

The Roles of Intensive and Extensive Reading Activities in Chinese EFL University Students' Reading Comprehension Skills

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the appropriate methods for Chinese EFL university students to improve reading comprehension skills. The combination of intensive reading and extensive reading in the teaching environment is suggested in this study. Specifically, in-class reading should be composed of two parts: 1) intensive reading activities involving the explicit instruction of reading comprehension skills; 2) extensive reading activities to increase Chinese EFL university students' background and vocabulary knowledge, which paves way for the comprehension of the text. After-class extensive reading should be composed of the reading of materials containing the repetition of new vocabulary appear in class, which could consolidate EFL learners' reading comprehension skills they have already learnt in class.

Keywords: reading comprehension skills, extensive reading, intensive reading, in-class reading, out of class reading

1. Introduction

Both intensive reading and extensive reading play a dominant role in helping students improve their reading comprehension skills. However, strengthening students' reading comprehension skills merely through either intensive reading or extensive reading is not an effective teaching method due to their individual limitations. Therefore, having a combination of intensive and extensive reading is the appropriate and effective approach to teaching reading comprehension skills. However, how does one use both intensive reading and extensive reading and balance them to strengthen students' reading comprehension skills? This paper attempts to answer this question and provide pedagogical implications for strengthening students' reading comprehension skills through both intensive and extensive reading.

2. Reading Comprehension Skills

2.1 The Definition of Reading Comprehension Skill

Reading comprehension skill is the ability to use context and knowledge to understand and construct the main ideas the author is trying to convey in texts, recognize the discourse structure (Farris et al., 2004; Grabe, 2009; Hudson, 2007; Lems et al., 2010), and gain the ability to use comprehension strategies (Grabe, 2009).

Examples of comprehension skills include using visual graphics or schemata, metacognitive knowledge or comprehension monitoring, and predicting what will come next in the text (Grabe, 2009; Hudson, 2007). Reading comprehension improves when readers have command of strategies for summarization, can form and answer questions (Grabe, 2009; Israel & Duffy, 2009), and can predict and monitor a text (Israel & Duffy, 2009). Additionally, Davis (1968) concluded that reading comprehension skills include mastering the knowledge of word meaning, following the structure of one passage, drawing inferences from the content, and finding answers to questions. Furthermore, activating background knowledge is important in reading comprehension skill, according to several scholars. For instance, Grabe (1991) and Lems et al. (2010) proposed that good readers can make use of background knowledge to construct meanings from the text and predict information. Additionally, vocabulary building is essential to reading comprehension instruction as vocabulary and comprehension are closely linked (Samuel & Farstrup, 2011). Vocabulary knowledge has similarly been recognized as an essential feature for strategic readers (Grabe, 1991). Based on Lems et al. (2010), reading strategies include word-learning strategies, sentence-level strategies, discourse-level strategies, and metacognitive strategies. All these discussions demonstrate that mastery of vocabulary plays an indispensable role in practicing students' reading comprehension skills.

Through the synthesis of these discussions, this study has concluded that reading comprehension skills involve (a) command of vocabulary knowledge; (b) the ability to predict, which means activating background or prior knowledge to promote understanding of ideas encountered in text (Samuel & Farstrup, 2011); (c) good knowledge of text structure; (d) visual presentations of text; (e) summarization; (f) answering questions on comprehension

and generating questions for text; and (g) comprehension monitoring, which is “defined as knowledge about cognition and the self-regulation of cognition” (Grabe, 1991, p. 382).

2.2 Ways to Teach Reading Comprehension Skills

It is essential for teachers to help students consciously acquire reading comprehension skills. How can teachers arrange instructions to strengthen students’ reading comprehension skills effectively? Grabe (2009) outlined the ways to teach reading comprehension skills: (a) direct and explicit strategy instructions such as teachers’ direct exploration into the text to gain the main idea; (b) instructions that must be recycled once introduced and practiced; and (c) instructions best explored within a pre-, during-, and post-reading framework. Furthermore, reading comprehension exercises should be varied, flexible, and suited to the texts, which contain sets of exercises such as open questions, multiple-choice questions, and right or wrong questions (Grellet, 1984). Furthermore, reciprocal teaching and transactional strategies instruction can be included in the reading comprehension instructions, and reciprocal teaching is characterized by asking questions about the paragraphs, summarizing the paragraphs, and predicting what might be in the next paragraph (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). Therefore, the introduction of the reading comprehension instructions provides implications for the combination of extensive reading and intensive reading and the effective ways to improve L2 university students’ reading comprehension skills.

3. The Role of Intensive Reading in L2 Reading Comprehension

Intensive reading is the most popular reading program teachers apply to practice students’ reading comprehension skills. Intensive reading can be “a means of increasing learners’ knowledge of language features and their control of reading strategies,” and “one goal of intensive reading may be comprehension of the text” (Nation, 2009, p. 25). Thus, based on Nation (2009), intensive reading is aimed at developing learners’ ability to comprehend texts through directing the learners’ attention to features of the text and strategies for dealing with the texts.

How can teachers apply intensive reading to improve students’ reading comprehension skills? Plinscar and Brown (1984) designed reciprocal teaching, which involves the training of three strategies: prediction of the content, making questions about the main idea, and summarizing what has been read. Guthrie (as cited in Nation, 2009) further demonstrated that concept-oriented reading instruction contains systematic explicit instruction in six strategies, including activating background knowledge, questioning, comprehension monitoring, summarizing, visual representations, and instructing texts. Furthermore, Nation (2009) also contended that comprehension questions are one of the language teaching techniques used most frequently to enhance learners’ reading abilities, and they are used as the major method to focus on the comprehension of texts. Therefore, these discussions provide implications for making full use of explicit comprehension instructions such as comprehension questions to organize intensive reading activities for the purpose of developing students’ reading comprehension skills. When it comes to the comprehension question, Nation (2009) pointed out that it includes pronominal questions, Yes/No questions, True/False sentences, multiple-choice sentences, sentence completion, information transfer, translation, and precis.

These comprehension questions are designed to help students understand what the text explicitly says and draw inferences from the text (Nation, 2009). Thus, different types of comprehension questions should be introduced in the intensive reading activities.

Therefore, intensive reading is a language-focused learning activity (Nation, 2009), and intensive reading exercises play an indispensable role in consolidating students' reading comprehension skills. However, merely arranging intensive reading exercises in class is not an effective way to replace a long period of practice. As a result, Nation (2009) argued that students also need meaning-focused input (extensive reading), with plenty of easy materials that do not contain many difficult or unknown words.

4. Extensive Reading

Both Nation (2009) and Grabe (2009) defined extensive reading by meaning-focused input and fluency development. Extensive reading is usually described as “skimming and scanning” activities (Alyousef, 2006), and the attention of extensive reading is on the content rather than the language (Day & Bamford, 1998). Furthermore, what greatly distinguishes intensive reading from extensive reading is that, in extensive reading, L2 learners are exposed to large quantities of meaningful and interesting reading materials (Alyousef, 2006; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989). Day and Bamford (1998) summarized, in extensive reading, that there are many reading materials and reading speeds. Additionally, its purpose is reading for pleasure, and it updates linguistic competence in terms of the fact that vocabulary is needed.

When it comes to the goal of organizing extensive reading programs, it is intended to build up knowledge of vocabulary and stimulate L2 learners' interests (Day & Bamford, 1998). In an attempt to conform to the features of extensive reading, Nation (2009) argued that the guidelines for managing extensive reading programs involve determining learners' vocabulary knowledge and getting readers to read a large quantity of interesting books. Therefore, to satisfy the requirements of extensive reading instructions, the materials in extensive reading should be easy texts that include a small number of unknown words, and the words there should be familiar to the learner (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation, 2009; Nuttall, 2005). In addition, plentiful texts are needed (Day & Bamford, 1998), and materials should be varied and appeal to the intended readers for the purpose of making reading an enjoyable process (Nuttall, 2005).

Extensive reading exerts positive influence on the improvement of reading comprehension skills. The result of one experiment conducted by Mason and Krashen (1997) indicates that extensive readers outperformed the traditional students who do intensive reading on a test of reading comprehension. Lems et al. (2010) approved that “extensive reading is the best global method to help all learners consolidate their reading comprehension” (p. 183). Therefore, reading extensively over a long period of time is the only way to master the required skills for reading comprehension and leads to improved reading comprehension. Then, in what ways is extensive reading beneficial for L2 English university learners to improve reading comprehension skills? For example, extensive reading contributes to enhanced vocabulary acquisition (Day & Bamford, 1998; Lems et al., 2010; Nation, 2009). In addition, it helps with content knowledge, syntactic structure, and knowledge of genres

(Lems et al., 2010).

Regarding the ways to arrange an extensive reading program, the most important point is to have readers engage in extensive reading activities and continue reading on their own (Grabe, 2009). For example, based on Grabe (2009), teachers should uncover what topics learners take interest in, and students should be allowed to have free-reading time when they can read what they prefer and share discussions about reading materials with others. Furthermore, Nation (2009) pointed out that it is critical to use simplified texts in extensive reading programs, and it is better to comment on reading materials through oral book reports and discussion groups. Additionally, extensive reading can be organized during class time when learners are not enthusiastic readers, and it can be regarded as an out-of-class activity when learners become hooked on reading (Nation, 2009).

5. The Combination of Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading Activities

In consideration of the fact that different teaching contexts fit into different methods, the methods to combine intensive reading and extensive reading differ. This study focuses on demonstrating an effective teaching method to improve the reading comprehension skills of university students who learn English as a foreign language. What L2 learners in the universities need are the explicit instructions of reading comprehension strategies and great quantities of extensive reading. In this way, they can transfer their strategies into skills and acquire reading comprehension skills consciously. The paper provides implications for ways to balance intensive reading and extensive reading by analyzing reading materials from two reading textbooks appropriate for L2 university students. The two textbooks are *New Concept English: Fluency in English* (Alexander, 1984) and *Introduction to the History of the UK* (Chang, Xia, & Zhao, 2016). As both Alyousef (2006) and Grabe (2009) proposed, contemporary reading tasks involve pre-, during-, and post-reading stages, and the reading programs should be designed according to this procedure. Moreover, reading class time is limited, so the quantity of in-class reading activities is too small, and out-of-class practice is needed to strengthen the skills students have already gained during the in-class exercises.

5.1 In-Class Reading Activities

Intensive reading and extensive reading should be combined with in-class reading activities to effectively teach EFL university students how to comprehend texts. In the beginning, extensive reading can be introduced in the pre-reading activity. The purpose of pre-reading activities is to introduce and activate the relevant schema and stimulate students' interests before the actual reading takes place (Alyousef, 2006). In the reading class, in addition to guiding students to practice comprehension of one major text through intensive reading, teachers should choose one or two passages whose themes relate to the major text applied in intensive reading for the purpose of having a brief introduction of background knowledge and making students activate their prior knowledge to fully understand the topic of a text. Teachers activate students' schemas during the prereading phase through helping students recognize what they have already known about the topic of a text (Alyousef, 2006). Therefore, teachers should relate the main passage to something that is familiar to them. Specifically, it is important to select several simple texts generally introducing the background knowledge of

the main text and require students to read them extensively to make students more familiar with the topic of the main passage and activate their prior knowledge.

Additionally, after finishing extensive reading on one or two introduction passages, teachers should ask students to read the main text extensively just once to stimulate students' interests and gain a rough comprehension of its main topic. Farris et al. (2004) demonstrated that, to set the stage for reading, it should begin with one or two probing questions. All these activities can be organized in the silent reading environment. After reading the passages extensively, students should be divided into several groups to discuss the two questions to directly practice students' reading comprehension skills. For example, when it comes to the textbook *Introduction to the History of the UK* (Chang, Xia, & Zhao, 2016), in the "Before You Read" part, probing questions about the background knowledge are illustrated. Additionally, in *New Concept English: Fluency in English* (Alexander, 1984), above the main text, there is a question involving the main idea of this passage.

Intensive reading plays a dominant role in instructions of reading comprehension skills, especially when reading and analyzing a major text. The best way to arrange intensive reading programs in class is through teachers' modeling of how to apply strategies to comprehend the article. Dole et al. (1991) proposed that reading instruction involves careful scaffolding, which means that teachers use examples to explain the reasoning involved in performing reading tasks. Therefore, explicit instructions are of great necessity in intensive reading through which teachers directly teach reading comprehension skills.

During intensive reading activities, teachers are the directors and managers of all practice. Then how can one apply direct instruction? Dole et al. (1991) and Farris et al. (2004) referred to reciprocal teaching, a cooperative-learning process in which teachers and students work together to better understand a text. "The benefits of reciprocal teaching in facilitating comprehension are enduring" (Farris et al., 2004, p. 341). Farris et al. (2004) stated that reciprocal teaching mainly contains comprehension strategies of prediction, questioning, and summarization. However, not only can these three skills be taught through reciprocal teaching but also visual presentations and analyses of the text structure can be applied through this approach. While teachers and students are reading the text, teachers are supposed to put forward comprehension questions about these strategies and then discuss them with students, analyzing the text carefully together. If the questions are hard for students to answer, teachers can apply the think-aloud technique. Lems et al. (2010) argued that teachers use the think-aloud technique to "orally explain for students how they figure out and execute a certain task as they are performing it" (p. 182). Therefore, teachers should not only instruct students using good examples of how to comprehend a text but also effectively enable students to practice reading comprehension skills. Additionally, some comprehension exercises are needed as postreading activities. Haller (as cited in Alyousef, 2006) contended that the use of matching exercises, cloze exercises, cut-up sentences, and comprehension questions can enhance students' learning comprehension. For instance, in *New Concept English: Fluency in English* (Alexander, 1984) after an intensive reading of the text, exercises such as cloze questions and multiple-choice questions should be given to help students practice their ability to understand the main idea and the structure of the text, as well as

develop their vocabulary knowledge. The *Introduction to the History of the UK* (Chang, Xia, & Zhao, 2016) also recommends a “Language Focus” part and “Solo Work” and “Group Work” to strengthen students’ reading comprehension skills.

5.2 Out-of-Class Reading Activities

Out-of-class reading activities should be composed of extensive reading activities to consolidate the reading comprehension strategies students have practiced in class and develop students’ new vocabulary acquisition. According to the preceding analysis of extensive reading, extensive reading should be arranged for pleasure, and students should be motivated to read as many materials as possible.

Therefore, there exist two important teaching methods that teachers should follow. First, after class, teachers should require students to read two or three reading materials that are extensions of the topic of the main text. These passages are usually appendixes after the main text. In the “Read More” part of *Introduction to the History of the UK* (Chang, Xia, & Zhao, 2016), three extension articles are demonstrated, and after-reading comprehension questions are given. The *New Concept English: Fluency in English*, however, does not provide readers with extra reading materials. This hinders students’ improvement of reading comprehension skills. Therefore, if the textbook used in reading class does not have a “Read More” part, teachers should select the appropriate reading materials themselves.

Most importantly, the new vocabularies students have already learned in the main text should also be included in these reading materials as frequently as possible. One limitation of the textbook *Introduction of the History of the UK* (Chang, Xia, & Zhao, 2016) is that the extra reading materials do not have enough new vocabulary repetition, which exerts a negative influence on students’ development of reading comprehension skills as vocabulary recognition is the basic foundation of reading comprehension.

In addition, teachers are supposed to select plentiful reading materials or books and then allow students to choose freely to read what they prefer among them as extracurricular activities. The *Introduction of the History of the UK* (Chang, Xia, & Zhao, 2016) is a good example. It gives readers a book list at the end of each unit. As Farris et al. (2004) put it, a lively discussion following the reading extends readers’ comprehension skills, and discussions on free reading are indispensable to L2 university students. Day and Bamford (2004) designed certain extensive reading activities such as Weekly Reading Review and Book Clubs. In Weekly Reading Review, students keep records of their extensive reading, including book reports, journals, or vocabulary journals, then students discuss their week’s reading in groups for about 10 min once a week in class, sharing the new words they have learned (Day & Bamford, 2004). In terms of the Book Clubs, Day and Bamford (2004) proposed that students should be encouraged to form groups and discuss the books they have read in common through creating discussion questions. According to the suggestions on extensive reading activities put forward by Day and Bamford (2004), asking students to read extensively without organizing discussions is less significant. Therefore, it is crucial to ask students to keep records of what they have read extensively through writing book reports or journals and arranging a 10-min group discussion once a week for the purpose of regulating

students' performance and strengthening their reading comprehension skills.

6. The Rationales for the Combination of Intensive and Extensive Reading Activities

6.1 In-Class Reading Activities

Before reading the main text intensively, it is of critical importance to introduce the extensive reading activities in class. Arranging extensive reading programs in class is not overly time-consuming. In fact, extensive reading is the best way to help all learners strengthen their reading comprehension skills (Lems et al., 2010). Furthermore, organizing extensive reading activities in class is necessary because students are exposed to more reading materials. It is hard to expect that students would read much at home if they were not reading voraciously in the classroom, especially for L2 university students who have different languages and cultural contexts (Lems et al., 2010). Thus, supervising students to read extensively in class is vital. The amount of reading correlates significantly with reading comprehension performance (Krashen, 1988). The more university students read, the better reading comprehension of one text they tend to gain.

Moreover, activating background knowledge through extensive reading in class exerts a positive influence on students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, prior knowledge of text-related information positively affects reading comprehension (Dole et al., 1991). Grabe (1991) explained that existing knowledge can be used as a filter to understand the meanings of a text. Day and Bamford (1998) claimed that extensive reading produces topical knowledge that facilitates reading comprehension. Thus, reading comprehension skills tend to be strengthened when previous knowledge is integrated into new knowledge acquisition (Farris et al., 2004). Therefore, the first part of the reading class should be extensive reading about the introduction of the background knowledge to help students activate prior knowledge to better comprehend the text.

Moreover, it is better to organize extensive reading in silent reading environments because sustained silent reading activity can help readers become more self-directed (Alyousef, 2006). Silent reading also enhances background knowledge and improves comprehension skills (Grabe, 1991). There are two different methods to ensure extensive and intensive reading. In terms of extensive reading, students should read probing questions and then scan through the text with questions in mind. This is important because it is highly likely to help students become more familiar with the structure of the text. As Grabe (1991) put it, strong knowledge of discourse structure or formal schemata influences the comprehension of a text. In terms of intensive reading of a major text, direct or explicit instructions of reading comprehension strategies are effective to help L2 readers strengthen their reading comprehension skills. For example, Grabe (1991) demonstrated that explicit instruction tends to cause students' inferences about instructional information to match teachers' intentions and increase students' metacognitive awareness of lesson content. Therefore, explicit and direct instruction is an appropriate teaching method to arrange the intensive reading activities through which students can develop a clearer understanding of what reading comprehension strategies involve and how to apply them exactly. In this way, L2 English university students acquire reading comprehension skills gradually and naturally.

6.2 Out-of-Class Reading Activities

Vocabulary repetition, reading for enjoyment, the quantity of reading materials, and having easy and simplified reading content determine whether out-of-class extensive reading activities are successful or not. In the beginning, having a strong knowledge of vocabulary plays a critical role in improving EFL students' reading comprehension skills. Grabe (1991) assumed that vocabulary knowledge is an essential feature of reading ability. Vocabulary is a vital instrument of reading (LeCoq, 1942). Moreover, Grabe (2009) argued that reading comprehension requires a strong recognition of vocabulary, and word recognition can be practiced through extended reading. Reading masses of material tends to increase general vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, extensive reading is beneficial for university students to gain enhanced vocabulary knowledge. However, learning new vocabulary only once is of little significance to developing a good command of vocabulary knowledge so vocabulary repetition is necessary. As Nation (2009) put it, it is important to have repeated opportunities to meet the same vocabulary in extensive reading materials because the new vocabulary that students gain from reading will be lost without further reinforcement. Thus, teachers should pay attention to vocabulary repetition through selecting the reading materials containing the vocabulary students have already learned during in-class intensive reading activities to develop EFL students' knowledge of vocabulary, which exerts a positive influence on the improvement of reading comprehension skills.

Second, in an attempt to satisfy the purpose of reading for pleasure, teachers should choose as many interesting reading materials as possible to appeal to students and allow them to choose what they prefer among all the reading materials teachers have selected. Nuttall (2005) argued it is much easier to teach people to read better if reading is considered a source of enjoyment. Therefore, "the books must genuinely appeal to the intended readers" (Nuttall, 2005, p. 131). Third, reading materials selected by teachers are supposed to be easy, without too many difficult words. It is more useful to read a great number of easy books than a few difficult ones (Nuttall, 2005). In addition, Nuttall (2005) further explained that easy reading content can motivate students to read more books. It is essential to encourage students to read great quantities of easier reading materials during out-of-class extensive reading.

In summary, all these discussions demonstrate it is critical for teachers to focus on asking students to read as many materials as possible, as well as selecting the reading materials that contain not only attractive but also simplified content, which can help students develop new vocabulary acquisition.

7. Conclusion

Based on the introduction of instructions of reading comprehension skills and the analysis of influence of intensive reading and extensive reading on students' improvement of reading comprehension skills, this study concluded that extensive reading and intensive reading are interdependent, and instructions of intensive reading should not be separated from instructions of extensive reading when teaching L2 English university students' reading comprehension skills. These discussions provide implications for designing an effective approach to balancing intensive reading and extensive reading. To be specific, for Chinese

EFL university students, extensive reading activity is of critical importance to increasing vocabulary knowledge and activating background knowledge, which are considered the foundations for strengthening reading comprehension skills. In addition, extensive reading activity arranged out of class gives EFL students the opportunity to keep reading comprehension strategies in mind and practice their reading comprehension skills. In terms of the intensive reading activity, the explicit instruction of reading comprehension skills exerts a positive influence on helping students develop a good command of reading comprehension skills. Reading instruction can be divided into two processes: in-class reading activity and out-of-class reading activity. In-class activity should be composed of extensive reading and intensive reading. Intensive reading activity gives students explicit strategy instructions and helps them develop a clear understanding of all reading comprehension strategies. Out-of-class reading activity should be the extensive reading activity, in which the reading materials provided by teachers contain new vocabulary repetition and are simplified, interesting and of great quantity.

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