

On Skills and Methods in Advanced English Reading

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Abstract

Advanced English Reading is a basic elective course in college English teaching. It is different from both advanced English reading for English majors and academic English reading for postgraduates. Based on the teaching practice, this paper discusses the necessity and effectiveness of Advancing English Reading from three perspectives: vocabulary, reading skills and cultural background, meanwhile, making an effective exploration in the teaching of English reading.

Keywords: Advanced English Reading; Necessity; Effectiveness

I. Introduction

English Extended Reading is a basic elective course in college English teaching. It is generally taken by senior undergraduates who are not English majors, with the purpose to help sophomore, junior or senior undergraduates (who have completed College English 1 and College English 2) to further improve their English reading skills and prepare for the next stage of English learning (graduate). Three basic goals are set in the syllabus. The first of the teaching task of this stage is to further improve students' reading ability in terms of difficulty, depth, breadth and speed based on the College English Test Band 4 reading, so that they can reach the level of the College English Test Band 6 within one year. The second is to reach a vocabulary of about 5,500 (including common phrases made up of these words), distinguish the difference in word meaning and usage between synonyms and master 1000-2000 academic vocabulary. The third is to be able to read general articles with high linguistic difficulty smoothly, grasp the main idea and the facts and details that illustrate it, analyze, deduce and summarize the content of the article at a speed of 70 wpm, and grasp the main idea, key facts and relevant details when reading a longer but less difficult material with no more than 3% new words at a speed of 120wpm, with the comprehension accuracy of 80-90%. The nature and characteristics of this course determine its particularity, which is different from both advanced English reading for English majors and academic English reading for graduate students. Students have been used to the way of thinking in college English learning after the reinforcement learning of College English Test Band 4 and College English Test Band 6. So it undoubtedly makes sense to explore methods along such teaching ideas.

II. Skills and Methods

It is essential to systematically expand students' English vocabulary, reading skills and cultural background. Here, we first emphasize the systematicness, which refers to a distinct hierarchical whole with indicators of

different dimensions at different levels, forming a certain order, and a clear logical relationship between indicators of the same level and between the indicator layers (Baidu Baike, 2023). Therefore, these three aspects are not simply improved in isolation but in a systematic and coordinated manner and in parallel. So is this course necessary? The answer is yes. The first is the need for work and study. Most students who have completed College English (1) and College English (2) have not reached a high level of reading proficiency, which makes it difficult for them to be competent for their future work or study (especially for reading literature and foreign journals in the postgraduate stage). The second is the need for college English teaching. As a public foundation course, college English undertakes the important task of cultivating foreign language talents for the society, but the reality is that a considerable number of sophomore students are still struggling to “pass CET-4 and CET-6”, and reading is the key link of “passing tests”. Many students take this course in the hope of passing CET-4 and CET-6 early. So the English reading level must be strengthened.

Teaching practice has proved that expanding English vocabulary, mastering basic reading skills and understanding relevant cultural background are the magic weapons for improving English reading skills. Building a high quality vocabulary reserve is one of the magic weapons to improve reading. Vocabulary is the first element of language learning and an important indicator of language proficiency. The syllabus of this course requires a vocabulary of about 5,500 (including common phrases made up of these words) and the ability to distinguish the difference in word meaning and usage between synonyms and the mastery of 1000-2000 academic vocabulary. The mastery of English vocabulary is broadly divided into that of cognitive vocabulary and of reusable vocabulary. Cognitive vocabulary is mainly used to improve receptive skills, that is, the larger a person’s cognitive vocabulary is, the faster his or her receptive ability to input information into the brain such as reading, listening and translating English into Chinese is improved, and the better his or her receptive ability is, the more accurately and quickly he or she will be able to read and understand textual material, comprehend verbal information, grasp the intention of the other party (the information sender), and achieve a deep and comprehensive understanding of the received material than others. And reusable vocabulary is mainly used to improve productive skills. The expansion of reusable vocabulary directly affects the level of a person’s English reading ability and English expression ability (Han Manling, Deng Baozhong, 2006:8-9). So, how to effectively expand vocabulary? The most effective way is to read. “The best way to expand vocabulary is to read” (Ophelia H. Hancock, 1998). In the teaching practice, the author always adheres to the basic principle of improving vocabulary through reading. In the selected textbook (Ke Yanbin. The new College English Reading Course (Advanced edition) there is vocabulary training behind each passage (Context and Other Clues: Guess the meaning of the following with the help of the context and other clues). This exercise is designed to allow students to guess the meaning of a word or phrase by reading it in context rather than looking it up in a dictionary. Such exercises have been proven to be effective in improving vocabulary. In addition, vocabulary can be expanded quickly through word formation, which allows students to change mechanical memory to rational memory. The root meaning represents the central meaning of the word, which is dominant in the word. The meaning of the root combined with the meaning of the affixes (prefixes and suffixes) produces the meaning of a word (Jiang Zheng, 2011). By introducing basic roots (word cores) and common affixes (word attachments), students will have a systematic knowledge of the formation of English words, and then use these words actively

combined with reading skills. In this way, it is not difficult to achieve high-quality vocabulary reserve. Mastering basic reading skills is the second magic weapon to improve reading. Reading skills refer to the means or strategies used to understand the content of the reading material and receive information from it. In effective reading, it is necessary to master basic reading skills. The main problems found in teaching are two major difficulties: reading speed and deep comprehension. Based on this, the author focuses on summarizing the word guessing method, skimming method, scanning method and so on, centering on solving the problems of reading speed and contextual comprehension. Reading skills and methods actually come from the structure and writing characteristics of an English article. For example, the role of the topic sentence or topic sentence group is to summarize the main idea of the whole article, which usually appears at the beginning of the article (Dai Weidong, 2008: 469-470). Such an English writing structure naturally “sprouts” the skills and methods of fast reading---grasping the first paragraph (first sentence) and paying attention to the last paragraph (last sentence). For another example, English writing places great emphasis on the connective role of discourse, which, whether in oral or written form, is a semantic whole logically organized by some sentences with relevant meanings through certain means of continuation. There are various ways to form sentences into an article, which can be roughly divided into three types. The first type is transitional words/phrases, which represent logical concepts such as time sequence, locative relations and causality, and are collectively known as “Logical Connectors”. The second type is the continuous relationship expressed by certain tense, stylistic form and syntactic means such as ellipsis, substitution, and reference, which are collectively known as “Grammatical Connectors”. The third type is the continuous relationship expressed by the repetition of words, the use of synonyms, near-synonyms, and antonyms, which is collectively known as “Lexical Connectors” (Dai Weidong, Zhang Zhenbang. 2008: 458). Such structure and writing characteristics provide us with a very practical technique for reading: the “signal word” method---according to the signal words (discourse connectors) in the text, quickly locating and capturing effective information. In addition to exploring the writing structure of the text, reading skills can also be studied according to the stylistic type. For example, the narrative can grasp several major elements of the narrative text in the reading. The expository text focuses on the explanation order, and the argumentative writing should clarify the argument, evidence and argumentation methods and so on. Here unnecessary details are not given. Understanding relevant cultural background knowledge is the third magic weapon to improve reading. Language and culture are two sides of the same coin. Teaching practice shows that digging deep into cultural background knowledge in textbooks is of great help to improve students’ reading level. On the one hand, it can enhance the readability of the article. As the saying goes, “Interest is the best teacher”, and grasping students’ interest in reading holds the key to improving their reading level. Wonderful sharing of a certain history or trend of thought in class can not only arouse students’ strong interest in reading, but also transform resistance into motivation. For example, there is a concept about entropy in teaching (Ke Yanbin, 2013:10), many students can hardly understand the whole article because they did not understand this concept. After careful searching, the author talked from the second law of thermodynamics to Schrodinger’s cat and to the double helix structure of DNA, and from the fitness trend to the inverse quotient process of life. Such sharing made the students not stop talking, and this article was solved. On the other hand, it is the need for the construction of ideological and political curriculum. Ideological and political content is an indispensable part of English teaching in colleges

and universities, and it can be “implicitly” injected into the classroom with the help of cultural background introduction. For example, when teaching an article about “racism” and “crime” in the U.S., the author went from the history of the Ku Klux Klan to Trump’s anti-immigration bill to the deep-rooted notion of “white supremacy” in American society. Combined with data and news events, the deep reasons for the high “crime rate” in American society are explained. Finally, the conclusion is drawn that “these chronic problems will inevitably tear apart American society”, while the historical trend that “the decline of the United States and the rise of China are equally inevitable” is illustrated by the use of contrast. Of course, these are just the tip of the iceberg in understanding the role of cultural background in reading, and the “allusions”, myths and religious legends in English will not go into details.

III. Conclusion

Reading is most closely related to the acquisition of knowledge. Only by mastering good reading methods and adopting appropriate ways and means for different reading materials and purposes can we maximize the acquisition of useful and relevant knowledge with the least amount of time (Han Manling, Deng Baozhong, 2006:252). English Extended Reading is an elective course designed to meet the needs of senior undergraduate students to improve their English reading skills, and its characteristics determine the skills and methods of this course. It is hoped that these techniques and methods in teaching practice will be rewarding for students and provide them with a solid foundation for their future work or further study, and that they can be applied in the teaching of other reading courses.

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Biography

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