Sub-skills Approach and Extensive Approach to Reading in TEFL

Lichun PAN[*]

East China University of Political Science and Law

Abstract: There are various approaches to reading in TEFL. As English language teachers, only by understanding what the different approaches are, what positive or negative role each approach contains, and how the appropriate approach may be related to the teaching practice, can better teaching and learning effect be achieved. This article, by means of analysing sub-skills approach and extensive approach, as well as evaluating the role of each approach may play in the development of reading and general language ability, draws the conclusion that extensive reading approach is better to EFL learners, and provides the possible ways of improving language ability with extensive approach.

Key Words: sub-skills approach, extensive approach, reading ability, TEFL

1. Introduction

McDonough and Shaw (1993:101) comment "As a skill, reading is clearly one of the most important". To improve reading ability, there are various approaches in this field at the present, of which two approaches are the most focused, they are sub-skills approach and extensive approach. According to the classroom observation carried out in East China University of Political Science and Law (ECUPL), most EFL teachers adopt sub-skills approach to reading classes, they believe this approach makes them feel "secure", because on the one hand following this approach they will definitely know what to teach in each class, on the other hand following this approach students will clearly know what to learn in each class. And the students of this university (ECUPL) do think the EFL teacher who shows them one skill in each reading class is the most professional teacher. But does sub-skills approach really work in EFL teaching and learning? With the question, this article will analyse both sub-skills approach and extensive approach first, then it will evaluate the role of each approach in the development of reading and general language ability. The main aim of the article is to find out the most effective approach to reading ability and demonstrate how to combine the approach with teaching practice.

[*] Lecturer of East China University of Political Science and Law, Academic visitor of Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics of Cambridge University. Email:pannycool2004@yahoo.com.cn

2. Sub-skills approach

2.1. Explanation of this approach

Urquhart and Weir (1998:91) report that "if reading itself is a skill, it must be possible to break this down into different level of component skills categories." In fact, several experts have made attempt to divide reading skills into component skills. Munby (1978) advocates that there are nineteen detailed skills to develop reading skill, such as recognising the script of a language, deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items, understanding conceptual meaning, understanding the communicative value of sentences, recognising indicators in discourse, basic reference skills, skimming, scanning to locate specifically required information and so forth.

Therefore it can be concluded that sub-skills approach is an approach, which believes that under the reading skill there are a lot of individual skills, which are called sub-skills. Learners need these sub-skills, focusing on which can help them get specific information from the reading texts. By means of the practice of each sub-skill, learners will achieve the utmost aim of improving reading skill. Basing on this approach, the teacher is required to teach sub-skills in detail and attempt to train learners to get familiar with them until they can use the sub-skills freely.

2.2. Evaluation of the role

In the development of reading and general language ability, there are several positive roles that sub-skills approach may play.

First, sub-skills approach can provide learners with concrete idea of reading skill. In this approach, reading skill is divided into specific details, thus learners are offered opportunities to have a clear clue on what exact skills are required to improve reading ability. Grabe (1991:382) reports "a reading components perspective is an appropriate research direction to the extent that such an approach leads to important insights into the reading process. In this respect, it is indeed a useful approach."

Second, sub-skills approach can help learners build up specific reading skills. Through the conscious practice of each specific skill, learners will form a solid foundation. "All these skills are assumed to play a significant role in the reading process, they include everything from rapid identification of vocabulary to the making of reference …" (Dubin et al, 1986:163).

The above might be the reasons why the EFL teachers of East China University of Political Science and Law prefer to apply sub-skills approach to reading classes and why the students of that university accept the sub-skills approach as well. But there are several obvious negative points in the role of sub-skills approach.

First, dividing language skill into too many details will destroy the nature of language. When people read in the mother tongue, it is unusual that they analyse each specific skill. Lunzer and Gardner (1979: 64) comment that "reading comprehension should not be thought of in terms of a multiplicity of specialised aptitudes. To all intents and purposes such differences reflect only one general aptitude: this is being the people's ability and willingness to reflect on whatever he is reading."

Second, too much concentration on sub-skills approach will probably constrain other reading approach. Richards (1998:47) reports "A skills approach to the reading has achieved a sort of unstoppable momentum. The dominance of skills, especially in ESL academic programs, leaves little room for considering other approaches."

To sum up, although learners' reading ability can be improved by this approach, it is not the most effective approach to reading. Only through more extensive reading that learners can gain substantial practice in operating the skills more independently on a range of material. (Hedge, 2000)

3. Extensive approach

3.1. Explanation of this approach

On extensive reading approach, there is no completely consensus definition. This article adopts Hedge's opinion (2000:202), which illustrates a series of characteristics of extensive reading approach.

-reading large quantities of material, whether short stories and novel, newspaper and magazine articles, or professional reading

-reading consistently over time on a frequent and regular basis

-reading longer texts (more than a few paragraphs in length) of the types listed in the first point above

-reading for general meaning, primarily for pleasure, curiosity, or professional interest

-reading longer texts during class time but also engaging in individual, independent reading at home, ideally of self-selected material

The aim of extensive reading approach is to "flood learners with quantities of L2 input with fewer possibly specific tasks to perform on this material. Exposing learners to large quantities of meaningful and interesting L2 material will, in the long run, produce a beneficial effect on the learners' command of the L2." (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989:5) Richards (1998:6) reports that extensive reading approach is to "get students reading in the second language and liking it."

3.2. Evaluation of the role

Compared to sub-skills approach, extensive approach is a long-run approach, through which learners cannot expect prompt effect. It is probably that being time consuming, this approach has not yet been extensively applied in most universities of China. Although Hedge (2000:204) reports "It would be unwise to make strong claim about the role of extensive reading", it cannot be denied that there are several obvious positive roles that extensive reading approach plays.

Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992:133) report that extensive reading is "intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading." Robb and Susser (1989) suggest that extensive reading procedure would be superior to, or at least remain equal to, the skills-based method.

Extensive reading can build up learners' vocabulary

Nuttall (1996:62) reports "An extensive reading programme is the single most effective way of improving vocabulary." When L2 learners read, it is probably that there are some repeatedly unfamiliar words in the material. If an individual word is met again and again and understood more than once in different contexts, naturally learners will quickly identify the words and tend to easily remember the words. Harris and Sipay (1990:435-436) comment "all the sources of information about a word are consolidated into a single, highly cohesive representation." As a result of frequent appearance, the unfamiliar words can turn into learners' familiar words. Richards (1998:16) comments that "familiarity breeds automaticity," which is called automatic processing with peripheral attention by McLaughlin (1990). Wilkins (1972) believes that through reading, learners can effectively come to understand which words are appropriate in which contexts.

Extensive reading can develop learners' structural awareness.

When conducting extensive reading, learners will also encounter some new structures. If the grade of the material can match learners' level, a certain amount of extensive reading can make learners develop their structural awareness even though these structures have never been taught to them.

 In line with Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), L2 learners can understand the input language, which contains "i+1". "i" refers to learners' current level of competence, and "1" refers to a bit beyond the current level. Input Hypothesis maintains that being exposed to the language environment, learners can subconsciously acquire the language from the input they comprehend. Therefore encountering various structures in extensive reading is beneficial for learners to transfer the input into intake, thus structural awareness can be developed distinctly.

Extensive reading can develop learners' schematic knowledge.

According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000:102), schematic knowledge is thought of as two types of prior knowledge: topical knowledge and sociocultural knowledge. In addition to linguistic knowledge (vocabulary and structure), extensive reading approach can help L2 learners to develop schematic knowledge as well. By means of extensive reading, learners are provided opportunities to understand the world, the society and the people from other ethnic groups. In other words, learners can acquire knowledge through second language reading. Harris and Sipay (1990:533) comment "wide reading not only increases word-meaning knowledge but can also produce gains in topical and world-knowledge that further facilitate reading comprehension." Grabe (1986:36) reports that "the more reading done, of the greatest informational variety and ranges of purposes, the quicker the reader will achieve the capacity for creating, refining, and connecting diverse arrays of cognitive schemata."

Extensive reading can help learners develop reading skill

Extensive reading approach provides an opportunity for learners to practise detailed reading skills subconsciously. In terms of extensive reading, there are various types of materials, such as novel, magazine and newspaper, which might contain a love story, a business report or an interviewing of a pop star. Towards these different kinds of materials, learners will subconsciously apply one or several specific skills in order to read efficiently, such as skimming, scanning or top-down. Keeping on extensive reading, learners are bound to have the ability to apply proper skills to the corresponding materials, therefore, the reading skill will definitely be improved. Nuttall (1996:127) reports "getting students to read extensively is the easiest and most effective way of improving their reading skills." Mason and Krashen (1997) report that the reluctant EFL learners at a Japanese University made statistically significant gains on a cloze test after a semester of reading extensively.

Extensive reading can help learners develop cultural awareness.

Extensive reading approach provides an opportunity for learners to acquire cultural awareness subconsciously. Delanoy (1997:60) comments "cultural learning is now viewed as an integral part of communicative language learning", which demonstrates the significant role of culture learning in EFL. With culture competence, students tend to understand better what is happening in the English-speaking world, and moreover they tend to cause no trouble when communicating with English native speakers. Reading extensively, students can not only acquire the western culture on the life style such as food, clothes, houses and transportation, but also acquire the western culture on the way of thinking such as why they understand the world in that way. "Such experience can allow learners to participate in the culture of the target language, which in turn can enable them to further learn how cultural background influences one's view of the world."(Singhal, 1997) Fantini (1997:41) comments "language work is always complemented by explicit attention to sociolinguistic aspects, cultural aspects, and the comparing and contrasting of target and native linguacultures."

Extensive reading can result in learner autonomy.

The traditional way of improving learners' reading skill is that the teacher, taking little account of learners' opinions, selects material for learners, and designs a series of tasks for the reading material. This method reflects teacher authority, which tends to make learners passive followers and take no responsibility for their own learning. In contrast, extensive reading approach advocates that learners might select materials for their own, and no specific tasks should be performed on that material. This approach reflects learner autonomy, which believes that learners have the "freedom and ability to manage their own affairs" (Scharle and Szabo, 2000:4). Extensive reading approach changes the role of teachers as well as the role of learners. Teachers are no longer controllers and learners are no longer followers, who are required and tend to be willing to take responsibility in the learning event. Hedge (2000:204) comments that "involving learners in programmes of extensive reading can be a highly productive step towards autonomous learning", also Naiman et al (1978) suggest that the most successful language learning strategies are connected with assuming responsibility for one's own learning.

4. Encouraging extensive reading

By means of the comparison and contrast of sub-skills approach and extensive approach to reading, it can be concluded that both of the approaches can be applied to train students' reading ability, but extensive approach is better. Extensive approve is not only effective to improve students' reading ability, but also effective to improve students' general language ability. The following methods are how to combine extensive approach into real teaching practice.

4.1 Outside of the English classroom---organising a class library

A class library can provide learners with various materials, compared with using the same material, learners are given more choices. Therefore more opportunities are offered to meet learners' interest. The teacher prepares a bookshelf in the front of the classroom, asks students to bring one or two English materials to the classroom and put them on the bookshelf, thus a small class library comes into being. Several students are in turn the librarians per week, taking charge of the borrowing and returning materials. A set of methods can be designed as follows:

Displaying on wall

"Younger students often enjoy visible performance". (Richards, 1998: 154) The teacher can post a grid on the wall, which lists out the names of the materials and names of students. The librarians write down the date when individual students finish the material. Thus students can know clearly what others read and how many others read, which will result in that students compete to read more. For example:

Students	Sun-rainy	Sarah	Terry	Johnny
Alice's in Wonderland	February 15th	February 14th		February 9th
Cinderella		February 4th		
Harry Porter			February 10th	February 16th

Writing comment

The librarians prepare and keep one note list for one material. Ask students to write short comment for the material that they finished. The comment can be several words or one or two sentences. Since other classmates will see what individual students comment on the material, the students will read with high motivation. The teacher can also ask librarians to organise students to vote for their favourite materials per month.

Holding seminar

The teacher can take one hour per week for students to conduct reading seminar. Divide students into small groups (about 5-6 in one group), ask them to discuss the problems that they

encountered during the reading, such as some certain plot, some cultural background. At the same time, they can also exchange what reading skills they use in that material. Seminar can help students solve the problem, learn from others, and the most important is that students are provided with the equal opportunity to state out their opinion, therefore students are encouraged to read more in order to speak more in the seminar.

4.2. Inside the language classroom---showing the importance

Students know that what the teacher teaches in the class is the most important to them. If the teacher can spend some time on extensive reading in the class, students will be encouraged to read more.

Silent reading time
In each week the teacher spends 20 minutes in conducting extensive reading. Both the teacher and students select reading materials from the bookshelf, 15 minutes is taken for silent reading and 5 minutes is for asking open-ended questions. For example: "Do you want to borrow this book to read this weekend? Why?" "How do you like the material, what made you choose that material?"

Applying reading material
If the teacher can apply what students read outside of the class to the classroom teaching activities, students will be motivated, for example, when teaching vocabulary, the teacher uses the example sentences like these: *Snow white is very beautiful, while her stepmother is cruel.* Since these sentences are related to what they read, students will not only attain a better understanding towards the new knowledge, but also they are stimulated to read after class.

Book Report
Every one or two weeks 3-4 students are arranged to make the book report to the class in the front, which includes what they are reading, what they are thinking after reading, and how they like to recommend the books to the classmates. Through holding book report, the students who do the report will read with pains, and the students who listen to the report will acquire large amount of book information, also it is an effective way of training presentation skill.

5. Conclusion

Sub-skills reading approach reflects the idea of being teacher-controlled. It is the teacher who chooses what to teach, who decides which one should be taught earlier than the others. By firmly controlling the class, the teacher feels safe because he prepares for everything possible. While extensive reading approach reflects the idea of being learner-controlled. It is the students who select what to learn, who decide the sequence of learning according to their individual interest and ability. It should be realized that to change from sub-skills approach to extensive approach is not the change of the teaching method only, but the change of the teaching concept. It takes time.

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