

Constructivism and The Teaching of English Reading in Senior High School

ChunLi Huang

School of Foreign Languages
China West Normal University
Nanchong, P. R. China
Email: 1090992804@qq.com

Abstract

English Reading is an indispensable and comprehensive language ability for Chinese senior high schools students. Based on the theories of Constructivism and an experiment, This paper aims at exploring the efficient ways of English reading teaching to eliminate the drawbacks of traditional teaching of English reading.

Key words: Constructivism; English reading teaching; senior high; teaching mode

1. Introduction

1.1 The current situation of English reading teaching in senior high.

English reading ability is one of the most important embodiments of students' comprehensive language application ability. The teaching of English reading, as an important way to improve students' reading ability, makes a significant difference in learners' second language learning. The deepening of education reform and the implementing of new curriculum standards put forward higher requirements to the teaching practice of English reading in senior high, but there exists a large gap between those high requirements and the actuality of reading teaching in senior. But there exist many problems in the current English reading teaching.

(1) Problems from students:

- a. passive reading attitudes: only few of the students show great enthusiasm for reading and insist large amount of reading exercises and instructions in class. Most of the students hold hesitant attitude and some students even hold that reading is not quite necessary no matter in study of in life. (Li Juan, 2014)
- b. deficient cultural background knowledge: For the majority of present students in senior high, the cultural background knowledge is quite deficient, which directly influenced their performance in reading.
- c. without good reading habits: according to the previous researches, more than 60% of the students cannot

stick to reading every day, and 90% of those students cannot read over half an hour. Once they come across new words or long difficult sentences, they will lose confidence and stop reading. (Li Juan, 2014)

(2) Problems from teachers.

a. teacher-centered: The basic class model of English reading teaching is still “teacher-centered”. Teacher is the dictator of the whole reading class controlling all the class activities. Students are the passive receivers of knowledge. Students’ original creativity and subjectivity are confined, which violates the original intentions of our reading teaching.

b. the out-dated teaching methods: The ideology of contemporary teacher is old fashioned; the teaching methods are single and should be improved; the teaching model has little relation with objective reality.

(3) Problems from education systems

Present testing system hindered the development of English reading teaching in senior high. The ultimate goal for both teacher and student in their reading practice is for “grades”, which just makes the reading practice lose its true meaning as a core unit in second foreign language teaching.

1.2 The theories of Constructivism

Constructivism is a new learning concept formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is the further development of Cognitivism and Behaviorism theories. Constructivism paid great attention to the fundamental roles of the original experience, psychological structure and beliefs in constructing knowledge. It also attached great importance to the proactivity, sociality and situationality of students’ study. The main views of Constructivism are embodied in the following aspects (Peter C. & Thomas M. et al. (eds), 1993),(Guo Cheng & Liu Yanling, 2012):

- (1) The teaching activity should be “student-centered”;
- (2) Constructivism emphasizes the importance of “Situation” in meaning construction;
- (3) Constructivism emphasizes the vital importance of “Collaborative Learning” in meaning construction;
- (4) The design of learning environment rather than teaching environment counts for a lot in the process of achieving successful learning;
- (5) Constructivism attached great importance to the proper utilizing of various learning resources.

In fact, Constructivism theory has already been regarded as the major theoretical basis of educational innovation.

This paper mainly attempts to combine Constructivism learning theories with the teaching of English reading in senior high schools and explores the efficient teaching ways of English reading based on an experiment carried out in two classes from one middle school. According to the experiment results, it is easily improved that the application of Constructivism in English reading teaching is feasible.

2. The application of Constructivism theories in the teaching of English reading in senior high

According to the New Curriculum Reform, the focus of the whole English teaching process should cultivate students’ practical language competence instead of teaching of vocabulary and grammar as the main purpose. (Kui Chunyu, 2011). Constructivism, as one of the most important leaning theories in education

history, is endowed with much of practical value in the exploration of advanced teaching method. Constructivists advocate that knowledge should be constructed by students themselves through proper utilizing of “situation”; students are the active learning subject instead of the passive receiver of knowledge. What constructivists hold can help the current English teaching especially reading teaching to adapt to the new curriculum reform and make better achievements.

2.1.1 Reading teaching and learning should be situational

Constructivist learning environment is composed of four elements—situation, cooperation, conversation, and meaning. Among them, context is the basic condition of meaning construction. The conversation and collaboration between teachers and students, students and students are the specific course of meaning construction. If teacher can introduce some relevant knowledge concerning the reading before the class and create relevant situation for the students, it will greatly help students improve their reading competence. (Bai Yinghua, 2007)

In the teaching process of English reading in senior high, the concept of “situation” can be interpreted from the following aspects:

(1) From the angle of knowledge, “situation” can be interpreted as “knowledge situation”, more detailed, the “related background knowledge”. Every reading material is bound with certain background knowledge. In the teaching process of English reading in senior high, if we enable students to master these “background knowledge” first, students will do a better performance in their practice of meaning construction.

(2) From the angle of learning and teaching, “situation” can be regarded as the supportive condition of learning. That is to say, in the teaching process of English reading in senior high, teacher can put all the students into certain situation through some scientific teaching strategies. Let students to make hypothesis and guess about the reading material they are going to learn. Through this, students’ readiness of learning is aroused, which will greatly enhance students’ learning efficiency.

The learning theory of Constructivism emphasizes the importance of creating favorable learning environment. (Peter C. & Thomas M. 1993) Meanwhile, making full use of the cooperation and conversation between teachers and students, students and students is also hailed as an importance part in the process of students’ meaning construction. The practice of reading teaching is actually the practice of helping students grasp the inner connections and essence among things.

2.1.2 Students should be self-constructed instead of passive input in the reading learning

Constructivists hold that knowledge is not the accurate characterization of reality, but a kind of interpretation, a kind of hypothesis. Knowledge can’t exist outside the concrete individual in the form of entity. Although we endow knowledge with certain external form through our utilization of language symbol, it doesn’t mean that students get the same understanding as we expected. Whether students acquire the knowledge depends on their own constructing practice. What we hailed as a successful attempt of knowledge-constructing is the one in which the validity of knowledge is judged on the basis of their own experience and belief. Students’ learning lies not only on their understanding of new knowledge, but also on their analysis, inspection and criticism to the newly-learned knowledge.

According to Constructivism's view of learning, the course of learning is namely the process of students' self-construction, which demonstrates that the whole learning process should be initiative. Students are not the passive receivers of the Stimulus-Response union. Students are required to make active choice and process to exterior information sources. What's more, learning is not what we simply interpret as the process of knowledge accumulation, but a two-way interacting process between the acquired experience and the newly-acquired experience.

2.1.3 Teachers should be active instructors in the reading teaching

Traditional class model is "teacher-centered". Under the impact of this model, teachers are the dictators of the whole class activities. Students are the passive receivers of knowledge. (Yu Wenjuan, 2009). In this kind of teaching mode, students' learning process carries on the characteristics of "low efficiency and high cost". According to Constructivists, What a teacher should do is to initiate students to construct new knowledge by regarding their previous knowledge as the new growing point of new knowledge. Constructivists stress that the process of teaching is completed by designing flexible tasks and questions to arouse students' enthusiasm for learning.

Applied in the teaching of English reading in senior high, the reading class should be "student-centered" instead of "teacher-centered". By using this model, students can make a better performance in the reading learning and realize the high unification of students' cognition, emotion, thought and behavior.

The teaching of English reading should be regarded as a dynamic process. In this process, all the learning and teaching activities should be designed flexibly. Once students failed in their attempts of self-construction, certain activities are designed to fix students' cognitive awareness, to help them rebuild their confidence. Thus, the learning practice can move on. In this process, teacher should not be the activity conductor, but only a discipline manager and problem helper. That's to say, in the reading class, reading class teacher should do their utmost to make the learning of reading be the learning of students, otherwise the "learning" process of students can only be hailed as the "teaching" process of teachers".

In a sense, the teaching of English reading under the guidance of Constructivism is to make students be the principal part of reading and guide them to generate the needs for reading spontaneously. What's more, the reading teaching under Constructivism aims at transferring students' gesture of passive receiving of knowledge and learning strategies to exploring knowledge and learning strategies actively. In order to achieve the preinstalled targets, reading teacher must adopt effective methods of teaching.

(1) Creating appropriate Learning environment to achieve preinstalled teaching targets

Constructivists emphasize the importance of creating favorable learning environment. Learning environment is the place where students can explore and speculate automatically. The setting of question situation can arouse the learning readiness of student to a large extent. The learning readiness here refers to students' motivation, emotion, and cognitive structure involved in the process of learning. Certain learning situation can help students cultivate their learning readiness towards new learning target. That will help them make a better performance in achieving their preinstalled targets. Commonly, "question situation" is set to put students into the web of hypotheses and guessing. That is to encourage students to learn to set pre-reading questions about the reading materials, to guess what the materials will mention about. Thus, students are

well-prepared for the coming self-construction of knowledge.

(2) Encouraging self-study to achieve higher accomplishment

Constructivists hold that students' self-study (students construct knowledge by themselves) always achieves higher accomplishments than students' passive learning does. The teaching model of reading guided by Constructivism is to instruct students to construct related rules and methods of reading through their autonomous study. In this course, students' reading skills are enhanced in an unconscious way. In the meantime, the key point of self-study is to encourage the cooperation between students and students and to urge students to make multilayered conversations. They are the conversation between students and reading texts, the conversation between students and students, and the conversation between teachers and students. In the practice of students' self-study, teacher should be a collaborative partner to students, a partner who is above the students, and also in the students.

(3) Inspecting the learning outcome

An effective teaching process is the ones that start with a spectacular opening and end up with a perfect outcome, which is of much practical use in the teaching process of English reading in senior high. The learning process of reading is namely the process of solving problems. This process can directly reflect the learning outcomes of students. Inspection of students' learning results can help student confirm what they got and retrospect what they lost. Thus, students' self-construction of cognitive structure is completed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research purpose

The design of the experiment is based on the teaching model of English reading under the guidance of Constructivism. The purpose of this experiment is to verify the validity of this teaching model of Constructivism. In the experiment, both traditional teaching model and the teaching mode of Constructivism will be involved. The two kinds of teaching model will be applied in two different classes, the controlled class and the experimental class. The controlled class will learn under the traditional teaching model, and the experimental class will learn under the reading teaching model of Constructivism. By inspecting their different learning results, we are able to verify our hypotheses of the validity of the new teaching model under the guidance of Constructivism.

3.2 Research subjects

The subjects of this experiment are 60 students of grade one from Beita Senior High school. The controlled class and the experimental class have 30 students respectively. The age of these students is between 16 and 17. The students in the two classes in the same or close level for their English learning.

3.3 Research materials and instruments

The research instruments for this thesis are the followings:

(1) Reading Public Lectures: in this experiment, research is carried out through two periods of reading public lectures. The reading material is one passage selected from NSEFC book1 (Module3 My First Ride on

a Train). The first period of public lecture is under the guidance of Constructivism's teaching model of English reading. The second period is in traditional teaching model of English reading. Finally, through the comparison of the different learning results under two kinds of teaching models, the author will get the experiment data.

(2) Classroom Test: after the public lectures, the author does a classroom test among the 60 students to check to see the direct learning outcomes of these students. The test concludes four parts: Vocabulary (15%), Phrases (15%), Reading Comprehension (40%), and Comprehension writing (20%). All of the students are required take the exam at the same time.

(3) Interview: after the test, author interviews the teachers attending the public lecture, and students at random. Through their answers, author collects more details about the different kinds of teaching model.

3.4 Data collection

Data collection is done through the above three procedures. Classroom test is the first step for the author to collect data. The data collected in this stage helps author get the most original and eloquent data. Interviews of teachers and students give author certain effective reflection in an indirect way. All of these data help to verify the validity of the new teaching model under the guidance of Constructivism learning theory.

4. The results of the study

4.1 The results of the classroom test

Class	Vocabulary	Phrase	Reading Comprehension	Comprehension Writing
Controlled Class	72%	65%	40%	41%
Experimental Class	50%	52%	85%	78%

From the chart, it is indicated that the experimental class did a better performance in reading comprehension and writing. In terms of grammar point, they are in a middle level. While the controlled class (under the traditional teaching model) are weak in the aspects of reading comprehension and writing, although they did a better job in grammar points (vocabulary and phrases), In general, the experimental class acquires high achievements in this experiment. That is to say, the teaching model of English reading guided by constructivism theory is more effective than the traditional teaching model in the aspect of instructing students to acquire integrated skills than the traditional teaching model.

4.2 The results of the teachers' interviews

According the feedback from the teachers who attend the public lecture think that in the experimental class, the atmosphere of the class is more active than that of the controlled class. Students in experimental class are involved in lots of class activities. while in the controlled class, students are not as active as the students in experimental class. The class atmosphere is quite dull and passive. The students' creativity and initiative are not stimulated effectively.

4.3 The results of students' interviews

Students in controlled class hold that they are familiar with the teaching style demonstrated in the public lecture. Even though sometimes they are afraid of the teacher, they are accustomed to the class atmosphere. What's more, when they are having reading class, their main focus is on the vocabulary, phrases, and long-structured sentences, because they are the common testing points in the exams. Most students in experimental class think the new teaching method is a little strange but quite interesting. In the class, they don't have to take notes continuously. Instead, they can communicate with each other freely. When teacher brings up questions, they can collaborate with their classmates to ponder on the questions. It is interesting for them and they are not nervous at all in the class.

5. Conclusion

The cultivation of reading skills and strategies directly determines the quality of students' English learning. However, nowadays, the teaching of English reading is not optimistic and not efficient. Most of the reading classes are still "teacher-centered" and the students are still playing the roles of "a passive receivers".

Constructivism is regarded as a scientific and effective learning theory, which can be applied flexibly into the instruction of present teaching practice. Constructivists hold that learning is a process of students' self-construction. students should be the performer and participant of all learning activity. The role of teacher is to assist students to finish their construction of knowledge.

By conducting and analyzing of the results of the above research, we can see that the teaching of English reading under the instruction of Constructivism is superior to the traditional teaching method. The teaching model based on Constructivism theories can bring out the better performance of students in their reading learning.

Appendix: Questionnaire

Questions for teachers:

- (1) Which part do you think is the most important in English reading?
- (2) Have you ever heard of Constructivism? What do you think of it?
- (3) How do you like the two periods of reading public lectures? What are the differences between the two public lectures? Which one do you like best?
- (4) Which class is more active in terms of class atmosphere?
- (5) How do you react to the different behaviors of students from controlled class and experimental class respectively?
- (6) What do you think of the two kind of teaching model demonstrated in the public lectures.

Questions for students:

- (1) Why do you read, for self-improvement or for exam?
- (2) In the past, will you deal with the vocabulary first or start to read directly when you are reading?
- (3) How do you think of the public lectures? Is it interesting?
- (4) Do you like classroom activities? What do you think of the cooperation between classmates?
- (5) Are you afraid of the teacher in class?
- (6) What will be your focus when you are reading, the grammar points or something else?
- (7) How do you feel after the public lecture?

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