

Teaching Reading English Comprehension: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract: This paper aims to find out the difficulties encountering teachers in teaching Reading comprehension and give some suggested solutions to improve the reality of teaching reading. As a teacher of English, I realize that leaning and teaching Reading skill are extremely dull, especially low interests of both teachers and students, lack of reading strategies, students' low proficiency, inappropriate reading teaching methods, the differences between teachers' favors and students' interests towards reading activities and so on. Therefore, I decided to study some challenges facing Vietnamese students as well as teachers in learning and teaching Reading skill. This paper consists of a number of some common difficulties that cause problems for both Vietnamese teachers and learners. The prominent obstacles included students' low motivation and limited vocabulary, mixed ability, too difficult reading tasks. Thus, the paper is a useful reference resource to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning reading skills for major students at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University.

Key words: Reading comprehension, Difficulties, Challenges, Learners, English

Tóm tắt: Tôi viết bài này nhằm mục đích tìm ra những khó khăn mà giáo viên gặp phải trong việc dạy kỹ năng Đọc hiểu, đồng thời đưa ra những giải pháp nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả giảng dạy kỹ năng Đọc hiểu tiếng Anh. Là một giáo viên tiếng Anh, tôi nhận thấy rằng việc dạy và học môn Đọc thực sự đang là một bất cập, đặc biệt là cả giáo viên và sinh viên thiếu đi sự hứng thú, việc thiếu kỹ năng và chiến lược giảng dạy, hay việc áp dụng những phương pháp không thích hợp cũng như năng lực và trình độ của sinh viên còn khá hạn chế... Vì vậy, tôi đã nghiên cứu một số thách thức mà học viên cũng như giáo viên Việt Nam thường phải đối mặt khi dạy và học kỹ năng này. Những khó khăn này bao gồm các vấn đề đến từ cả giáo viên và sinh viên nhưng tiêu biểu là việc người học thiếu hứng thú, thiếu vốn từ hay trình độ sinh viên không đồng đều hay những hoạt động liên quan đến kỹ năng này quá khó để sinh viên có thể thực hành. Bài viết này là một nguồn tham khảo hữu ích để tăng cường tính hiệu quả trong việc dạy và học kỹ năng đọc hiểu tiếng Anh cho sinh viên chuyên ngữ trường Đại học Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu.

Từ khóa: Kỹ năng đọc, học viên, Tiếng Anh, khó khăn và những thách thức

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I. Introduction

Gaining communicative competence is the last main goal of teaching and learning English. However, this aim is not always achieved. There is a fact that when Vietnamese students are required to read in English, they seem to get stuck or find it difficult to deal with reading tasks. Normally, when the poor reading competence is reported, students tend to be blamed for having poor ability or making insufficient effort. Nevertheless, some other factors should be taken in consideration. The most important reasons are too many new words in the text and lack of background knowledge. Most students are bored and not very interested in sitting for hours to read long texts and do exercises as well. In addition, teachers also find it difficult to teach reading skill. They do not know how to improve the motivation of students in reading English.

A number of methods and techniques have been implemented in order to improve the quality of teaching reading skill. However, the Communicative Approach to language teaching as well as the use of Communicative Activities (CAs) has shown its enormous advantages in teaching and learning.

Being a teacher of English at Ba Ria – Vung Tau University, the author finds it necessary to make an investigation of the reality of teaching reading skill. Besides, the reasons that lead to difficulties in reading teaching will be figured out and discussed as well as to seek for an effective way to enhance the speaking teaching process.

Personally, the researcher hopes the study could be useful source for teacher in their teaching process.

I. THE NATURE OF TEACHING READING IN EFL

1.1. Definitions of Reading

As a receptive skill reading is clearly one of the most important skills which normally initiates in teaching process and it cannot separate from the other skills. Williams (1984) as cited in McDonough and Shaw [28:102] usefully classifies reading into (a) getting general information from the text; (b) getting specific information from a text; and (c) for pleasure or for interest. In fact, reading is a process that readers access to decode the information. Nunan [35:68] stated that reading is a fluent process of readers combining information from a text and their own background to build meaning. Obviously Nunan emphasizes the goal of reading is comprehension.

It cannot be denied that reading is a complex skill which requires its readers to integrate the background knowledge to decode the information from the text and build meaning, interaction, and communication.

1.2. Kinds of Reading

Like many other researchers and methodologists, Grellet [15], Harmer [17] have the same point of view on categorizing reading into four main ways: skimming, scanning, extensive reading and intensive reading. According to Grellet [15:4], skimming is quickly running one's eyes over a text to get the gist of it. On the contrary, he defines scanning as "quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information." Grellet describes extensive reading as reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding. To intensive reading, he defines as reading shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more accuracy activity involving reading for detail.

In reality, the reading purposes constantly vary and therefore, when devising exercises, the teacher should vary the questions and tasks or activities according to the type of text studied and the aim of reading it (Grellet, [15:4]).

1.3. Principles for Teaching Reading

Harmer [17:101] suggested six reading principles as follows:

Principle 1: Encourage students to read as often and as much as possible.

The more students read, the better everything we do should encourage them to read extensively.

Principle 2: Students need to be engaged with what they are reading.

Outside the normal lesson time, when students are reading extensively, they should be involved in joyful reading. That is, we should try to help them get as much pleasure from it as possible. But during lessons, too, we will do our best to ensure that they are engaged with the topic of a reading text and the activities they are asked to do while dealing with it.

Principle 3: Encourage students to respond to the content of a text (and explore their feelings about it), not just concentrate on its construction.

It is important for students to study reading texts in class in order to find out such things as the way the language is used, the number of paragraphs they contain and how many times they use relative clauses. But the meaning, the message of the text, is just as important as this. As a result, we must give students a chance to respond to that message in some way. It is especially important that they should be allowed to show their feelings about the topic-thus provoking personal engagement with it and the language.

Principle 4: Prediction is a major factor in reading.

Normally before we start to read the text, our brain will start predicting what we are going to read if have a look at the headline, the title and so on. Therefore, In class, teachers should give students "hints" so that they have a chance to predict what is coming. This may help students succeed in reading.

Principle 5: Match the task to the topic when using intensive reading texts.

Once a decision has been taken about what reading text the students are going to read, we need to choose good reading tasks-the right kind of questions, appropriate activities before, during and after reading, and useful study exploitation.

Principle 6: Good teachers exploit reading texts to the full.

Any reading text is full of sentences, words, ideas, descriptions, etc. it does not make sense, in class, just to get students to read it and then drop it and move on to something else. Good teachers integrate the reading text into interesting lesson sequences, using the topic for discussion and further tasks, using the language for study and then activation and using a range of activities to bring the text to the life.

1.4. Teaching Reading in a Communicative Way

In order to teach reading in a communicative way, many researchers have expounded many ideas which require both teachers and students' efforts.

Harmer [17] described six reading principles through which EFL teachers need to facilitate, elicit and encourage students to deal with the reading text to build meaning and communication. To gain the objectives, teachers must organize various communicative activities such as predictions, guessing games, communication games and so on. Teachers need to create real reading and communicative situations in reading classrooms. Widdowson as cited in Nguyen Van Dinh [31:8] states that reading is no longer regarded as a "pure" activity of interpreting the reading passage for information but it is common these days to refer to reading as a communicative activity.

Reading is, of course, just as communicative as any other form of language use so teachers should establish direct communications among students to exploit students' interaction. A feature of real reading is that while we may read alone we communicate what we read to others constantly. Talking about what we have read is a rich source of classroom possibilities. (Howarth [20:1])

In addition, one of the ways to teach reading communicatively is the necessity of using comprehension questions. During the teaching process, teachers should use comprehension questions to ask and at times teachers use support questions to deal with students' mistakes. The teachers should also provide opportunities for students to take the initiative in asking questions (Cheng [9:56])

In terms of the CLT, according to Littlewood [26], Richards & Rodgers [42] and Prodromou [41], the language teacher could play many roles such as a facilitator, an organizer, a monitor, a friend, a counselor and a co-communicator and so on. More importantly, in a communicative reading classroom, the teacher should act as activity-organizer, a facilitator rather than a leader or an authority to hold various different communicative activities to help students learn interactively with interests.

In sum, to teach reading in a communicative approach, EFL teachers should organize a variety of communicative activities motivating students' learning, bring about opportunities to encourage students in learning reading communicatively, and especially, teachers need to pay much attention to their roles in teaching as well as creating real reading situations to promote students communicate in a real way.

II. Difficulties In Teaching And Learning Reading Skill

2.1. From teachers' perceptions

Most of Vietnamese teachers say that they have no interests in teaching reading skill because reading was boring. Indeed, the difficulty of the reading tasks might reduce not only students' learning motivation but also teachers' teaching motivation.

In addition, teachers faced lots of challenges in the process of teaching reading such as students' communicative competence. It is a factor that hinders them from teaching reading communicatively. This implies that students' communicative competence was not good enough to exchange information with other students. Concerning about students' language use, Vietnamese students enjoy using their mother tongue in learning reading communicatively. They are poor in linguistic knowledge to express ideas so they used mother tongue to speak instead. According to Littlewood [27:20], "*In order for the classroom environment to be communicative, one of the main approaches is using the foreign language as a teaching medium.*" Nevertheless, do teachers succeed in using foreign language to instruct students if their students use mother tongue to communicate? As a result, students' use of first language also interfered with teachers' teaching reading.

Furthermore, a large class and the mixed level of students are very typical learning environments in Vietnamese classrooms. They are considered as negative factors that constrained teachers' CLT. This shows that big class made it less successful in instructing students' learning communication. Students had less chance to express their own ideas in front of the class and teachers could not cover them all. Apart from this, multilevel classes could bring about lots of challenges in communicating or interacting with one another. For instance, a weak student could hardly communicate well with a fair or a good one. Consequently, this led to various problems for teachers

Beside the above points, some activities in the textbook were not suitable. For example, the tasks are generally long and teachers lack time to conduct all reading activities. Also, material and facility limitation is also an obstacle to their teaching reading communicatively.

In a word, Vietnamese teachers actually have various problems that hinder their teaching reading communicatively. It is, therefore, essential that teachers partly adapt the current textbook so that they can make their teaching more interactive and appropriate with their students in Vietnamese learning context.

2.2. From students' perceptions

Similar to teachers' difficulties as discussed above, students' troubles also derived from the complexity of reading passages, the challenge of reading activities and their length. For example, if reading tasks are difficult, students will be partly prevented from interacting or communicating with their classmates during their reading lessons.

The first problem in learning Reading skill is that Vietnamese students do not have enough time to deal with. Hence, it is necessary that teachers adapt or adjust the reading tasks so that both teaching and learning can fit the time and promote more chances for students to interact during their learning.

Reading tasks are not very communicative. This does not create opportunity for them to interact with their classmates. For this reason, students have to cope with their difficulty in learning reading communicatively. In addition, they encounter troubles because there are too many new words in reading texts and their exercises. This affects students' ability of understanding the reading texts and tasks. If students did not understand vocabulary, reading passage or instructions for doing the tasks, would they succeed in expressing ideas when communicating with their teacher and partners? It was therefore troublesome to students.

III. Suggestions For Better Reading Teaching

3.1. For Teachers

First of all, before teaching, teachers should have small seminars or group reunions to collaborate with other colleagues on discovering the difficult aspects of the textbook that need adapting. Teachers should exchange knowledge and methodology on how to adapt the textbook with other members in the group. By doing so, teachers will decrease difficulties in teaching and be able to develop profession.

Second, teachers necessarily have a deep study and update the methodology knowledge by reading methodology books as well as magazines and journals from the Internet, participating in workshops and so on. Especially, teachers need to improve knowledge of communicative activities and implementation of the CLT so that their perceptions of Communicative Approach or the CLT application will be upgraded. Hence, they will be more successful in teaching language skills in the light of the CLT. When understanding deeply about characteristics of communicative activities, teachers can easily evaluate how communicative the textbook is, and teachers can successfully adapt the tasks for teaching more communicatively.

Third, although the time is limited, teachers need to manage time properly to try to adapt reading tasks more frequently. By doing so, teachers can help students feel easier or motivated in learning reading communicatively. On the other hand, teachers will become more creative in teaching process. To some reading texts, teachers should adapt by using *jigsaw reading*, *giving students cues to make questions and guiding students to work in pairs or groups*. By this way, students' interaction and communication will be stimulated.

Fourth, it is essential that teachers know students' learning preferences, language competence and needs to adapt the tasks so that they are appropriate with their students' interests and abilities. Moreover, teachers should utilize or exploit various communicative activities such as *role-play*, *pair work*, *group work and communication games* in order to attract students' full interaction and enthusiastic participation.

Fifth, teachers should regulate the teaching time properly. Three reading stages are all important. However, pre-reading stage is normally used for eliciting or leading in the lessons. Therefore, teachers should not spend too much time on this stage. With good time management, teachers can have enough time to spend for the other stages. Hence, students have more chances to effectively perform at while-reading stage and develop productive skills at the post-reading stage. This can avoid leaving tasks at post-reading stage for students to do at home due to shortage of teaching time.

Sixth, in terms of the CLT, teacher's role should be various. Teachers may serve as a facilitator, a manager/organizer, an advisor, a monitor, a co-communicator, a counselor or a reliable informant and so on. Therefore, teachers can co-communicate with students and inform them of reliable information and facilitate their problems so as to help students feel easy and confident in learning communicatively. Besides, teachers should be tolerant with students' mistakes or correct in a positive way so that their students' flow of communication could not be interrupted. This also helps to promote more communication and interaction in learning process.

Seventh, teachers should use a variety of teaching aids with full of attractions to appeal to students towards the lesson.

Lastly, it is important that teachers need to design communicative activities which easily activate students' background knowledge and create real-life situations. This will help students understand the lesson easily and communicate naturally in a real world. Furthermore, teachers' adapted activities need clear instructions, simplicity, clear demonstration and integration of humorous or motivative content like games, songs, acting and so on. Hence, teachers' in-class job will not be time-consuming but smooth and create more opportunities for students to interact.

3.2. For Educational Authorities

Foremost, it is necessary that educational authorities should collaborate with national or international institutes in holding workshops on teaching renewals and especially on adapting textbooks, materials and syllabus to appeal to teachers' participation. Basing on the suggestion of teachers and group leaders from local schools right before teaching, these necessary workshops should be organized yearly or periodically. This is one

of the most effective ways that teachers can approach methodologists or experts and scholars to renew their knowledge of methods. On the other hand, teachers will have chances to share experiences with colleagues, learn from the others and take in adapting techniques practically.

Furthermore, school administrators should invest more facilities to help teachers use frequently. If facilities are limited, teachers will delay their adaptations and become uncreative teachers or deskills teachers.

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