

The Cultivation of Discourse Ability in Middle School English Reading Teaching

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Abstract—English has always been an essential part of junior high school curriculum. Improving students' reading ability is not only the purpose of learning English for junior middle school students, but also an important means to acquire new knowledge. However, reading as one of the four basic skills required by the English course often keep students from getting high marks in the middle of the exam, although they took lots of time to read. This paper emphasizes the importance of English reading in junior middle school and analyzes the current situations and problems of students' reading. It introduces the theories of reading and reading comprehension, discourse and discourse analysis, and the relationship between reading and discourse. The author puts forward some measures to improve the reading ability of students. There are many researches on discourse analysis about university, but the research is less involved in the secondary school, and the study of reading comprehension in junior middle school is even rarer. Therefore, the author thinks that it is very necessary to improve the discourse ability of junior high school students.

Index Terms—junior middle school English, reading teaching, discourse ability

I. INTRODUCTION

In the whole process of English reading, the cultivation of reading ability is a gradual process. Reading is an approach to understand and absorb the written information. Today, extensive and effective reading is needed in the information age. It is pointed out by English syllabus for middle schools that the teaching purpose of middle school English is to train students' ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Today, more attention is paid to the training of students' language communication. Reading teaching is the main body and core of junior English teaching at the initial stage. Now reading teaching becomes more and more difficult. Because it is necessary for students to give full play to their imagination in the light of the original text. Therefore, the improvement of reading ability can not only inculcate students' knowledge, but make students master the theme. English reading in middle school is a basic stage for students to learn English and it determines other aspects of English learning. Students' reading ability must be carried out in the process of reading training.

The reading ability here mainly includes three abilities: acceptance, judgment and innovation. The ability of acceptance is to understand the facts provided by the text and the author's writing intention. This is the basic requirement for students in the process of reading. Judgment is that the reader can evaluate and use the knowledge according to the content of the text and the author's views. If students do not have the ability of acceptance, they will not be able to form a correct judgment. Creativity is the ability to solve problems or put forward new ideas based on their viewpoints. These three abilities are interlinked. In a sense, the improvement of reading ability is the key to improve the ability of listening, speaking and writing.

According to the overall situation of English reading teaching in junior middle school, the students' English reading ability is not satisfactory. For a long time, our understanding of English reading teaching is narrow. It has not paid enough attention to students' reading habits and reading interests. Therefore, it keeps the students in a passive state. In the ordinary course of teaching, we find that reading is a problem that makes the students trap into trouble. Many students are not interested in reading, and they lack motivation of reading or adopt improper methods. One of the main reasons is that students are not actively involved in the teaching process.

The key of the matter is that students are very afraid of reading. When starting reading comprehension, there is often a feeling of fear for students and there exists many problems in the reading process. Firstly, Students lack sufficient vocabulary and cannot understand the passage in time. The expansion of vocabulary is the main part of reading comprehension. The size of the vocabulary indicates the reading ability. It is also an important method to check the students' English learning level. If there are lots of words that we do not remember, the passage is difficult to read and understand. So it is necessary to carry out reading training on the basis of sufficient vocabulary. But most junior middle school students have small vocabulary, weak perception of sentence structure and lack comprehension of discourse. Secondly, students are often lack of necessary common sense of life. There are many reading articles which are closely related to daily lives. This kind of article is very practical. They can not only rely on the accumulation of students in life, but rely on their own efforts in the process of doing exercises. Thirdly, students have bad reading habits. They often have many superfluous movements in their hands, eyes and mouth when they are reading. These reading habits affect reading speed and understanding.

Most of students only passively complete the reading tasks assigned by the teachers, and will not consciously read some extracurricular materials to expand their knowledge. But the language material provided only from the textbook is not enough to read for students. Extracurricular reading of English belongs to extensive reading, which is an essential stage to consolidate the classroom reading and cultivate student's English reading comprehension competence. We know that extensive reading materials, complex situations and language phenomenon is very abundant, which is conducive to the cultivation of students' language sense.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part describes the definition of reading and the levels of reading comprehension. It also explains the influence of reading theory researches on discourse and the relationship between discourse and reading.

A. *The Overview of Reading Theory and Discourse Analysis*

Reading theory plays a major role in the learning process of students. For the definition of reading, different scholars have different views. So far, the definition of reading has not fixed. However, reading comprehension can be divided into four grades for students to study.

1. The definition of reading

In the early 20th century, some scholars began to study the reading process. In recent decades, researches on reading have been rapidly developed with the development of psychology, pedagogy, linguistics and other related subjects. The term reading is being interpreted quite diversely by different linguists.

Kenneth Goodman gives the definition: "Reading is a complex process by which a reader re-constructs, to some degree, a message encode by a writer in graphic language." (Goodman, 1970, p. 5) As a highly active behavior, reading is the process of selection, classification and explanation of information. The writer is the deliverer of the message and the reader is the receiver of the message. That is to say, reading is an interactive and communicative behavior between the reader and the writer through the discourse. To make the communication successful, the reader has to deal with the discourse according to the previous experience and the writer's cues. Just as Christine Nuttal states, "reading is not only an active process, but also an interactive one between the reader and writer." (Nuttal, 2002, p. 10). From the cognitive point of view, the definition is that "reading as the construction of meaning from a printed or written message." (Richards, 1988, p. 12) According to Widdowson, reading is a strategic and interactive meaning-constructing process influenced by a reader's previous knowledge (Widdowson, 1979). Zhang Weiyou defines reading as a process of communicating between a reader and a writer and also the process of a reader's getting information from the discourse. (Zhang Weiyou, 1995)

To sum up, most of the definitions focus on the interaction. Reading is not the process of accepting the language symbols passively, but an active and cognitive activity. It is a kind of psycholinguistics guessing game.

2. Levels of reading comprehension

Though reading process is complex, many scholars think it possible to make a rough division on levels of reading comprehension. Nowadays, the reading comprehension can be divided into four different levels: literal, inferential, evaluative and appreciative comprehension.

Literal comprehension refers to the fact that readers can understand the superficial meaning of the article including the identification of words meaning, sentence structures, the gist and details of the article, the time, place, order and the relationship between persons in the event and so on. It is mainly based on the linguistic knowledge; the literal comprehension is the least sophisticated level of reading.

Inferential comprehension is a kind of deeper and more sophisticated understanding relying on certain reading skills and linguistic competence to infer the author's intention of writing and the macro-structure of the text.

Evaluative comprehension is that readers analyze and evaluate the article by virtue of their own knowledge and evaluative principles to show their attitudes, such as assessing the authenticity of information, the reasonability of conclusion and the possibility of an event. It goes beyond the literal contents, representing the author's positive thinking and attitudes to grasp their true intentions.

Appreciative comprehension is that readers understand the theme of the article and the author's point of view through their own thoughts, realization, emotions and interests, including the identification, feeling and appreciation towards the writing skills and idea of the article. It is a psychological process of the integration of emotional activity and cognitive activity.

3. The Definition of Discourse and Discourse Analysis

"Discourse" is a linguistic term, different scholars have given different meanings in their writings. Halliday and Hassan think that it is better to regard the discourse as a semantic unit, that is, not a unit of form, but a unit of meaning. (Halliday, Hassan, 1976) Huang Guowen, a domestic research scholar, defines discourse as a series of consecutive words or sentences that constitute the whole language. (Huang Guowen, 2001) Hu Zhuanglin defines "discourse as any natural language that is not completely subject to the grammatical constraints of a sentence in a given context." (Hu Zhuanglin, 1994, p. 5)

Discourse analysis, also called discourse grammar, is a very important concept in linguistics. It has attracted linguists' attention since the 50s in the last century, and it has developed as an independent subject since 50s. Discourse analysis

refers to the analysis of the language and communicative functions. It starts from the understanding of the whole discourse content and analyzing of the relationship between sentences and paragraphs. Discourse analysis includes the logic structure of discourse materials, narrative mode, text mode, descriptive means and cohesive means. It not only attaches importance to language forms, but also attaches importance to language functions. At the same time, it also focuses on cultural background knowledge and related knowledge, so as to cultivate students' ability to understand, analyze and acquire complete information.

Discourse analysis is basically divided into two categories: one is the macro structure research. It mainly studies from the overall structure and organization of the article. The other is the micro structure research. It mainly studies the relationship between sentences and sentences, identifies the relationship symbols between sentences, and discusses how a series of sentences make up a coherent article.

B. The Influence of Reading Theory Researches on Discourse Teaching

The study of reading theory reveals the regularity of thinking activity and the characteristics of psychological activities in the process of reading. It also analyzes the relationship between various factors that influence reading, and it is significant for language teaching. Of course, we can't simply reject a reading pattern. We should know clearly that each reading pattern has its own limitations. In nature, we should choose the corresponding reading mode according to the students' current language level and the actual requirements of teaching.

The process of reading is the process of interaction between the reader and the author. The meaning is not directly attached to the surface of the language, and nor is it rigid in the article to wait for the reader to get it on its own. Readers must make full use of their own knowledge, such as prediction, induction, reasoning and other positive thinking to obtain meaning and understand the connotation of the article. When reading, readers should relate to background knowledge, cultural difference knowledge, body structure knowledge and so on. With enough language knowledge, we can quickly identify words meaning, grasp certain background information and predict relevant knowledge. Only in this way can readers read effectively. The classroom reading teaching and training can be individual skill training, which is a preparation for comprehensive reading activities. The students can start reading activities successfully with it. The main purpose of this reading training is to improve the language knowledge and language abilities. As far as English reading teaching is concerned, we should pay more attention to the clear purpose of reading guidance for the students and fully stimulate students use their acquired background knowledge to grasp the overall meaning of the passage. It enables them to use various reading skills comprehensively in the actual reading. In this way, the students' reading comprehension ability can be improved effectively.

C. The Relationship between Discourse and Reading

Students' English reading process can be divided into four levels. The first level is the literal meaning, that is, to master the words, phrases, sentences and syntax of the article, and translate them out of the heart by the mother tongue; The second level is analysis and understanding, that is, to use grammatical analysis to make them more logical; The third level is evaluation understanding, which is based on the content stated in the article and the author's ideas and views; The fourth level is appreciation understanding, which refers to the reader's deep understanding of the content of article. When people read in daily life, the object of reading is actually the specific segment of the social function in the specific context, which is what we are talking about. Chapter is the basic unit of discourse analysis. The first chapter is the purport of the whole passage and we may get the overall structure of the text by means of it. Then we can analyze the logical connection between sentences and sentences, paragraphs and paragraphs, so that students can grasp the theme of the text.

Discourse analysis is the most significance in the process of English reading. From a systemic functional linguistics perspective, we can see the discourse is a meaning unit in social communication, and we can link the form of language with its meaning. This can not only explain how the language components are used in the text, but also explain the reasons for the use of the language. In the teaching of English reading, we cannot control the reading text is only the combination of the simple meaning of all words. Discourse analysis is to understand, analyze and evaluate articles from the perspective of discourse integrity. In the deep understanding of language, we mobilize students' enthusiasm and initiative in using language knowledge to improve their English reading and communicative competence. Therefore, students are consciously trained to read with the idea of "text" during reading. We should train students to understand and grasp the general layout, paragraphs, and central ideas of the article in the process of reading. At the same time, we should help students master the layout skills and try to figure out the intention of the author. We should also cultivate students to get meaning from the overall level of discourse, so that we can avoid the one-side reading of students, which is beneficial to the improvement of students' reading comprehension.

III. THE CULTIVATION OF DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

This part describes the principles related to the employment of reading strategies and the procedure of the lesson of reading training strategies. The procedure includes pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages.

A. Strategies for Cultivating Students' Discourse Competence

The reading strategies play a very important role in improving students' discourse ability. A lot of teachers and researchers have done studies on reading strategies, and have obtained many achievements. The author puts forward some strategies in reading based on these studies.

1. The selection of suitable reading materials

In order to train reading strategies, suitable reading materials must be chosen. Reading materials affect students' interests and reading speed etc.

Interest will be a key criterion in selecting texts for learners, so the teacher should ask learners to find extensive reading materials used in the class by themselves which will make the class more interesting. At the same time, the teachers discovered students like to read certain types of reading materials through questionnaire. Such as non-fiction, thrillers or romance etc.

2. The cultivation of students' consciousness of reading skills

A lot of scholars have already discussed reading skills from different angles, and they hold different ideas. Grellet believes that the main ways of reading are as follows: The first way is skimming. Skimming is one's eyes quickly look over a text to get the gist of the text. The second way is scanning. Scanning is quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information. The third way is extensive reading. Extensive reading is to read longer texts, it often depend on one's own interests. This is a complete activity, which mainly involves global understanding. The fourth way is intensive reading. Intensive reading is to read shorter texts to extract specific information. This is an accuracy activity involving reading for details. (Grellet, 1981)

These ways are important because they are frequently used by middle school students in reading class. But as it is known, a variety of reading skills are useful to readers. These four ways are not enough for students, therefore, some other reading skills are applied.

Predicting is a basic skill which is the faculty of predicting or guessing what happens next. We can grasp it more accurately according to grammatical, logical and cultural clues. It is therefore worthwhile to devote more time to systematic training. The following methods can be used in prediction training: The teachers should help students recognize an unfamiliar word through word formation and prefix or suffix. The students should recognize synonyms and antonyms to understand relations between parts of a text via lexical cohesion device of synonym and antonym. It is also an important method. The teachers should give students unfinished passages to complete little by little. And in order to cultivate the students' prediction ability, the teachers should stop at the end of each sentence. Previewing is a very specific reading technique which involves using the catalogue, the appendix and paragraph headings in order to find out where the required information is likely to be. By means of previewing text, students could quickly locate an article in a newspaper or have a few minutes to get an idea of a text through the title.

3. The improvement of reading speed

In order to improve reading speed, students must always be aware of reading speed. There is a formula of the reading speed:

$$\text{Reading speed (w.p.m)} == \frac{\text{Length of the text (w)}}{\text{Reading time (m)}}$$

For example, one student finished a 500-word text in 2 minutes, his reading speed is 250 words per minute. One of the most common ways of increasing reading speed is to give students suitable passages to read and ask them to time themselves. But at the same time, enhancing reading speed should not at the expenses of comprehension. Reading must be based on understanding. That is to say, they should grasp the main meaning of the passage while improving the reading speed.

Besides, appropriately adopting reading skills in reading can also help improve reading speed. Improving reading speed is not independent, because it is affected by a lot of other factors, such as the awareness of reading speed and the motivation of reading.

4. The interactivity of reading process

Students should enrich their language knowledge. Language knowledge plays a significant role in understanding the text for them. A good reader can recognize a wide range of vocabulary automatically: grammatical structures, and other linguistic features that decode quickly in the given text. The purpose of reading is to encourage students to develop strategies for guessing word meaning from contextual clues and background knowledge. So teachers should help students gain more vocabularies. In order to read efficiently and not to be affected by unknown word, it will be essential for the students to grasp the structure of the sentences they read. They should be taught to discriminate quickly between what is the core of the sentence and what is the padding. By recognizing the structure of complex sentences, students can read more efficiently.

Students should enrich their cultural knowledge. A number of writers in recent years have reviewed the complex relationships that exist between language learning and culture, and some have focused specifically on the implications of using the target language culture. It is common that reading materials are published in a particular English-speaking country to use their culture as a setting. One of the reasons is the link between language and culture. Given this link, the stated aim of the curriculum is to wide cultural horizons and increase understanding of other people and ways of life. So culture is not only the means to learn a target language, but also the purpose.

B. *The Procedure for Reading Strategy Training Lesson*

Reading procedure is divided into three stages, pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages. The details about reading strategies training are following:

1. The strategies at the pre-reading stage

In the light of insights into the reading process and into how successful readers interact with the text, a set of general learning goals for the reading can include: to build schematic knowledge in order to interpret texts meaningfully; to build a knowledge of language (e.g. vocabulary, structure), which will facilitate development of greater reading ability; to adopt reading style according to range of purposes and application of different strategies (e.g. skimming, scanning); to develop awareness of the structure of written texts in English; to train students to read intentionally, and the teachers should ask himself or herself some questions before setting reading tasks. These questions are: what is the text about? Is it a story, a biography, a report of an event or a description of a place? Are there different ways for students to read this text? What kinds of activities will help students apply appropriate strategies? What can we set as pre-reading tasks?

The first step is to activate students' motivation. Motivation is a term in psychology, which leads to a conscious decision to act in order to attain a previously set goal. It directly or indirectly affects students' learning.

The second step is to activate students' prior knowledge. Schema theory suggests the prior knowledge will affect students' ability to understand new information. What we already know about the subject and what we are looking for are probably just as important as what we actually draw from the text. Some ways can be used to activate prior knowledge. Brainstorm is a popular method used in class now to review enough words related to the current topic. At this stage, both language and cultural knowledge should be prepared for the class.

The third step is to make students predict and preview. Students can predict from headlines, pictures or their own experiences.

2. The strategies at the while-reading stage

Traditionally, English language learners read text mainly focusing on language knowledge and grammar. Recently, since the adoption of the idea of reading as an interactive process, the following aims are to be covered: the students' response to the opinions expressed and their understanding of the information contains; students should ask themselves questions and make notes; they also should confirm predictions and predict the next part of the text from various clues. To fulfill the aims, the teachers should encourage students to do reading training actively and set different tasks in while-reading activities.

The fourth step is to carry out some activities around reading strategies. At this stage, students will first check their predictions done at pre-reading stage and change their predictions as the plot develops.

3. The strategies at the post-reading stage

Post-reading activities can change with the text it follows, but they will always have a close connection with the reading purpose set before. Students check and discuss activities done while reading and make use of what they have read in a meaningful way to discuss their response to the writer's opinions, to infer writer's intention, to have a role-play activity, or to have extensive reading on the same topic.

The fifth step is to judge the communicative value of a text. During the discussion, problems such as the students' attention, the quality of the information given or the use of devices such as irony, fact or humor, naturally come up.

The sixth step is extensive reading. According to these practical and useful steps, together with the teacher, students apply as many strategies as possible (for example: predicting, inferring, skimming, scanning, previewing etc) to improve reading competence, and make reading an interactive process during these three stages.

Each step has its flexibility and can be mixed together or canceled according to the aims.

IV. CONCLUSION

In reading, students are directly confronted with discourse. The information, composition and rules of text play vital roles in reading comprehension. Discourse is not a simple accumulation of sentences. Instead, the author uses various means and techniques to link all parts of the text into an organic whole. Therefore, in reading the text, students should not only pay attention to the grammatical structure of words and sentences, but also analyze the content and structure of the article from the level of discourse. Besides, teachers should help students to deepen their understanding and grasp theme of the text, cultivate their ability of obtaining complete information and logical thinking and improve their reading ability. Discourse analysis has opened up a new perspective for reading teaching and put forward new methods. Discourse analysis is to understand, analyze and evaluate the article from the perspective of the whole text, so as to fully grasp the author's thinking and the passage of the article. This study proves that discourse analysis has obvious advantages in reading teaching. This reading comprehension ability and the ability of using the language synthetically provide a useful method for teachers' reading teaching. Therefore, it is feasible to use context oriented reading teaching mode in middle school English reading teaching. In English teaching, teachers should do their best to help students read English articles by means of discourse analysis in order to improve their reading comprehension ability.

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