A Framework Establishment of the Reciprocal Teaching in English Learning of After-School Tutoring Institutions

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Abstract. The reciprocal teaching, compromising a series of reading strategies, is always being conducted in plentiful regular educational institutions, concerning reading comprehension enforcement among students of all levels. This paper intends to discuss the practice of applying the reciprocal teaching in English class of the after-school tutoring institutions, the entities supplementing regular school education; and more importantly, to establish a framework guiding the relevant matters from preparatory work to class activities, from implementation appraisal to system maintenance.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is the ability to process text, understand its meaning, and to integrate with what the reader already knows. Accordingly there are many reading strategies available in improving reading comprehension, from vocabulary enlargement, to critical text analysis, or engagement in deep reading. As a matter of fact, some strategies are key to help with reading comprehension, and varying according to various challenges arisen from given reading tasks. In addition, strategies should fit to the ability, aptitude and age level of the learner.

Among others, reciprocal teaching, with a teacher-student interactive learning activity in class, refers to one approach aiming at reading improvement among students; in specific, the meaning construction of the reading materials could be well conducted when students, delicately instructed by their teachers, are facing various reading tasks.

Reciprocal teaching was coined by Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar and Ann L. Brown in 1984.

It was once regarded as a learning technique facilitating teachers in terms of fostering reading comprehension of the students who were stranded in the challenges of reading and acquiring the meaning of texts. To be simple, reciprocal teaching is a combined reading strategies package that the readers could leverage to seek reading improvement. One prominent advantage of reciprocal teaching lies in mutual efforts from both the teachers and their students. And more importantly, students could get access to the role of their teachers in learning activities, which fully arouses the curiosity and motives of the language learners.

Compared with regular school education, after-class tutoring institutions, featured as the establishments with relatively smaller size of students, more flexible teaching modes and multiple interest-provoking learning resources, usually play the role of supplementing school education for massive students who are eager to improve their reading comprehension. Therefore, the reciprocal
teaching is most effective in the context of small-group collaborative investigation, where students will develop stronger reading comprehension skills on their own if the teacher gives them explicit mental tools for unpacking text.

This paper intends to incorporate the reciprocal teaching in the real practice of English reading training in after-school tutoring institutions. In specific, the framework guides how to conduct reciprocal teaching in English reading program, as well as the maintenance of the relevant training system, will be discussed.

2. Teaching Pattern Design

2.1. Targeting Students in Primary School

It has been proved that reciprocal teaching represents a language format with which children are familiar compared with writing task. The students chosen in this study are mainly 6 graders in a local English-featured primary school, who have been learning English language since the entrance of campus, where the starting age of English teaching is earlier than the other regular elementary institution. There are some advantages owned by these students, who will be accessible to the incorporation of reciprocal teaching:

(1) These students have established a good foundation in English language learning including vocabulary of nearly 2000 plus some basic grammar knowledge.

(2) Reciprocal teaching illustrates a number of unique ideas for teaching and learning and is based on both developmental and cognitive theories. The strategies embedded in reciprocal teaching represent those that successful learners engage in while interacting with text. They are thought to encourage self-regulation and self-monitoring and promote intentional learning. These students, long influenced by learning norms and teaching goals in their English-featured schools, and seeking for extra tutoring now, will have stronger motive for language improvement compared with others.

(3) Restrained by daily teaching practice in their own school, the extracurricular learning activities could be more flexibly organized and conducted among these students in the after-school training institution. This is because teacher-student or student-to-student dialogue can provide a useful vehicle for alternating control between teacher and students in a systematic and purposeful manner. Undoubtedly, after-school tutoring institutions would provide an ideal platform of appropriate introduction of the reciprocal teaching.

(4) These higher graders are prone to following the teacher’s instruction and free from the phenomenon frequently occurs among the lower graders who can hardly concentrate on the ongoing learning task.

2.2. Reading Materials Selection

As the carrier of the reading comprehension, reading materials need careful selection by the teacher. This paper suggests key points in the process of selecting proper reading materials:

(1) Nonfiction materials, referring to any document or content, purports in good faith to represent truth and accuracy regarding information, events, or people. For this practice, the teacher needs to collect the materials covering a wide range of topics, from nature to household, from entertainment to hobbies.
(2) The contents embodied from reading materials should contain updated information, not obsolete and pertaining the smaller-aged students’ reading taste at present. It is advisable for the teacher to avoid using the stuff cited from textbook, as the reading materials in the textbook have been too familiar or even boring sometimes to the students.

(3) The training program in after-school tutoring institutions should be more interesting, featured with flexible arrangement. The teacher needs to conduct a survey collecting the preference of the students in advance, ensuring the enthusiasm of them.

2.3. Preparatory Work

Before the teacher really commences the reciprocal teaching process, he or she should brief the background information to all the students in the classroom, this could be conducted with pictures presentation, story-telling, puzzles or other classroom games, which serve as the lead-activity or warm-up exercise. The whole practice is aimed at leading the review activity among the students about the previous learned things, and connecting these contents to the upcoming knowledge acquisition.

In the meantime, the relevant requirements could be seriously addressed among the students in advance, which could ensure the normal class discipline and the authority of the teacher’s instruction.

3. Operational Procedure

There are four components constituting reciprocal teaching for the purpose of solving the problems in reading comprehension, questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting. These component strategies fulfill the functions both in fostering reading comprehension and monitoring reading effect; the students could affirm what they have learned from reading via their teachers’ supervision, and the teacher could utilize these four strategic steps to instruct the reading activities.

Prediction is usually harnessed as technique alluring students’ interest for seeking genuine answers and correcting the wrong ones. Students need to clarify information they can hardly understand by asking their teachers or checking by their teachers questions, then the key points will be well positioned. More questions will be asked just after the students’ reading through the whole passage, and the learners should make summary based on the rephrased and elaborated reading texts made by their teachers. The learning pattern ranging from key points positioning to targeting reading, from questions for checking reading effect to summary about reading comprehension, demonstrates a clear logic in reciprocal teaching.

3.1. Prediction

To summarize, predicting provides an overall rationale for reading—to confirm or disconfirm self-generated hypotheses. In this stage, the core task for the teacher is to actively allure the students to relate the reading materials at hand to their own acquired knowledge. In specific, the teacher needs to prepare several questions which should be earlier equipped among the students, which inspire them to imagine or predict what might happen next in the reading discourse. All of these predicative directions are not necessarily accurate, but with inspiratory functions which arouse the curiosity of the student readers. In the real practice, the thesis statement of the sample questions could be made as follows:
(1) w-questions like when, where, who, what might be involved in this reading text;

(2) What connection might be found between previous learned points and this reading material;

(3) please predict the subsequent events in the narrative of the reading passage;

(4) what is the writing purpose of the author;

(5) what information did the author try to convey or imply.

All of these sample questions above are easy to search the answers, and much like the procedure that the students conduct in their native language learning in the classroom. One thing worth mentioning here, the range of questioning, clarifying, summarizing, and predicting should be then repeated with subsequent sections of text.0

3.2. Questioning

This section of reciprocal teaching primarily lies in questions and answers between the teacher and the students, or among the students themselves. The questions should be design as the following norms:

(1) targeting the unsolved or unknown parts generated from the students’ reading;

(2) being inspiratory in pushing further reading;

(3) easy to be answered among the students;

(4) facilitating the establishment of the students’ self-confidence;

(5) being crucial in reminding of the things learned before.

In the practical action, the teacher should finish this mission as the following steps:

(1) The teacher can ask the selected questions in public, calling for the collective and congruous responses from the students, where the active learning atmosphere and energetic participation could be created; if necessary, the teacher can slower the speaking rate consciously or preserve the half of the question, attracting the eager reactions and leaving enough space for students’ self-play.

(2) Encountering the silence or conspicuous hesitation where the students can hardly respond to the questions, the teacher could explain the direction for problem solving instead of presenting the answers directly.

(3) After a round of questions and answers, the teacher needs to divide the learning groups at the will of the students, or designate the group division; then the next round of reading tasks can be distributed and conducted by the previous demonstration.

(4) The answers from multiple learning groups should be put forward by their representatives in turn, where the teacher should excel coordinative skills to balance the competition between groups.

(5) The teacher should always keep focused at the performance of the students in the whole, striving to pose necessary praises for good answers and punishment for sluggish responses.
3.3. Clarification

In this section, the teacher should finish the mission as follows:

(1) collect the difficult vocabulary from the students, and explained the meaning and usage accordingly; attention here, the vocabulary building here is to utilize the context to facilitate the understanding of the words, rather than mechanical explanation;

(2) in terms of abstract or obscure concepts, the teacher needs to present the background information or other related external contents for students’ better understanding, since the point explanation alone does not work well, and even cause more puzzled points among the students;

(3) the teacher could connect all the key points for the students, and then form a whole structure the reading material with a clear logic; this is also the step which sets up a prerequisite for summary in the next section;

(4) the teacher could order the students to re-read the whole passage or intensively read the unsolved parts left, where the constant encouragement should be posed so that the teacher could trigger the motive of the students for further reading.

3.4. Summarization

In short, summarization is the action that the students need to figure all of the key points of the reading materials, and rewrite a short passage including them with a complete structure and a clear logic. The specific practice can be designed like this:

(1) The teacher needs to lead the students to list all the key points generated from the previous sections, the pattern could be contribution from the students in turn; afterwards, the teacher, with the help of the students, collects the information and add something missing from the students’ contribution.

(2) The teacher should let the students deeply understand the importance of discriminating between important and less-important information in the text.

(3) Before the real writing of the summary, the teacher, at the presence of all the students, could use the mind map to connect the key points and help the students work out an outline demonstrating the reading materials.

(4) In the real practice of summary writing, the teacher should always remind the students of two points: a. use the vocabulary and sentence patterns of the students themselves, direct copy work is not permitted; b. no personal remark or other emotional facts is allowed to appear in the summary.

4. The Follow-Up Appraisal

Another point needing attention in this paper is that, the completion of the ritual reciprocal teaching does not mean the end whole process. After the four-step strategies of reciprocal teaching, the teacher needs to appraise the reading improvement and personal performance of the students. Several pieces of checking devices could be employed by the teacher:

4.1. Sharing the Summary Works

The teacher could select the good summaries or ask the students to vote for the excellent themselves;
afterwards, the students could be invited to deliver the summary in public, or even retell the summary by memory. The questions previously generated and sorted could be used again to reconfirm the reading effect of the students.

4.2. Knowledge Points Reinforcement

It would be very natural for those lower graders to meet unknown words in extracurricular reading, the teacher needs to suggest vocabulary explanation by the students themselves. In this practice, the meaning, function and usage of the new words should be well introduced by the context and closely related to the previous reading tasks. In addition, the compulsory procedure needs to be done for vocabulary building, for example, dictation.

Second, grammatical rules involved in the reading materials need to be reinforced by the teacher, who can elaborately design some exercises immediately after the reciprocal teaching.

Third, various cultural factors behind the reading materials would be another bulk of interesting points, worth further addressing by the teacher or group discussion among the students. Some of them might be necessary as they are common knowledge, some of them might be the background information conducive to the next round of reciprocal teaching.

4.3. Exploration of Reading Materials

Based on the knowledge points acquired by the students from the previous reciprocal teaching round, the teacher could add some extra knowledge to the students, in order to fulfill two functions:

a. enlarge the knowledge scale of students’ acquisition

b. set down the further teaching direction for the next round of reciprocal teaching.

5. Establishment of Dynamic Learning Procedure

Just like what mentioned before, the practice of reciprocal teaching should not be taken as a simply mechanical interaction in the class, but as a dynamic learning model recycling from class to class, adjusting over varied reading tasks. Several points need to be taken into careful consideration after one round of implementation of multiple reciprocal teaching strategies.

5.1. Ever-Decreasing of Teachers’ Participation

The proportion of the teacher’s personal instruction and exemplification should be gradually decreasing with the practice being increasingly intensified among the students. In this process, students, initially instructed and modeled by the teacher, are bound to become more adept and confident with the strategies in the reciprocal teaching, and the role of the teacher could transfer from leader to assist, and then to supervisor facilitating evaluation. In short, the teacher’s responsibility for leading the small-group discussions of the text and the strategies will be handed over to the students sooner or later.

As a result, the teacher will be endowed more opportunities to diagnose strengths, weaknesses, misconceptions emerged among reading tasks; and meanwhile proceed to decently plan the follow-up task arrangement.
5.2. Cognition-Oriented Practice

The focus of reciprocal teaching does not linger on the surface, where pieces of knowledge points from reading materials serve as medium only not the real purpose that the students strive to achieve.0

The teacher should always render the students’ correct conception on the reciprocal teaching that what is learned are cognitive strategies for reading comprehension rather than specific facts and procedures. In other words, this teaching pattern focuses on how to learn rather than what to learn. Therefore, learning of the cognitive strategies occurs within real reading comprehension tasks rather than having each strategy taught in isolation; at the same time, all of the reading strategies should work interactively with a pre-planned order.

5.3. Students’ Role Swift

Far too different from the ritual reading tasks, the students under this reciprocal teaching framework, need to fit in the group work as quickly as possible, by fostering the spirit of team work and by developing the awareness of problem finding and solving. Maybe in the past, they have been accustomed to depending on the teachers’ lecture giving, waiting for step-by-step instruction from their teacher. However, the new role giving the students has become dual that the student will play the roles of both an instructor and a learner. This requires the individual student does not function as a static body in learning position, but a dynamic entity in interactive procedure.

6. Conclusion

The reciprocal teaching approach is always enjoying its advantages both in reading ability improvement and accessibility to teacher-student interaction. But actually, its coverage of usage should be widened to a larger sphere or occasion, for example, after-school tutoring institutions. This is because this kind of educational establishments are usually constituting educational resources featured with flexible curricular arrangement, smaller class size, interest-oriented learning atmosphere, and more importantly, the stronger willingness to seek reading ability improvement both from the teacher and the students.

In this paper, a framework of the matters concerning the reciprocal teaching, from the ideas of design, preparatory work, implementation process to follow-up appraisal have been discussed in details. And more importantly, the reciprocal teaching does not only mean a specific teaching pattern that the teacher could utilize, but also a dynamic system integrating sustainable problem-solving and recycling learning advancement.

References


