after reading.

Almost half of the students (N = 85) have barriers in reading strategies. Some of them even don't know how to use strategies while reading. Translating costs so much time to read through the passages. However, overcoming reading strategies needs the joint efforts of teachers and students. It is discussed in the next part.

Strategies to Overcome English Reading Barriers

To Overcome Language Factors

To expand vocabulary. Expanding vocabulary is a basic way to improve reading ability. However, the quantity of vocabulary of high school students is very limited. In order to expand the vocabulary, students must know some vocabulary leaning strategies, such as memorize the words and expressions in curriculum, especially picking up the high frequency words in the passages; learn word-building principles and know the characteristics of the words; develop the ability to memorize various meanings of a certain word in different language context; trained to guess the meaning of the new words in the context.

To strengthen grammar. Overcoming grammar barriers needs teachers to train students with practices, such as simplifying the sentences, and picking up the trunk of the sentences in a limited time. Students should learn the complex sentences structure well like inversion sentence, emphatic sentence, ellipsis sentence, parenthetical sentence and so on (Han, 2014).

To strengthen discourse comprehension skills. Cultivating discourse ability must clear the conjunctive word in the article, such as: thus, therefore, as a result, so … that, the result is, the reason is, because, etc. Ordinal words should be paid much attention to such as first, second, third, to begin with, moreover, finally, etc.

Students need to know how to seize the main idea. The topic sentence is always designed for the first or the last sentence. Therefore, the teacher should teach the students how to find topic sentences and sum up the main idea. Students should pay much attention to practicing and using such kind of skill.

To learn background culture. The relationship between language skills and culture is inseparable. But culture is a very broad concept and needs long-term accumulation. The cultural barriers may be the most difficult factors of reading barriers.

Liu (1999) proposed reading comprehension is related to the knowledge of the students' personal experience and background knowledge. These two factors have impact on reading comprehension and speed.

Expanding the quantity of reading articles is a good way to know about western culture. During winter and summer vacation, students can do some extracurricular English reading. Teachers should organize activities in class such as sharing students' English reading achievements. In addition, teachers can permeate the words accumulation as well.

To Overcome Non-language Factors

To overcome psychological factors. Teachers should improve students' tolerance of fuzzy phenomena in English. It is not necessary to be anxious about the unknown paragraph. Students should be trained to know how to infer the unknown information according to the context.

Moreover, teachers need to build a relaxing class atmosphere without threatening. This relaxing atmosphere could help them do reading in a relaxing environment.

To get rid of bad reading habits. Teachers should train them to do the reading practice in a limited time, so that they don't have time to point at each word and read it. For example, passages can be put on the screen, with time controlling then students are required to sum up the passage (Lei, 2005).

Then, students should force themselves to develop good habits, such as using eyes instead of fingers. Teachers should correct students' bad reading habits immediately once they find the problems (Lei, 2005).

To develop English reading interests. Interests in English reading have great significance in cultivating reading ability. Xie (2008) put forward four ideas about how to raise reading interest: teachers should clarify the aim of reading, teachers can select the reading materials that are suitable for high school students, teachers can read the passages with students at the same time and teachers can set up English learning atmosphere.

Therefore, teachers should choose appropriately difficult passages and provide a variety of subjects so as to fully stimulate students' intrinsic motivation.

To overcome strategies barriers. Reading strategy training can improve reading scores mainly because it improves reading speed.

Chen (2007) described reading strategies as skimming, predicting, inferring, key word, context, word structure analyzing. It is suggested that students should use skimming skills so as to improve their reading speed. Then students learn to use clausal structure such as "although", "however", "even though", "so", "as" and "because". They can clear the relationship between words, sentences and paragraphs with the help of these words.

Other point is that students should read targeted passages that are suitable to them. Choosing moderately difficult or the college entrance exam passages will help them improve reading interest (Yan, 2014).

Conclusion

This paper carried out a questionnaire survey on No. 2 High School of Yanji about High School students to study their English reading barriers. The major findings can be concluded as follow:

First, there are two main factors affecting English reading, language factors and non-language factors. Language factors include vocabulary barriers, grammar barriers, discourse barriers, culture background barriers, etc. Non-language factors mainly include psychological factors, reading habits, reading interest, reading strategies, etc.

Second, this paper puts forward possible solutions to both language factors and non-language factors. Students should expand vocabulary, strengthen the grammar knowledge and discourse skills. As for the non-language factors, students should overcome the psychological defect, improve reading speed and overcome bad reading habits.

Third, it needs the joint efforts of teachers and students to improve the students' reading abilities. Teachers should not only stay in the traditional teaching methods on reading, on the contrary they should try other advanced teaching methods on reading to raise students' reading interest and improve their reading abilities. For students, they should cooperate actively with the teacher and do more extracurricular reading works. Also, it is very important to communicate with the teachers in time when there is a problem in reading.

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