

Exploring the Role of Task-Based Reading Activities in the Second Language Acquisition

Yuan Chen

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 999077, China

ABSTRACT

In China, the traditional reading activity is still the major approach for improving students' reading competence. Completing the traditional reading activity, language learners mainly apply bottom-up strategies to focus on the details of a text. However, the way learners process a text in the traditional reading activity does not follow the nature of reading, because reading requires language users to apply both top-down and bottom-up strategies. As a result, the traditional reading activity cannot effectively improve learners' reading competence. To improve reading competence, the task-based reading activity should be extensively applied in the SLA classroom. The task-based reading activity encourages learners to apply top-down and bottom-up strategies to interact with the given text. This approach fulfils the requirement of the nature of reading, which consequently makes it more effective than the traditional reading activity. Therefore, the task-based reading activity should play a salient role in the SLA classroom.

KEYWORDS

Task-based reading activity; Reading competence; Instructed second language acquisition

1 Introduction

In China, traditional reading activities are widely used in English teaching, even though extensive research has indicated that doing so is not very helpful in improving learners' reading competence. Research has proved that the task-based reading activity is more effective than the traditional one. To facilitate language acquisition, the task-based reading activity should play an important role and be extensively applied in the SLA classroom.

This paper makes a connection among the research, the practical application, and the theory of instructed second language acquisition. The nature of reading and the problems of the traditional reading activities are first discussed in the paper. Two simple sample activities are later proposed. One is designed traditionally, while the other is designed as a task-based reading activity. Through comparing the two, the merits of task-based reading activities are introduced.

2 The nature of reading

2.1 The nature

According to Benati (2022, p.106), "reading is an interactive process between readers and texts". In reading, language users unconsciously apply both bottom-up strategies and top-down strategies to comprehend a text when reading in their first language. During the process, language users utilise their knowledge to interact with the target text to achieve full comprehension. It requires linguistic knowledge, thinking, and reasoning (Benati, 2022), which support language users to process linguistic information, prior knowledge, and information beyond the linguistic information. Therefore, in terms of developing competence in reading, readers should be able to recognise written words, assign meaning, and apply their background knowledge (Benati, 2024) so that they can construct meaning from the text (Benati, 2022).

However, language learners tend not to transfer the reading strategy of their native language to reading a text in another language (Benati, 2022). Top-down strategies are not usually applied when learners read in another language. Learners often attempt to comprehend a text mainly through linguistic information like lexicon and grammar (Benati, 2022). They read word by word and focus on the detail, separating it from their prior knowledge and the general idea of a text. Without top-down strategies, learners are actually reading for translating. It is insufficient to develop a full comprehension of a text. Meanwhile, focusing too much attention on the linguistic information does not allow learners to comprehend a text with the support of knowledge beyond linguistics. The barrier between learners' prior knowledge and the text information hinders learners from achieving a full comprehension of a text. In second language acquisition, teachers should encourage students to apply both top-down and bottom-up strategies. However, in traditional reading activities, students are usually encouraged to read text word by word without utilizing their prior knowledge to comprehend a text. The bottom-up strategy alone does not fully fulfil the requirement of the nature of reading. Therefore, the traditional reading activities cannot effectively improve students' second language reading competence.

In second language acquisition, what reading strategy language learners need to use is "to read in another language".

It does not require learners to translate a text, but to understand a text in the way they read in their first language. Like reading in their native language, learners should try to apply both bottom-up and top-down strategies to process linguistic information, prior knowledge, and information beyond the linguistic information. In this process, language users utilise all their knowledge to interact with a text to achieve full comprehension. They do not only focus on the linguistic form, but also on the meaning. Through the interaction, the connection between words and meanings is developed. The key to the strategy is the interaction between a text and its readers. In second language acquisition, students should be given opportunities to use all their knowledge to understand a text. These opportunities can be provided by task-based reading activities. Learners are encouraged to explore the meaning of a text step by step through completing a series of sub-tasks. During this process, language teachers can guide students to use all their knowledge so that the strategy of reading in another language is applied.

2.2 The pedagogical implication

Understanding the nature of reading can help language teachers design effective reading activities to improve learners' reading competence. According to Benati (2024), empirical research conducted on the nature of reading provides four insights:

(1) Pre-reading activities are very effective because they offer learners an opportunity to activate their prior knowledge. Before reading, teachers can require learners to brainstorm on the given topic. Learners can make some predictions on the topic, which helps them activate their prior knowledge. Through the brainstorm, learners are allowed to exclusively use their prior knowledge to have a general understanding of the upcoming text.

(2) Reading activities that learners participate in should enable them to gradually link their prior knowledge with the text. The reading activity should be divided into several subtasks, allowing learners to gradually approach the text. At the beginning, learners may not be able to deal with the complex or profound ideas of the given text because the prior knowledge they have may be insufficient to support them in understanding the ideas in the text. Therefore, language teachers should utilize a series of subtasks to guide learners to gradually explore the meaning of the text. Through the step-by-step interaction with the text, learners can have the opportunity to fill the information gap between their prior knowledge and the information in the text.

(3) In reading activities, teachers should provide sufficient support to facilitate learners to make connections between a form and its meaning in the given context. Teachers play the role of facilitators in the reading activity. They can guide learners through the processes of previewing, predicting, skimming, and paraphrasing during the reading activity (Benati, 2024). With teachers' support, learners' motivation and confidence can be increased. Therefore, they are more likely to find the meaning of a form and finally develop appropriate word-meaning mappings.

(4) Learners should be engaged in interactive tasks using a stage-based approach, which enables them to develop their reading skills in stages. For example, teachers can require learners to skim the text so that they can apply top-down strategies to get the main idea of the text. Paraphrasing can also be used to help learners summarize the main idea or concepts of the text in their own words (Benati, 2024). However, paraphrasing tasks should be done after skimming because the information learners attain through skimming can facilitate the paraphrasing. If learners are required to complete the task focusing on detailed information too early, the task may lead them to exclusively apply bottom-up strategies and then read the text word by word. As a result, learners may not have the opportunity to apply top-down strategies as well as their prior knowledge.

3 Traditional reading activities

3.1 The features of traditional reading activities

According to Benati (2024), the traditional reading activity consists mainly of two types of tasks: a. translation tasks, where learners need to translate a written text into the target language; b. Q/A tasks where learners should read the text word by word to find specific information to answer questions from the text. In traditional reading activity, learners actually read for translating because they mainly focus on the linguistic information of the text with bottom-up strategies.

The Sample Activity 1

The Dragon Boat Festival is Becoming Boring

(Text: ...)

Step 1: Translate the following sentence into Chinese.

The Dragon Boat Festival is more than just eating zongzi—it's a bridge between the past and present.

Step 2: Multiple Choice.

Why do young people find the Dragon Boat Festival boring?

A. Because they dislike zongzi.

B. ...

C. ...

D. ...

Step 3: Answer the following questions.

Which one of the three main problems mentioned in the article is caused by the modern lifestyle?

3.2 The problems of traditional reading activities

Traditional reading activities can not effectively improve learners' competence in reading because it does not follow the nature of reading. "Reading is an interactive process between readers and texts" (Benati, 2022, p.106), but the reading activity mentioned above is one-way. Learners only apply bottom-up strategies to find specific information in the text. They only look for particular information to answer questions focusing on the details. In this process, learners exclude their prior knowledge and mainly use their linguistic knowledge to translate the text. It is reading for translating because there are few interactions between the readers and the text.

Traditional reading activities do not allow learners to develop their skills to comprehend the text in stages. To develop reading competence, learners must be able to recognise written words, assign meaning, make word-meaning connections, and apply their prior knowledge (Benati, 2024). Questions in the sample activity 1 are not designed to target the skills required by reading, but focus on looking for particular information or even forms. Learners sometimes do not even need to know the meaning of words. They just need to find the phrases mentioned by the questions in the text, and then transfer the information from the text to the answer sheet (like Question in Step 3). In the traditional reading activity, most questions can be easily answered through translating or transcribing. Learners do not need to use their prior knowledge to assign meaning and make a word-meaning connection. They only need to recognise written words and transcribe the information. Learners may not be able to understand a text when some key words in the text are beyond their linguistic knowledge, because they do not know how to use their prior knowledge to interact with a text so that they can assign or even guess the meaning of the word they do not know.

Some teachers may think the reason why learners cannot understand a text is that their linguistic knowledge is not sufficient. This belief is not reasonable because learners might not have the verbal virtuosity of native speakers (Benati, 2024). However, it is extremely difficult for learners to achieve such a high language proficiency. Learners might become native-like in some narrow domains of a language, like syntax, but still have difficulty with interfaces (e.g., syntax-discourse interface) (VanPatten, 2017). Therefore, teachers should use strategies to help learners comprehend a text (Benati, 2024). Even though a learner has as much linguistic knowledge as a native speaker does, what reading requires is beyond linguistic knowledge. Learners still require thinking, reasoning, and various reading strategies to support their comprehension.

In traditional reading activity, the roles of teachers and learners hinder the development of reading competence. Teachers play the role of an authoritative transmitter of knowledge in traditional instruction, while learners are note-takers (Benati, 2020). In traditional reading activity, teachers utilise their knowledge to understand the text and explicitly explain the meaning of the text to learners. What learners need to process is the information refined by teachers or sometimes even the translation of the text. These explicit teaching methods cannot facilitate the development of language acquisition (Krashen, 1982), and also cannot improve reading competence because they disobey the nature of reading and ignore the skills required by reading.

4 Task-based reading activities

4.1 The features of task-based reading activities

Task-based reading activities require learners to complete tasks that include the expression and interpretation of meaning and have a purpose that is not practice (Benati, 2020). To bridge the gap between readers and information contained in the text, the activities involve five stages: a pre-reading stage, a reading stage, a text-interaction stage, a post-reading stage, and a personalisation stage.

The Sample Activity 2

Stage 1: Pre-reading phase

Task 1: Have a brainstorm with your groupmates. Discuss the following questions about "The Dragon Boat Festival":
What do you know about the Dragon Boat Festival?

...

Task 2: The title of the article you will read later is "The Dragon Boat Festival is Becoming Boring". Work with your groupmates and list some concepts, ideas, or information you might encounter in the article.

Stage 2: Reading Phase

Task 3: Quickly look through the article. Is there anything matching your prediction?

The Dragon Boat Festival is Becoming Boring

(Text: ...)

Stage 3: In-text Interaction

Task 4: Read the article. Summarize the main idea of each section.

Task 5: According to the article, please indicate whether the following statements are true or false.

1. The Dragon Boat Festival is on May 5th.

2. ...

Task 6: Please use the information from the article to correct the wrong statements.

1. Now, the Dragon Boat Festival is about eating zongzi

2. ...

Stage 4: Post-reading Phase

Task 7: In Section d, the author proposes three creative solutions. Can they be applied to solve the problems mentioned above? Make matches.

Stage 5: Personalization

Task 8: Work in groups. If your group successfully predicts some concepts or ideas, please, based on your knowledge and experience, provide some information to support the predicted concepts or ideas. If you fail to do so, just provide some information to support the mentioned concepts or ideas.

Task 9: Work in groups and propose some solutions to protect the customs of the Dragon Boat Festival.

4.2 The merits of task-based reading activities

Task-based reading activities offer learners an opportunity to use their prior knowledge to interact with the text. Research indicates that learners find it difficult to process unfamiliar topics (Benati, 2022). The tasks in the pre-reading aim to familiarise learners with the given topic through activating and enriching learners' prior knowledge on the given topic. In the pre-reading of sample activity 2 (e.g., task 1), learners are required to have a brainstorm with their groupmates so that they can fully apply their prior knowledge to prepare themselves for the topic. Meanwhile, brainstorming with groupmates allows learners to exchange information with each other so that they can try their best to familiarise themselves with the given topic. Gass and Mackey (2014) suggest that when learners engage in meaningful interchange with others, they receive more input from others, and are more likely to notice the information they need in that input. Therefore, learners, through completing interactive tasks in the pre-reading, are prepared with rich prior knowledge, which can support them to better comprehend the text.

The stage-based tasks in the reading activities can develop learners' abilities to recognise words, assign meaning, make word-meaning connections, and apply prior knowledge. In the pre-reading (e.g., task 2), learners are provided with opportunities to recount the words and the expressions relevant to the topic. Learners share words and expressions through discussion with others. These tasks allow learners to negotiate the meanings of words and expressions so that they enrich their topic-related knowledge. This process facilitates learners' recognition of written words. Through recounting, learners can find out what they know about the given topic so that they do not necessarily process all the information during reading, and can pay more attention to process the information they do not know in the text. In task-based reading activities, tasks bridge the gap between readers and the information contained in the text (Benati, 2024). They lead learners to comprehend the text with prior knowledge. When learners encounter unfamiliar concepts in the text, they use their prior knowledge and the information provided in the text to achieve a full comprehension (e.g., task 6). Learners assign meaning and construct word-meaning connections through interacting with the text or negotiating meanings with others. As a result, all four competences required by reading can be developed.

Task-based reading activities encourage learners to read in the way they do when reading in their native language. Focusing on linguistic information and information beyond that, the tasks lead learners to apply both bottom-up and top-down strategies to make learners "read in another language" instead of "reading for translating" (e.g., task 4 and task 5). Research indicates that students' comprehension and confidence can be improved when they simultaneously apply top-down strategies and bottom-up strategies to construct meaning (Benati, 2022). Learners can fully comprehend the text with these two types of strategies because they achieve both general and close-up understandings of the text.

5 Conclusion

The task-based reading activity is more effective than the traditional one because it follows the nature of reading and is able to develop the skills required by reading. It provides learners with opportunities to interact with the text. With tasks, it can also bridge the gap between readers and the text. Encouraging learners to read in another language

facilitates the development of abilities to recognise words, assign meaning, make word-meaning connections, and apply prior knowledge. Therefore, task-based reading activities should play a salient role in the SLA classroom.

About the Author

Yuan Chen, Male; Buyi ethnic group; Xingyi, Guizhou; Bachelor Degree; Research Interests: Second Language Acquisition, Ethnic Minority Languages

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