

IMPROVING STUDENTS' READING SKILLS IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASS

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It is clearly stated in the English Curriculum Standard that the overall objective of the English curriculum at the compulsory education stage is to enable students to develop a preliminary comprehensive language-use ability through English learning. Among the four modules of listening, speaking, reading and writing English reading ability is the most direct manifestation of the process of comprehensive language use and occupies an important position in English teaching. This paper starts from the importance of improving English reading ability, explores the reasons for the weaknesses in reading skills formation in middle school students, and then puts forward relevant suggestions for cultivating and improving students' reading ability.

Keywords: middle school English; language skills; TEFL; reading comprehension; reading instruction.

Foreign research on English reading has a history of hundreds of years. The research on reading comprehension has been in the process of dynamic change and advancement. American psychologist Goodman believes that the reading process is a kind of psycholinguistic guessing game in which students read according to their original background knowledge [1, p. 126-135]. Reading the meaning of all the individual words in a text does not add up to understanding the text. Effective reading requires the reader to synthesize and think about the reading material. Therefore, it is helpful for students to accumulate some cultural background knowledge in the course of their regular reading for reading comprehension skills.

Nunan believes that reading is a process in which the reader and the author interact through the text. In the process of reading, the three elements – author, reader and text – interact with each other, and the main purpose of reading is to understand the key information and the author's intention. Therefore, in reading, readers process the information actively rather than passively. To summarize, the author believes that the process of reading comprehension is a very complex thinking process. In this process, the extraction of visual information, the activation of background knowledge, and the generation of acquired information, which alternate, finally form the process of readers' reading comprehension [2, p. 41-43].

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards) clearly state, that it is necessary to increase the amount of English reading for junior high school students to reach 150,000 words of English reading input, to do a good job of reading guidance, and to improve students' English reading ability with the help of extracurricular reading and independent reading [3].

According to the requirements of the Curriculum Standards, junior high school English teachers should exert their subjective initiative to recommend some extracurricular books to students and guide them to carry out independent reading. However, in actual teaching, due to the tight teaching time and heavy task, teachers seldom recommend extracurricular books for students. Nor do they point out the direction of reading and make reading suggestions for them. Due to the lack of guidance and supervision, some students are either not interested in independent reading in English, or although they can carry out English reading activities, they are not interested in reading in English. Although they carry out English reading activities, there are problems such as blindness and arbitrariness in English independent reading [3].

The current situation of English reading teaching in middle schools of China is as follows. First, reading teaching is very monotonous. Most teachers lack appropriate methods to stimulate students' interest in reading, guide reading, evaluate reading and so on. However, in junior high school English reading teaching, in addition to the teacher's teaching, it is also

necessary to pay attention to the combination of “speaking” and “practicing”. Some students think that the atmosphere of reading class is monotonous and dull, and the reading topics are single, so they are not interested in reading texts. Some students think that reading is just reciting and memorizing grammar points, which is tasteless. To them, reading lessons are just tasks and burdens rather than a source of knowledge enrichment and interest development.

Secondly, the reading of the text stays on the literal understanding, and the teacher only pays attention to the intellectual “input” of the students, resulting in insufficient “output”. Teachers always “guide the students”, so that the students lack the initiative to learn English and do not feel the joy from reading. Moreover, the reading materials in textbooks for students are very limited, and it is difficult to find reading chapters suitable for their interests, which greatly reduces students’ interest in reading.

Lack of students’ awareness of active reading strategies is another challenge. Most of the students think that reading is important because it is easy to lose marks in the English exam and is a difficult part of the exam. Students put heavy pressure on their backs and spend more energy on using some speculative ways to improve their reading scores. The current state of teaching tends to make students equate reading with doing problems in exams.

From a psychological point of view, the reading process is not a simple process of information transfer and passive acceptance of information by the reader, but a very active process of psychological change, in the whole process the reader should be in a positive and active state from the beginning to the end. That is, there should be a strong interest in reading. Students’ lack of a clear and reasonable understanding of the practice of reading in English makes it difficult for them to carry out active reading in English and to expand their reading outside the classroom.

Students lack certain reading skills. In junior high school, students have a limited vocabulary, because many students do not pay attention to the usual accumulation of English vocabulary, so it is possible to encounter a lot of vocabulary in reading, which becomes an obstacle to comprehension of the article, so that students do not dare to read and do not want to read. Some students’ reading skills and reading strategies are not well mastered and utilized. A considerable number of students’ mastery and application of reading skills and strategies are unsatisfactory, they lack training in this area, and they seldom receive guidance on reading skills and methods in the classroom. Meanwhile, students pay less attention to and accumulate less knowledge in this area in the process of learning, which makes it difficult for them to have a deeper understanding of the content of the article and personal reflection.

To improve reading instruction in middle school, we suggest utilizing several techniques described below.

The first strategy is accumulating vocabulary and sentences. To understand the meaning of the text, the meaning of words and sentences should be basically grasped first, and English teachers should gradually encourage students to In the process of English reading, students should gradually accumulate words and sentences so as to improve their English learning ability. Therefore, English teachers can actively improve their own English literacy, apply the connotation of English literacy, use some incentives to skillfully encourage students to actively learn English words and sentences, and then encourage students to discover and explore English vocabulary and sentences independently. Secondly, teachers can improve their linguistic and artistic abilities through vivid language teaching, so as to further increase students’ attention to learning and to pay more attention to words and sentences in English reading.

The second strategy is activating reading experience through innovative teaching modes. Reading in junior high school English textbooks is mainly storytelling and life-related. The aim is to present interesting stories through vivid scenarios to expand language knowledge. The aim is to present interesting stories through vivid scenarios, to expand language knowledge, to increase reading interest, and to increase the language input while learning the content. Through situational teaching, we can consolidate and expand language knowledge, develop

reading strategies, accumulate reading experience and improve students' reading comprehension. After discussion, the author has formed a set of progressive reading teaching mode, from superficial to profound, from superficial perception to in-depth understanding and application.

The third strategy is situational teaching that implies creating learning situations to stimulate reading interests. In English reading teaching, although teachers, as the designers and leaders of teaching, have to keep learning and do a good job in teaching design, students, as the main body of learning, are the ones whose interest in learning, willingness to learn, learning behaviors and habits determine the quality of individual learning. In other words, it is the students who are the direct decision makers and responsible for the learning outcome, and whether they can learn well or not has a direct relationship with the individual.

While middle school students have a strong desire to learn, there are also those who have a low interest in reading, which is related to the individual and to teacher guidance. All enjoyable, effective and successful education is inseparable from the creation of teaching situations and active participation of students [4, p. 54]. Therefore, in English reading teaching, teachers should create teaching situations according to students' physical and mental developmental characteristics in order to stimulate their reading interests and make them become more active and positive in reading [5].

The fourth strategy to improve reading is teaching reading methods and cultivating reading ability. The reading process integrates viewing, information acquisition, translation and thinking, which not only refers to seeing things with eyes, but also requires readers to use reading methods and strategies to acquire information. Junior high school students are very blind, mechanical and casual in English reading because they have not mastered reading skills and methods, and in the long run, they lack interest in English reading.

With this in mind, in English reading teaching, teachers should find ways to teach reading skills and cultivate students' English reading ability, so that they know how to concentrate on finding the main points and how to get the key information.

In conclusion, from the viewpoint of the current English literacy of junior high school students, improving their English reading ability has become an urgent issue, and the cultivation of English reading ability can not be accomplished overnight. Middle school English teachers should take the students' point of interest as the starting point in teaching, take the mastery of basic knowledge as the prerequisite, guide students to master the corresponding reading skills, and combine the requirements of the new curriculum standard with the listening, speaking and writing perspectives to realize the comprehensive cultivation and improvement of students' English reading ability.

It is hoped that further applied study of reading skills development will help English teachers to develop their teaching skills and strategies in the process of English reading teaching, and to stimulate students' independent learning competency.

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