Interactive Approaches in ESL Teaching and Its Application

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Traditionally, second language reading was considered as a simple passive decoding process. However, researchers began to study the issue from the psycholinguistic perspectives, and proposed the interactive approach to ESL reading. In this thesis, a brief review is made concerning the related theories. Some strategies are suggested to improve learners' ability in top-down and bottom-up models. Finally, it is pointed out that these two models interact in the reading process, and therefore the teaching methods should also be applied in good combination to improve reading.

Keywords: reading, interactive approach, text, decoding

Introduction

Reading occupies a pivotal role in EFL teaching, so linguists and educators engaged in foreign language teaching have never stopped researching and exploring the approaches of teaching reading. Before the 1960s, reading was often regarded as a passive decoding process. Later, linguists represented by Goodman used psycholinguistic theories to analyze the reading process, which had great significance and influence on EFL research and teaching, and the interactive model of reading was gradually accepted in the aftermath of that.

Theoretical Review of the Second Language Reading Model

Goodman describes the reading process as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1973, p. 164), which means that readers go through a process of recognition-prediction-confirmation-correction. In this process, efficient readers do not have to use all the clues provided in the reading material, and the more correct their predictions, the less textual information they need. Goodman (1979) pointed out that in the reading process, the reader selects only enough from the textual information provided to establish a linguistic framework for decoding, rather than a precise comprehension process.

On this basis, Coady (1975) proposed a model of reading in which the background knowledge of second language readers interacts with comprehension and reading strategies. He argued that background knowledge plays an important role in the reading process and can even compensate for some of the reader's deficits in syntactic knowledge, a factor often neglected in second language reading. In fact, the reader's background knowledge plays a much larger role than the content provided by the reading text, because in the reading process the reader does not simply acquire information from the text, but mobilizes a large amount of existing information, ideas, attitudes, and even beliefs, which, together with linguistic prediction skills, determine the reading process. The effective interplay of linguistic knowledge and background knowledge determines jointly the reading skills.

The role of background knowledge in language comprehension is known as schema theory, which assumes

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that reading a text does not have any meaning in itself, but only provides a direction for the reader, who must extract and construct meaning from his or her previously acquired knowledge (i.e., background knowledge). According to schema theory, the process of comprehension is the fusion of the input textual information with the reader's existing schema to produce understanding. This results in two modes of information processing, namely, the bottom-up model and the top-down model. The bottom-up model of reading refers to the process by which the reader constructs the meaning of a discourse by recognizing linguistic units, such as letters, words, phrases, and sentences on a step-by-step basis. This model emphasizes the processing of textual material as input information from low to high levels, and is therefore called "a material-driven process". Top-down reading, on the other hand, is a process of predicting input information based on higher-level schema and searching for relevant information in existing schema (e.g., background knowledge), and is therefore also called "concept-driven".

However, both the bottom-up and top-down models view the reading process as a unidirectional linear sequence, overemphasizing the underlying textual material or overemphasizing higher-level schematic information, and thus have their own limitations in explaining the reading process. The interactive reading model was later proposed by Rumelhart (1977), McClelland and Rumelhart (1981), and Lesgold and Perfetti (1981). This model assumes that reading is neither a difficult word-by-word decoding nor a prediction of information based on existing schema. That is to say, it is not a mere bottom-up or top-down process, but an interactive process in which both contribute to the comprehension of the input textual information. On this view, a good reader is good at both decoding and text comprehension, and as reading skills improve, his or her decoding skills also naturally grow (Eskey, 1989). The reading interaction model emphasizes the two-way nature of the reading process and interaction between the various levels of the reading process, and this theory is widely accepted.

Developing Students' Top-Down Reading Skills

The first step is to help students build background knowledge. Research on schema theory suggests that the more background knowledge a reader has about the information in a reading text, the more thorough his or her understanding of the text's information will be. So, many of the problems that students have in reading are caused by a lack of background knowledge. For example, for second language reading, certain schema does not exist because the schema exists only in a particular culture and not in the reader's home culture. During the reading process, the required cultural background knowledge interacts with the reader's existing cultural knowledge, which is why it is easier for readers to understand content based on their own culture when reading texts of comparable linguistic and syntactic difficulty. Thus, in teaching, some pre-activities can be conducted before reading to introduce relevant background knowledge, which can take various forms, such as lectures, slides, pictures, class discussions, or even field trips. Students can also be asked to read relevant materials in advance to master key words. An appropriate combination of different forms of activities will produce better results. It is extremely important for students with limited second language skills to become familiar with key words or concepts before reading, especially when their vocabulary limitations prevent them from understanding the meaning of the text they are reading.

Another effective approach is to change the traditional approach of asking reading comprehension questions after reading to asking relevant questions before reading the text, so that students read with the questions in mind, which gives students the motivation to read, i.e., to find the correct information in the reading text to answer the

questions. In this way, the reader can also make predictions about the content of the reading text based on the questions. Pre-reading questions, such as these prompt students to select and activate existing schemata and build new background knowledge, and Stevens (1982) emphasized the importance for teachers to teach both reading skills and relevant background knowledge.

In addition to background knowledge, the content and quantity of reading also affect students' reading efficiency and the development of reading skills, and Krashen (1982) noted that EFL learners should read texts on topics that are interesting and relevant. Even in first language reading, it is difficult to read if the content of the text is both boring and unfamiliar, and it is difficult for students to gain knowledge and improve their reading skills if the same text is read in second language reading. Therefore, the choice of reading text must be as interesting as possible to students, the following two methods are introduced for reference.

1. Reading lab method: Students are given a wide range of reading texts to choose from and ask them to complete as many as possible. This method takes care of students' interests, reading levels, and potential levels of progress, takes full account of individual differences, allows them to make longitudinal comparisons of progress in reading skills, accumulates background knowledge, and creates a personal reading profile. However, there are certain problems with this approach. Since students can read according to their own interests, it inevitably results in a scattering of reading content, making it difficult to find the textual content that every student has read, and therefore group discussion-based activities would be hard to conduct. In addition, for those students who have not developed good reading habits in their first language reading and who lack self-motivation, this way of reading emphasizing individuality has some limitations, so the following approach could be an alternative.

2. Content-centered reading: This method also emphasizes interesting reading topics and reading quantities. The difference, however, is that students are provided with a common reading theme and a large number of related reading texts at a time, and students can read materials of different depths depending on their own situation. The reading topics are flexible, such as English for readers in a particular discipline or profession (ESP), English literature topics for international students, topics in psychology or computers, etc. Since students share the same reading theme, activities following the reading can take many forms: discussions, lectures, presentations, writing essays, etc. Students' motivation to read is stimulated in the process and it is a process of using their overall second language skills, using and improving all aspects of listening, reading, and writing. Reading is no longer a fragmented activity, but a part of second language learning. Of course, there is a downside to this approach, and that is the lack of personal choice. It is almost impossible to find a reading topic that interests every student. So, teachers can combine the two approaches in an organic way and allocate reading time scientifically to individual or thematic reading.

Developing Students' Bottom-Up Reading Skills

Although current researchers have focused more on top-down reading models, from viewing reading as mere decoding to now seeing the reading process as an active process of predicting textual information, some researchers also point out that effective second language reading requires both top-down reading strategies and bottom-up reading approaches. After all, decoding at the linguistic level is the foundation of reading. Two aspects of analysis will be made in the following part: grammar and vocabulary and recognition.

Developing Grammar and Vocabulary Skills

Knowledge of grammar and vocabulary plays a key role in both first and second language reading, and many

researchers have conducted studies and reached similar conclusions. For example, Mackay (1970) pointed out that for second-language readers, recognition of English conjunctions is crucial to accessing textual information. Therefore, teachers can give students practice about linking words in English, such as conjunctions, substitutions, and synonyms, to help them understand how the parts of textual information are organically bound together by these linking devices. Vocabulary is a key component for improving reading decoding skills. In contrast to the traditional view, researchers now believe that the meaning of a word is not fixed, but has different meanings around a theme that interact with context and background knowledge in the text. For example:

> The punter kicked the ball.
> The baby kicked the ball.
> The golfer kicked the ball. (Anderson, 1977, p. 368)

The three sentences above have different meanings of the same word "ball" because of their different actors. The same verb "kick" also has different meanings. However, if the reader does not have the relevant background knowledge, his understanding of the word "kick" and the whole sentence will be affected. Therefore, teaching students new vocabulary also means imparting new concepts and knowledge, forming part of the students' schema.

Improving Recognition Skills

In the reading process, knowing the meaning of each word does not guarantee that students will read quickly and accurately; inability to identify quickly or misidentifying can interfere with the entire reading process. Too many interruptions can weaken comprehension of the text. Even if the reader is a strong top-down reader, it does not help. Recognition skills include both awareness and comprehension.

To improve recognition, teachers can use rapid recognition exercises, i.e., to improve students' ability to quickly and accurately identify language symbols, such as letter combinations that conform to pronunciation and spelling rules, homophones, words with the same vowel and different consonants, synonyms and antonyms, up to the identification of phrases. This can be done selectively according to students' language proficiency. At the same time, attention should be paid to develop students' recognition speed and eliminate the wrong method of reading word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence. In general, the reading speed should be around 200 words per minute. A common way to practice this is fast reading. However, the practice time should be controlled; a few minutes per session are appropriate. The purpose of this exercise is threefold: to improve recognition sensitivity, to break down the mental barriers to fast reading, and to identify existing problems. Another common problem for students in reading is vocabulary, and they tend to stop to look up words in the dictionary, thus interrupting the normal reading process. Teachers should guide students to guess the meaning of words and analyze them according to semantic and syntactic clues, commonly practiced in the form of completion exercises.

Conclusion

In summary, although both bottom-up and top-down models of reading are important, both have their limitations when viewed individually; the bottom-up model ignores the active role of the reader in the reading process, and the top-down model ignores the role of lower-level recognition skills, such as grammar and vocabulary in reading. A successful second language reading process is actually an organic and interactive combination of these two. Therefore, the interactive model of reading is widely used in EFL teaching, supplemented by a variety of teaching activities to develop and improve students' reading skills.

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