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THE ART OF READING: ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

Abstract:

At present, the main pedagogical considerations of using professionally-oriented materials in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom in Ukraine call for the content-based instruction to provide effective language learning within new academic contexts determined by the changes in the educational system of the country and the demands of the global job market. Special emphasis is to be put on effective reading strategies and methodologically relevant reading materials incorporated in the meaningful language training of learners expected to meet the requirements of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Reading as an effective instrument for study and social interaction serves a universal educational means as it teaches language learners to process information from different sources properly. Thus techniques, tasks and activities to enhance reading comprehension in the ESP classroom are to be chosen carefully in the content-based instruction framework that aims at the development of all language areas and linguistic skills. Language proficiency is considered a key to quality education, sustainable professional growth and life self-development.

Keywords:

content-based language instruction, reading comprehension, reading strategies, exam training, English for Specific Purposes

JEL Classification: I29

1 Introduction

Current socio-political context in Ukraine is determined by the integration of the country into the European community that calls for the radical changes in different spheres as well as the reforms in the Ukrainian educational system. In addition to the demands for efficient and professional employees capable of meeting the challenges of the changing country there is a huge change in the language policy with special emphasis put on high-quality English language instruction. The objectives to reach in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classrooms are grouped on the dual principle: the ones that relate to the content of instruction and those that aim at communication and functions so that to provide communicative competence of language learners.

To address important pedagogical issues it is significant for language professionals to provide insights into the challenges in the English language teaching (ELT) in Ukraine at present and to outline ways, in terms of solutions, to deal with the intricacies of language training for specific purposes within the methodological framework of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (Council of Europe, 2001). The competitive job market in the global world, as well as the predictions for the future developments, prompt the demands for professionals in different spheres of economy that will be able to deal with innovations and higher standards in the workplace. In this respect, the academic context of the English language instruction should meet the requirements of the validation systems of language ability.

These concerns resonate with the problem of language training for internationally formatted examinations such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Pearson Test of English (PTE), First Certificate of English (FCE), Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) as the language certificates are recognized by universities and colleges, government agencies and employers all over the world. Exam preparation implies addressing particular language features and exam specificity, namely the test content, format and requirements. Language learners should be aware of these aspects to have the level of language performance high enough to succeed.

2 Discussion

The aim of any EFL exam is to assess the examinee's overall linguistic knowledge and communicative skills. Candidates are expected to demonstrate the ability to understand and be understood, to be fluent enough in the use of language, to have an appropriate level of listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills. Apart from the skills candidates are to know adequate ways to express a variety of ideas reasonably in the oral and writing format in different registers in addition to using variable grammar structures and rich vocabulary.

Though reading is a separate examination part, other modules that are examined depend on reading to a great extent. This makes reading comprehension a key component in language instruction and examination preparation. The CEFR system offers detailed explanations of the requirements to reading skills in the form of 'can do' statements. The requirements serve as universal guidelines across European countries to describe achievements of foreign language learners and vary according to CEFR levels of language skills: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 that identify language functions and skills in three categories: 1) Basic User (A1 and A 2); 2) Independent User (B1and B2); 3) Proficient User (C1 and C2) (Council of Europe, 2001). The

levels specify the achievements and match the goals of language development in listening, reading, writing, spoken interaction and spoken production. All these aspects are included into language testing systems that are used worldwide to evaluate language learners' skills, competences, and knowledge.

There is much debate about the ways and methods to teach languages effectively in the EFL and ESP fields. Basic theoretical and practical considerations of raising effectiveness of language training focus on successful language performance in the context of Ukraine's integration into the European community. We believe the aim can be reached via the Content Based Instruction (CBI) approach that it is a special pedagogical framework to reinforce and develop language comprehensive strategies (Brinton, 2003; Bialystok, 2002; Dörnyei, 2001; Richards and Rogers, 2001; Stoller, 2004; Snow 2005). The CBI focuses on the quality of teaching materials and appropriate instruction methods that enhance students' language performance, raise their motivation and interest to English. Undoubtedly, proper language and pedagogical input ensure better academic achievements of language learners (Krashen, 1985; Nunan, 2003). These are the main ideas behind the CBI regarded beneficial for training language learners for doing any EFL examination. The assumption that to do academic tasks successfully language learners must master different language aspects, such as grammar, intonation, vocabulary, sounds, and to be aware of grammar rule and structures resulted in the evolvement of a number of theories united within the framework of CBI in which language is the medium used to learn new content.

The CBI fundamentally maintains that in case students are exposed to and engaged with more content, these factors are most likely to promote their interest and motivation. Focus on content realized in a concrete academic and social situation is another essential component of the CBI. In our view, effective and methodologically appropriate combination of both parameters enables students to use analytical and cognitive skills while learning new information and helps them focus less on the language structure itself. It is obvious that the CBI approach depends on language learners' ability to use linguistic means properly, but it is learner-centered in terms of the content of the materials taught and the techniques and activities applied. Though language instruction in Ukraine mostly emphasizes content-based and communication-oriented teaching settings, still, there is much to be done to enhance communication and linguistic performance of the English language learners via the CBI in the EFL and ESP context. The approach is designed to meet academic, vocational and occupational objectives of the learners, as its main goal is to prepare students to acquire language while using the context of any subject matter since they will learn the language by using it within a specific context.

Nomnian and Johnson (Nomnian, 2002; Johnson, 2004) claim that at present teaching reading can be viewed from two different perspectives. Constructivism refers to educational practices that are mostly student-focused, meaning-based, process-oriented, interactive, and responsive to students' personal interests and needs while the idea of 'instructionism' refers to teacher-centered, skill-based, product-oriented, non-interactive, and prescribed educational practices. In terms of remedial reading instruction theoretical assumptions aim at whole language learning and skill-directed activities within a meaningful context. In educational practice remediation refers to specific strategies directed toward improving student learning outcomes and develops ideas behind the notion of remedial reading as one of the areas to be addressed. The term 'remediation' is used in the instruction process

alongside the synonyms 'compensatory education', 'direct instruction', 'corrective teaching', 'adaptive instruction', 'individualized instruction' all of which aim at the improvement of students' academic results.

Brinton (Brinton, 2003) confirms the CBI is an approach to language instruction that integrates the presentation of topics or tasks from subject matter classes within the context of teaching a second or foreign language or as the integration of particular content with language teaching. Moreover, the CBI aims at the development of use-oriented language skills and at the learning of a specific content, which reflects a shift in foreign language instruction from formal to meaningful teaching that lays the grounds for learners' autonomy and cooperative learning in the learner-centered setting. Recognizing a language learner an equal party in the ESP process teachers should take their learning preferences into consideration.

Recent radical changes in the way people communicate call for using innovative means and ways in the language classroom to employ the resources as well as modern devices to access them. Just a few years ago language learners used tablets and PCs to deal with texts for reading while currently a universal tool to process information is a mobile phone due to its numerous functions. Undoubtedly, mobile phones can be used to the best advantage in the ESP classroom thanks to the world of possibilities they offer for comprehensible reading and exchange of information by using social networks and platforms. Moreover, they might support language learners' interest in special topics, enhance their involvement in critical thinking and problem solving activities.

Given the autonomy and cooperative learning as key factors of successful language learning, scaffolding may be used more extensively to provide enhancement and support in the academic environment. At present, educationalists (Bhooth, Azman and Ismail, 2014; Samana, 2013) state that scaffolding is a teaching strategy based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) that explains the levels of individual achievements in contrast to the goals reached with support from others in different settings. In the EFL classroom support may be provided either by the teacher or other language learners. Four basic types of scaffolding are used in the current EFL context: conceptual scaffolding aims at considering what to learn and guiding language learners to key concepts; procedural scaffolding helps students use appropriate tools and resources effectively; strategic scaffolding encourages students to look for alternative strategies and methods to solve problems; metacognitive scaffolding supports reflection on what students do and achieve, this way it relates to self-assessment.

3 Rationale

Integration of language and content in the EL instruction brings functional (everyday) language into focus and maintains that meanings change depending upon academic contexts. These considerations determine the interchange of classroom group-oriented activities and individually tailored home tasks that reinforce students' analytical ability to compare and contrast authentic materials of various formats, to do different tasks effectively, and to develop a variety of skills and strategies (Ellis, 2003; Hinkel, 2006; Rubin, Chamot, Harris and Anderson, 2007). The application of the pedagogical postulate about content-based teaching and learning in the ESP classroom results in the increased motivation and development of cognitive and analytical skills which are invaluable for shaping language learners' reading comprehension strategies.

Oxford (Oxford, 1990) claims that language learning strategies focus on operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information, specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. The role of strategies in comprehensible effective reading prompted numerous researches in the last few decades. We believe the most logical classification is the one that encompasses metacognitive, cognitive, affective and social strategies (Gibbons, 2003). The first group if strategies refers to purpose-oriented (defining one's purpose and deciding whether the text in question fits one's purpose), comprehension monitoring (making sure that what is read is comprehended) and strategies that focus on learning from text (taking notes, paraphrasing). Cognitive strategies are used for interaction with author and text, different types of reading (scanning, skimming, re-reading), along with strategies for unknown words (using information from text to define the word, translation etc.) and including prior knowledge (making connections between one's prior knowledge with text). Affective and social strategies refer to choosing what to read, reading what one likes, and discussing texts.

Candidates should be aware of the fundamental differences between reading tasks of various exams in terms of allotted time and examination focus. The FCE reading module includes 35 questions to four texts to be done in 75 minutes. The typical tasks are gapped texts with missing headlines and text parts, multiple choice and multiple matching texts. The texts offered to the candidates of IELTS and CAE examinations are mostly authentic newspaper and magazine articles. The Reading Paper in IELTS is limited to 60 minutes with 40 questions that may include multiple-choice questions, sentence completion, short answer questions, completion of tables/charts/summaries, choosing headings, identification of the writer's views and/or attitudes in terms of 'yes, no, not given' answers, classification, matching lists, matching phrases are based on three authentic texts. The CAE Reading Part is limited to 75 minutes, the examinees are expected to do 50 questions (multiple-choice variation, gap filling and multiple matching).

In the language instruction a reading class usually focuses on a reading passage according to the three-phase reading schema of pre-reading, reading and post-reading. Each of these phases is designed to use specific tasks and activities that create a prerequisite for comprehensible processing of the reading text. Pre-reading questions help to elicit students' background knowledge and provide insights into reading texts, introduce key problems and important vocabulary. Post-reading activities include diverse comprehension tasks: true/false; multiple choice; fill in the blanks; complete sentences or texts with relevant information; provide short answers etc. These tasks are supported by vocabulary and grammar-oriented exercises. Follow-up activities aim to engage students in the written or spoken tasks through personal involvement that implies expressing opinions about the text by sharing their comments and ideas on moral or ethical issues raised in the text. Still, to identify the meaning that is implied but not stated directly, a higher level reading skill is required, as this kind of reading requires abstract thinking and richer vocabulary, grammar, and functional routines.

Study of the examination guides that give deep insights and provide tips on reading strategies for language exams resulted in outlining typical strategies that can help learners prepare for the reading part of the EL examination (Table: Task types and reading strategies).

Table: Task types and reading strategies

		Task type	Tips for comprehensible reading
1)		Identifying the topic	Read the title and subtitle to get an overview of the text.
2)		Matching paragraph headings	Read the first paragraph carefully. Then look through the headings. Choose the one that provides the main idea of the paragraph. Check through all the headings for each paragraph. There might be a heading used already, but that fits a 'later' paragraph better.
3)		Sentence completion (no more than three words), note completion	The words, that are used, must be in the same form as in the passage. Moreover, they must fit semantically and grammatically.
4)		Diagram labelling	Read the paragraph carefully and study the diagram at the same time. Use the words in the same form as in the text. Do not change them. Some labels are already given.
5)		Table Completion	Read the paragraph carefully and study the table at the same time. Use the words in the same form as in the text. Do not change the words.
6)		Classification (matching numbered features to a set of general categories)	As the information in the numbered items will be in a different order from the information in the text, read the information in different sections to give an answer to one question.
7)		Locating information in paragraphs (reasons, explanations, examples, problems, etc.)	Read the text, one paragraph at the time, thinking about the main types of information that it contains, and look through the main items in the tasks for the match in the paragraphs.
8)		True/ False/ Not Given (focus on factual information)	First, scan the text to locate the section of the text where the information is given. Read the section carefully and decide where it is True/ False/ Not Given.
9)		Multi-choice questions (may focus on main ideas, details or writer's opinion)	First, scan the text to locate the section of the text where the information is given. Read the section carefully and make sure that the answer is not only correct according to the passage, but also gives an appropriate reason or explanation. Use the key words in the question and in the sentence to locate the very information in the text.
10)		Summary completion, using words from a box (focus on all or parts of the text; be ready to deal with the paraphrases of the words in the text)	Read the summary quickly. Use the title of the summary to find the relevant section in the text. Find the same meaning in the box. At the end of the completion task check whether the answers make sense and are grammatically correct.

Source: own compiled as a result of critical overview of language examination guides

Anderson (Anderson, 2008) maintains that reading involves the integration of various bottom-up and top-down skills in order to reach the goal of comprehension, adding that good readers can combine information from a text and their own background knowledge to build meaning. Language learners should be aware of different reading comprehension tasks and materials that are offered in different EFL examinations, these varying considerably in terms of the language content and strategies to apply to be able to complete them accurately. Besides, candidates should realize the challenges caused by examination logistics, format, variety of reading materials, and time allotted to each task.

The pedagogical practice of training good readers includes intensive and extensive reading, in-class and independent reading, academic and pleasure reading. To achieve better results many EL teachers adopt an integrated approach combining elements of different methods (Chugu, 2014). The basics of the effective approach to teaching reading rely on the following methodological considerations: complexity of authentic and semi-authentic reading material as language learners need to make progress to reach the goal of reading 'real-world' texts. Nevertheless, for students to be motivated to read more and to improve their reading skills, they should read texts that are appropriate for their language ability. The content principle implies that a variety of reading material on different topics must be available: books, magazines, newspapers, fiction, non-fiction, general, specialized, humorous, narrative texts. In addition to encouraging reading different materials for students to be more motivated language learners must know how to read for different reasons (entertainment, information, hobby) and, consequently, in different ways (skimming, scanning). Volume of reading and the amount of time spent on reading tasks are important factors in the exam training.

Obviously, strategies for reading depend on the kind of tasks. Development of such strategies is time consuming and needs systemic effort in the language classroom. Students may need careful introduction to reading, extensive reading in particular, so teachers should explain that reading leads not only to gains in reading proficiency but also to overall gains in language learning. When students use a foreign language as a universal means of communication and study, they learn to analyze, contrast, compare and summarize information from different sources. So, language learners benefit greatly reading independently for themselves as in such a way they make a good progress in reading comprehension, enrich vocabulary and enhance development of writing skills.

To help candidates prepare for the EL examination properly language teachers are to use a variety of tasks so that students could experience different types of reading. Comprehension and reading comprehension strategies should aim at teaching learners to predict, infer, monitor, clarify, classify, evaluate, generalise, scan, skim, read for general and read for specific information. Another important objective for the students to achieve is to gain knowledge of collocations, patterns within text, recognize new word-forms, discourse and text structures, guess words and their associations from the context, chunk texts, comprehension skills. Regular and methodologically relevant use of meaningful tasks in the EL classroom enhances language learners' understanding of the complex nature of reading. The employment of a range of content-based tasks and activities relevant for training fluent users of English is more effective when language teachers use both innovative and traditional methods efficiently. Besides, the language instruction should consider the challenges of future employment in the competitive job market. The complexity of effective language teaching and EFL exam training requires introduction of special reading and exam training courses into the

academic curricula in addition to the application of innovative instructional practices in the ESL and EFL contexts in Ukraine.

Conclusion

Currently, the language instruction in Ukraine is mostly content-based with the focus on the linguistic competence of language learners. Still, demands for highly qualified professionals in the country necessitate a radical change in high education in general, and the EL instruction in particular as knowledge of a foreign language has become a priority that encourages students to use a it as a universal tool for communication and study.

Reading is a great challenge for language learners who have to master several complex skills and language modules. The EFL instruction should provide exposure to different types of reading so that students could accomplish diverse goals, differentiate between different kinds of reading in texts from different sources. Development of reading comprehension strategies is to be ground on classroom and home tasks focusing on reading texts of different volumes and levels of complexity to stimulate students' thinking and to promote their reflection on the reading process.

Using appropriate classroom techniques and activities that are similar to exam tasks makes training for examinations meaningful and useful with meaningful connections between the reading module and other language skills and aspects such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar enhancement, speaking, listening and writing. Reading is one of the core modules in language training as it determines proper understanding of other examination parts. Though language learners are usually highly motivated by successful communication very little efficient communication is possible especially in the non-English language environment without sufficient reading skills.

Highlighting the challenges in the EFL and ESP fields in Ukraine the article put emphasis on four major concerns in the EL instruction: general language training, focusing on the development of all language areas, raising students' awareness of lingual, social, and cultural peculiarities of English; helping language learners become familiar with the peculiarities and format of a certain exam. These factors call for the introduction of special reading courses in the ESL and EFL fields in the country.

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