

A Study of EFL Reading Teaching in Senior High Schools Based on Key Competencies of Subject

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Abstract: With the release of *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School*, the cultivation of students' key competencies of English subject has become the major concern of many English teachers in senior high schools. As an important part of English teaching, reading teaching is supposed to take the responsibility of helping students form key competencies. In this study, the current situation of English reading teaching in senior high schools is investigated to find out whether English teachers fully and efficiently carry out the cultivation of key competencies of English subject in practical teaching. Data from questionnaires and interviews of teachers indicate practical problems exist in cultivating students' key competencies in English subject in senior high school, so teachers need to have a further understanding of them and take more innovative activities to help students develop their language competence, cultural disposition, thinking quality and learning ability.

Keywords: Reading teaching; Senior high schools; Key competencies of subject

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1 Introduction

Under the background of new curriculum reform, cultivation of students' key competencies of subject becomes a hot topic. Key competencies of subject include language competence, cultural disposition, thinking quality, and learning ability, which have enormous significance on improvement of students'

reading and comprehensive abilities. Reading teaching is an important part of English teaching, the success of which contributes to the forming of students' subject competencies. In this paper, the current situation of English reading teaching in senior high school will be explored from the perspective of key competencies of subject, with the aim of providing teachers with a better understanding of reading teaching.

1.1 Background of the study

Reading is an indispensable part of language learning which plays a primary role in prompting other languages abilities like listening, speaking, and writing. Through reading, students could broaden their vocabularies, enrich linguistic knowledge, promote critical thinking as well as cultivate cross-cultural awareness. However, there are many problems in reading teaching at present. For instance, teachers focus on vocabularies and grammar explanations while neglecting the importance of other aspects such as reading strategies, thinking quality and cultural awareness.

Put forward in 2014 by the Ministry of Education, developing students' key competencies becomes a hot topic in education circles. Key competencies of English subject consist of language competence, cultural disposition, thinking quality, and learning ability. Besides, newly issued *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* puts forward the following provisions about English reading: students can use different reading strategies according to different reading purposes, and should absorb main ideas and author's intentions as well as predict the following plots according to the clues so as to improve their abilities in acquiring knowledge,

dealing with, analyzing and solving problems. Hence, improving reading teaching and students' learning abilities has become important issues for English teachers.

1.2 Significance of the study

Studying the reading teaching under the emergence of key competencies and the upgrading new curriculum standards has great significance for both teachers and students. For teachers, they can realize shortages of reading teaching, correctly explore the nature of key competencies, and renew the teaching methods so that innovative classroom teaching activities can be possible. For students, in a positive environment and atmosphere, they are more likely to participate in classroom activities and their language and reading abilities can also be improved more quickly. Besides, it also can enhance students' comprehensive abilities. Thinking from different aspects, students can broaden their minds and then know more about the international community. At last, it does help produce high-quality English-speaking talents needed by our society who are proficient in communicating with people from other countries, so as to make Chinese voices louder.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Reading

Reading is a term on which experts at home and abroad have different explanations. Linguist Bloomfield (1933) thinks reading is a signal change from visual to audio; American psychologist Goodman (1967) points out that reading was a game guessing process, more specifically, a positively cognitive process. Downing and Leong (1982) think that there are two types of reading: one meaning acquiring, the other decoding process.

Domestic educator Zhu Chun (1994) puts forward that reading is a cognitive and linguistic interaction process as well as a complicated psychological and physical one that involves readers in making links with information provided by the author based on their own knowledge about languages, vocabulary, syntax, previous experiences, and article types.

2.1.2 Reading teaching

Ge Bingfang (2003) holds the view that reading

teaching is a kind of highly comprehensive course to cultivate thinking abilities, which needs to be taken seriously. Reading plays an irreplaceable role in studies. Teachers should teach texts from different aspects, integrate contents of teaching materials and take students' actual levels into consideration. The nature of reading teaching is to guide students to read and understand the texts, studying English language while understanding meanings of texts so that they can obtain reading skills and improve thinking abilities.

Wang Qiang (2013) points out that reading is an interactive process for students, teachers and texts. Reading can develop students' abilities in acquiring knowledge, dealing with knowledge and assessing knowledge. The key point is to make students build positive links with the texts so that they can obtain more profound meanings of an article.

2.1.3 Key competencies of English subject

Key competencies refer to essential characters and key abilities that students should have to adapt to the needs of life-long and social developments. On the basis of general objectives of senior high school curriculum, four specific goals are concluded in English Curriculum for Senior High School (2017) including language competence, cultural disposition, thinking quality, and learning ability.

Language competence refers to the ability of using languages in the way of listening, speaking, reading and writing so as to understand and express in the social situations. Thinking quality means one's thinking levels and characteristics in terms of logic, criticism, and thinking innovation. Cultural disposition refers to understanding and recognition of non-native cultures which can build cross-cultural awareness among them to spread Chinese cultures. Learning ability refers to students' awareness, and abilities to positively and actively change learning strategies, to broaden learning channels through media and information resources and to improve learning efficiency.

2.2 Study abroad and in China

2.2.1 Overseas reading teaching study

From the 1960s, some reading teaching patterns have been raised by linguists and psychologists which can be grouped into three types: Bottom-up reading model, Top-down reading model and Interactive

model of reading. Bottom-up reading model holds that reading starts from decoding of words and emphasizes information changes from low levels to high levels. Top-down reading model is contrary to Bottom-up reading model, in which readers are not negatively accepting information but are constantly speculating assumptions based on their own knowledge and using clues to analyze and to testify those assumptions.

2.2.2 Domestic reading teaching study

From the view of Discourse, Wang Shixian (1998) first introduced English teaching experiment based on Sunny Hyon's Genre method in the University of Michigan, which provides inspirations for future English reading teaching. Hou Fuli (2002) proposes that text strategy extraction is an indispensable part of English text reading teaching. It can cultivate students' text awareness, improve their abilities to effectively interpret different texts and fundamentally enhance their English writing abilities.

From the pragmatic view, Xu Yuchen (2001) finds that in reading teaching, students understand all separate words in a sentence but cannot understand the meaning of the complete sentence. The difficulty lies in the fact that they do not understand the meaning of words determined by the context of them. Therefore, contextualization is one of the strategies to help students better understand texts in foreign language teaching.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research subject

This research is focused on current English reading teaching situations in senior high schools. Main participants are 6 teachers from 3 different schools and 183 grade-one students from 4 classes in Feixi Experimental High School.

3.1.1 Research questions

(1) What is the current reading teaching situation in terms of key competencies of English subject?

(2) What are the reasons for the existing problems in English reading teaching?

(3) What can we do to solve these problems?

3.1.2 Research instruments

(1) Questionnaires

In this investigation, in order to get specific and

scientific data about reading teaching situations based on key competencies of English subject, 183 grade-one students from 4 classes are involved. Questions are from four aspects: language competence, thinking quality, cultural disposition, and learning ability. Students are asked to finish an electronic questionnaire in 1 hour in which all questions are single-choice.

(2) Interviews

In this interview, 6 senior high school teachers are included. There are 5 questions designed to get teachers' understanding of key competencies of English subject and the current situation of English reading teaching.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Results and analysis of questionnaires

From questions 1 to 7, about 65.57% of students think that their teachers usually use dialogues, pictures and videos; there are 68.85% of the students who think that their teachers can guide them to summarize the general ideas and structures of articles; 72.68% of them hold the view that their teachers can explain vocabularies and grammars in particular contexts; 58.47% of them think that their teachers have analyzed types and styles of articles in reading teaching most of the time.

From questions 8 to 11, 43.71% of students think that teachers usually focus on analyzing the differences between foreign and Chinese cultures, and guide them to respect the differences; 39.35% of them agree that teachers always cultivate students' patriotic feelings and form cultural confidence; on the question whether they can resonate with the emotions in the article, 50.27% of them hold the negative attitudes.

From questions 12 to 18, 25.34% of the students think that teachers seldom set tasks for them to complete in groups; as for the question whether teachers teach reading strategies and skills in reading classes, only 42.07% of students hold a positive attitude; 22.40% of the students think that teachers always remind them to use reading strategies to read; for the question of whether teachers advocate students to read more after class, only 17.49% of students think that teachers always do so.

From questions 19 to 24, 11.48% of them believe that teachers always guide them to speculate on the authors' writing intentions; 34.97% of students think

that teachers are stressing on logical orders of articles in the reading teaching; 19.67% of them believe that teachers usually guide them to understand thinking and behavioral ways of people in English-speaking countries.

4.2 Analysis of interviews with teachers

As to the question “Can you make a brief talk about your understanding of key competencies of English subject?”, all the 6 teachers have a certain understanding of the concept but they cannot give the further and more professional views to it. What they know are basic components and meaning of it.

For the question “What’s your reading teaching mode?”, the answers are different. 4 of them tend to emphasize students’ self-exploration. Students are asked to find the background information related to the topic through all kinds of resources. However, the other two teachers usually adopt traditional teaching method, they’d like to spend more time in teaching grammar and vocabulary.

For the third question “What are key points of reading teaching in your opinion?”, 4 of 6 teachers believe that the fundamental purpose of reading teaching is to explore deep meanings of a text as well as enhance their comprehensive language ability, so they think understanding the structure and exploring deep meanings of a text are key points.

As to the question “which aspects of key competencies of English subject are the most difficult to be implemented in reading teaching and why?”, there are two types of answers. One answer is that learning ability is the most difficult to be implemented in reading teaching because students cannot apply what they have learned in classes. The second type of answer thinks that cultural disposition is hard to cultivate in the background of exam-oriented education, and the culture is a complex point related to many aspects that cannot be explained in simple words.

And for the last question “What factors do you think make it difficult to cultivate students’ key competencies of English subject?”, each of them mentions the pressure of exam-oriented education. In such an environment, teachers have to pay more attention to improving students’ scores, making traditional teaching models still popular in which students learn passively and teachers are of a dominant role in classes. Besides, there are four

teachers who think students themselves lack the spirit of active exploration and the consciousness of improving other abilities.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Main findings

Firstly, English teachers in senior high schools have a certain understanding about key competencies of English subject and know the importance of them, while in practical reading teaching, they still pay more attention to improving students’ scores without thoroughly considering the key competencies.

Secondly, teachers pay more attention to developing students’ language competence in comparison with other key competencies. Generally speaking, most of the frequently used methods in senior high school fail to fully cultivate the key competencies of English subject of students and cannot arouse students’ learning interests. In classes, what teachers emphasize most is the learning of vocabularies and grammars; they’d like to spend a lot of time explaining vocabulary and sentence structure, while showing little concern over the text organization, author’s intention and attitude, writing style and students’ opinion.

Thirdly, teachers need to work harder on cultivating of cultural disposition, learning ability and thinking quality. Language is a carrier of cultures, and to learn a language is to learn cultures behind it. However, teachers seldom introduce the cultural background information or lead students to find out the cultural factors behind the text, which is not good for the cultivation of cultural disposition of students. Besides, with effective learning strategies students could explore knowledge by themselves which contribute to the cultivation of talents our society needs. As for thinking quality, in the real classroom teaching, teachers usually ignore the cultivation of this quality which mainly reflected in the aspect that teachers cannot guide students to evaluate the text logically and critically.

From the findings, it is suggested that teachers learn more about how to combine key competencies of English subject with practical teaching together as well as update their teaching concepts in time. From the perspectives of thinking quality, teachers should have a deep analysis of the teaching material in terms of text organization and main idea to deepen

students' understanding. As for the learning ability, what teachers should do is to instruct students to learn reading strategies as well as remind them to use it the real reading.

5.2 Limitations and suggestions for further studies

Although there are some findings in the study, problems still exist. The study was only carried out in a senior high school in which 183 students participated, so the data is not representative enough. Besides, questions in the research and interview cannot cover all aspects of reading teaching. For future study, the subject quantity should be larger and the research should be implemented in different schools, which is a guarantee of accuracy, on the basis of which, more specific and helpful suggestions can be given.

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