

Evaluating Reading Activities in Microteaching: the Impact of Content-Based Instruction and Cooperative Learning

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1. Introduction

My objective of learning English had been to obtain high scores in examinations such as school tests, Eiken, which is a test to measure English proficiency, and university entrance examinations since time when I was a junior high school student. However, grammar knowledge and reading skills for achieving high scores did not develop my English communication skills. It seems to me that fluency and conversational strategies are sufficient in actual English conversation. Grammar Translation Method and the form of examinations which require learners to memorise grammar and vocabulary hinder learners from speaking English.

Second language (L2) teaching focused on language forms. Compared to the first language (L1), L2 learners face difficult situations in terms of the language acquisition in the case of emphasis on only the forms. However, as Hymes points out, the nature of language in society should be seen. That is, English should be dealt with as a communicative means in English classroom (11). This is because the traditional grammar focused approach aims to provide the learners with the environment to acquire linguistic competence rather than how to communicate with people. In the case of a teacher-centred environment, the teachers know everything which will happen and the information that will be given. It can be said that the traditional idea about learners' language acquisition controlled by teachers results in a rigid teaching style and not a flexible one. Natural linguistic acquisition appears to need learners' autonomy and subjectivity in order to engage them in lessons.

It is supposed that learners' engagement in classroom activities depends on their autonomy. Especially, reading itself in real life is usually an individual activity and the main purpose of reading is to gain information in texts which readers like. As for reading activities, the texts should be interesting for the learners. In that case, the choice of materials can be one of the most difficult things in making lesson plan. In microteaching conducted by myself and peers, many learners show acceptance for the content of reading material. However, in fact, the microteaching based on Content-Based Instruction (CBI) did not increase the learners' comprehension of the content. The assumed problem is excess

focus on tasks which promote English communication and ignore the value of content. Therefore, this paper will find the impact of Content-Based Instruction as a material on learners' engagement in activities.

2. Literature Review

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is to gain some integrated learning outcome. On the one hand, in settings such as bilingual education and immersion programmes, learners are expected to acquire a second or foreign language through learning the subject matter taught in the target language (Lightbown and Spada 155). On the other hand, CBI is implemented as a beneficial approach to enhance the academic performance of students in learning English for academic purposes in university contexts (Song 434). In those contexts, the relevant content with students' major possibly has strong impact on those learners' English development. The purpose of learning English targets the comprehension of the content. Yet, Spada and Lightbown's research discovers that the learners aged five to seven tend to find it difficult to understand instruction of the L2 in subject matter in the classroom (221). Since CBI sees English "as a vehicle for learning content" (Richards and Rodgers 208), it requires appropriate language levels to enable learners to get involved with tasks. CBI is an appropriate purpose of using L2 and seems to expand English learning opportunities in classrooms and promotes the genuine use of English as a communication tool.

At the same time, the appropriate selection of materials is also important as the content of material is supposed to be meaningful for learners. Richards and Rodgers recommend that a wide variety of materials is introduced in class and the main concern in respect with the selection is the authenticity and comprehensibility of content (214). Authentic materials mean materials which are not produced for language learning, which can motivate learners to study the target language since they can find real language use and living through authentic materials (Guariento and Morley 347-8). Therefore, it is important for learners to understand the content of given texts. As for authenticity, Peacock discovers cases where learners find the text less interesting (152). His research of motivation of university students shows that authentic materials can enhance learners' concentration whereas they do not show interest in the authenticity itself (Ibid.). Although authenticity does not guarantee the validity of learners' involvement in activities, it can be said that authenticity is one of the factors for students who want to know specific information such as university ESL learners engaging with learning.

Despite the impact of content on learners' engagement, there are some difficulties of integrating language learning with subject matter learning. One is, as Swain's research points out, the short length of students' utterance in history lessons in immersion schools

(70). Teacher-centred classrooms have a risk of reduced learners' speaking time. The problem raised by Swain is that teachers' way of eliciting learners' response focusses on correcting grammar mistakes. Thornbury questions the teaching method to elicit a response by hinting or guiding learners to the answer which the teachers want or expect (281-2). That teaching appears to have interaction between a teacher and students in verbal exchange, however, real conversation is unlikely to be seen (Ibid.). Even though CBI emphasises the comprehensible meaning rather than language forms, classes for the purpose of language acquisition should be conducted with connection of the consider the process of learners' linguistic development.

As far as advantages are concerned, CBI has the potential of create a learner-centred classroom. Cooperative learning such as group or pair work can increase opportunities of language learning classrooms. According to Dupuy, the focus of CBI is not on language form but on subject matter (206). The comprehension process of content has an impact on language learning in the case that learners speak the target language in the classroom. For example, learners' interaction in English to complete tasks facilitates "authentic language use" (Crandall 117). Crandall claims that students are encouraged to use the target language through interaction with each other to understand the content of the text (Ibid.). That situation where English is used as a tool to communicate can promote natural language use. Additionally, Rodrigo, Krashen and Gribbons investigate the effectiveness of sets of reading and discussion activities in CBI language classrooms (54-6). They point out that reading and discussion activities can contribute to learners' enthusiasm and involvement in classroom activities compared to single reading activity classes (Ibid. 59). Cooperative learning of content in a content-focused classroom can enrich learners' English use and provide learning motivation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Action Research

This research aims to investigate the impact of CBI on learning outcome in a microteaching class conducted by myself. Dörnyei indicates that there has been less action research, where teachers research own their teaching as researchers, though the connection between researchers and teachers has been considered seriously (191-2). However, in order to analyse the impact of CBI in my own teaching and understand the validity and shortcoming of it, this action research is carried out.

3.2. Research Question

1) What elements do learners seek for in the content of reading materials?

2) How does cooperative learning influence reading activity?

3.3. Teaching Context

The students in this study were post graduate students in Teaching English as a Foreign Language course in the United Kingdom while the teaching team consisted of five student-teachers in the same course. The learners already had high English proficiency. As for the majority of students, 84 percent of students were non-native speakers and 93 percent of them were female. The microteaching, which aimed for obtaining critical thinking through reading a children's book, was a single class and 30 minutes length. The lesson is divided into three parts, pre-reading activity to enhance the understanding of critical thinking with pictures, while-reading activity to summarise the story and post-reading activity to share their ideas.

3.4. Data collection

Two participants were invited into this qualitative study in order to see the perception of Asian L2 learners in microteaching. The data collected through each single interview are presented as particular individual cases rather than representative ones in the classroom. The interviews with the two participants conducted after the microteaching were recorded and transcribed. In the interview, questions concerning the content of literature and corporative learning activities in the microteaching were asked. Concerning sampling, a female and a male student in a pair who seemed to have a good interaction in tasks as a pair were chosen.

4. Finding

Here, summarised findings in the data are presented. Interview extracts can be found in the Appendix.

Both of the participants state that inadequate time for reading activity caused their poor understanding of the literature. Less understanding of it negatively affects their feelings in debating activity following the reading. As for the content of the material, the male participant (M) has strong reaction against it as he finds it unrelated to him while the female one (F) accepts literature as a reading material. Yet, she claims that the content of material should have had meaningful information for her. In the debating activity related to the content, they are encouraged to engage with speaking practice. However, as mentioned before they have somehow anxiety to justify their own opinion in the task.

5. Discussion

5. 1. Content of Material

The authenticity of literature enables learners to learn English used in reality. However, as Peacock points out (152), the effectiveness of authentic materials in learners' involvement with tasks is unreliable. The involvement with materials is most likely to depend on individuals' interest. In the data, there can be seen two factors influencing the two participants' preference of the material. One is whether the meaning of content is connected to their lives or not. As pointed out earlier, content-linked language class can contribute to academic English development in university ESL contexts. According to (F), she read texts in order to gain information in the context. If the microteaching had dealt with content in relation to participants' interest or major, it might have made them more engaged in tasks.

The other factor for the preference of material is participants' gender identity. Interestingly, both of them described their gender in explaining their preference. They identify themselves by categorising themselves as a man and a girl. (M) says that "the material targeted female students", shows his negative attitude to the content. On the other hand, (F) explains the reason why she has a positive image of children's literature as follows: "girls usually like cute things". They appear to be determined by gender identity. Learners' identity has a great impact on their preference in materials.

However, it seems hard to choose the context of text which every student is interested in. Rather, teachers should have responsibility to "view pedagogy not merely as a mechanism of maximizing learning opportunities in the classroom but also as a means for transforming life in and outside the classroom" (Kumaravadivelu 14). That is, English teachers should consider not only how learners learn English but also what makes the learning meaningful for their lives. Based on that, it can be said that the shortcoming of the microteaching is the teachers' unawareness of learners' needs.

5.2 Cooperative Learning

As mentioned above, it might be difficult that every student has interest in the content of material. In that situation, cooperative learning can compensate for the shortcoming. Carter explains that students' participation in a process of meaning-creation allows them to have responsibility for activities related to texts and working in a pair or a small group is an effective way of engaging them with reading activities (4). Cooperative learning makes learning environment student-centred and expand learning opportunities by placing learning responsibility on learners. In English interaction among peers, learners can use English as a communication tool.

However, the negative impact on the learning responsibility can be seen in the

microteaching. (M) and (F) have anxiety about the debating activity, because of the individual responsibility in the activity. Despite that, (M) reported that he enjoyed debating task and (F) states that the casual debating style makes her feel better. It means that their anxieties may be coming from uncertainty about the content of literature rather than their English proficiency. As Richards and Rodgers claim (214), comprehensibility of content is necessary. The emphasis on understanding content could have enhanced cooperative learning in the microteaching.

CBI requires teachers and learners to interact with each other in English. Cooperative learning where learners speak English can maximise the opportunity of speaking practice. In that sense, appropriate language levels should be considered in order to facilitate cooperative learning. In this study, the data discloses that the participants did succeed in the debating activity although they have less confidence and understanding of the content. As mentioned above, their high English proficiency seemingly results in that outcome. However, the microteaching forces the learners to debate without evidence from the literature. Consequently, it fails to achieve the learning objective to gain critical thinking. At the same time, it can be considered that teachers' guidance to enhance learning outcome is limited in the classroom.

6. Conclusion and Implication

The process of exploring the meaning of authentic materials, learners' exposure to English can be increased. In that sense, the selection of content is crucial. This is because content play a pivotal role to engage learners with tasks. Two elements to select content of materials can be shown in this research. Firstly, two participants prefer life-related content to children's book. Even though authenticity can be seen in literature for children, the participants looking for meaningful information in reading text hardly have interest in the material used in the microteaching. Secondly, Comprehensibility in content has impact on learners' mental condition. Participants feel anxious in cooperative activity following reading one because of the inadequate understanding of content. In order to maximise the effectiveness of CBI, it is suggested that teachers should consider those elements in selecting a reading text. However, there is possibility that children's book can be connected to learners' life. It is teachers' responsibility to make the content relevant to learners' needs.

However, because of learners' variety of identities, it may be difficult to choose the content accepted by all students in the classroom. As far as literature as a material is concerned, the interpretive feature allows learners to have their own viewpoint. By preparing chances to exchange or share with peers, learners take responsibility for reading tasks. Cooperative learning can improve their motivation for L2 use activity. Teachers

should work as a facilitator who makes learning successful. Under the circumstance, CBI can expand learning opportunities in terms of authentic language use. There is a shortcoming that CBI requires certain English proficiency such as to understand instructions and to describe one's own thought. It is noteworthy that the sequent activities based on CBI have the possibility of creating learner-centred environment where they use English for communication.

This research aims to present the effectiveness of CBI focused on content of reading content and cooperative learning. It cannot be denied that accuracy in English use tends to be ignored in CBI. Well-balanced teaching practice including form-focused interaction and grammar correction methods should be suggested. Apart from CBI, importantly, the interview data in this research reveals a reason that the microteaching failed to increase learners' reading comprehension. The reason is a gap between the teachers' assumed time for the reading and the time needed by the learners. Both Interviewees report that the time length of reading activity is too short. Considering that, it is recommended that teachers observe learners' reaction and adjust a teaching plan flexibly in classrooms.

Appendix

Interview extract :Male student (M)

I: Let me ask about the impression of the microteaching.

(M): Earlier, I didn't think I'd known the story. [...] We didn't have enough time to read the whole story so what I could do is just scanning of it. [...] As a result, I didn't feel I got it [...]. So in debating I felt so guilty, because I had just evidence from the quick reading.

I: Could you tell me your feelings in the debating activity more?

(M): Debating itself was quite fun and I enjoyed it but I couldn't get background knowledge in reading activity so I felt uncomfortable with what I said without evidences.

I: What do you think of the children's book?

(M): The three little pigs [the learning material] is much, much, much far away from my real life. [...] I felt to be pushed into the teachers' interest, honestly. I think, the material targeted female students because they were the majority in the classroom.

Interview extract: Student (F)

I: Could you tell me your impression of the microteaching and the story?

(F): I like reading literature and have imagination. Girls usually like cute things and I'm still young. But time to read the story was too short. [...] I wanted to get information from the text. I read for information. [...] So I think connection to real life is important. But the material might have less connection.

I: Could you tell me your perception of debating parts?

(F): We couldn't find evidences because of time. But debate is OK, because when you, I mean, debate can guide the students. You want to find something to defense own position so debating is more interesting.

I: You said you had less evidence in debating. What did you feel in the activity?

(F): At first, I felt a little less confident as I could not find much evidence in the limited time. But after I actually debated with my partner for a while, I felt better as I found the debate was casual one, like a chat with a friend.

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