



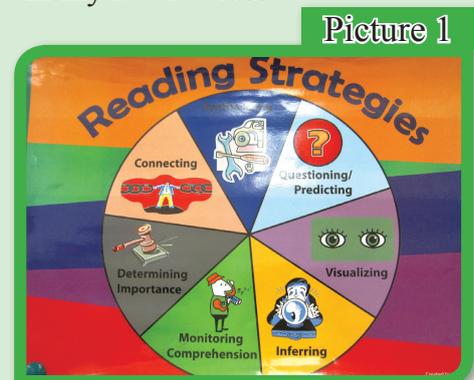
How to Develop Students' Learner Autonomy in Reading Strategies and Reading Activities

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Introduction

A teacher is to guide students how to learn, rather than explicitly teach them what to do. After this fruitful visit to American schools, I was deeply impressed by their open-minded and respectful learning environment. The pedagogies applied in classes were to foster students' learner autonomy and to guide them as independent learners. "It is a truism that one of the most important spin-offs of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process." (Wenden, 1998: xi) The learner autonomy and independence have been valued these two decades. The concepts may be conveyed in varied terms or pedagogies, such as "Spin-Off Classroom" or "Learning Community"; however, the essential spirit is that learners take more responsibility of their own learning by using proper strategies or techniques when tackling their encountered learning problems. Of all these American class observations, reading strategies interested me most. Therefore, I would like to share reading strategies and activities observed and further carry them out in my future class.

Autonomous learning is achieved when learners make use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies (See Picture 1) along with their motivations and attitude. This requires a wide use of learning strategies and I would like to discuss about the ones I observed in American classes and make them possible in my class.



1. Contextualization

First, "contextualization" embeds a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence. Everything was viewed as a whole and students learned to look at their learning materials from a broader perspective. When dealing with reading, they read the whole text first, brainstormed and discussed about it. They regarded the target language arts as a meaningful entity, instead of breaking them down to small chunks without contexts. The materials were introduced top-down and further solved together by the class. Learners were motivated to solve learning problems with their own mind and thoughts. They needed to take responsibility of their learning spontaneously, away from teacher dependence. Certainly, this required proper learning scaffolding built from teachers.

1.1 Tricky Words

The teachers taught practical strategies for dealing with tricky words, i.e. the words they hadn't learned yet. According to the observations from Centreville School and PS 173

Q, students had tried learning these strategies and skills since they were in the first grade. Take “picture cue” for example, the teacher was reading a short story with students sitting on the carpet. She paused when encountering a tricky word and pasted a yellow post-it below it. Students were encouraged to try reading it aloud while she was pointing at the picture as a hint. She continued two more pages to familiarize her students with this strategy and then sent students back to their own short readers. Students started to read books and use post-its when they found tricky words. In addition, they not only tried reading them aloud, but also shared their own books with their neighboring classmates. This reinforced their picture-cue technique and created peer learning by buddy reading. Students were viewed as young independent learners, completing reading tasks on their own. The teacher demonstrated how to use the strategy, and students made it into practice shortly after they learned. I was overwhelmed by this organized teaching flow and skillful performance from the students.

Back from the States, I started to try this in my grade 5 class and the outcome was satisfying. It was a listening passage in the written form of a conversation (See Picture 2). Before listening, I asked students to look at the picture and talked about it in group to grasp the possible ideas of the passage. We had a short class discussion about the picture afterwards and I directed them to the topic, “weather” and “activities”. Then, students read the passage in group and marked the words they didn’t know. After that, we read together and I paused when something was tricky, asking them to fill in the gap. What’s more, they needed to tell me how they chose the answer from the picture cue. Finally, they were allowed to listen to the audio file and circled the answer. After all the steps, they found the listening text wasn’t as hard as they had thought. Carrying out this strategy was simply one goal of doing this task; more importantly, students gained a sense of self-confidence and achievement by solving problems spontaneously.

Another way of coping with new words was to sound them out. The teacher guided the class to read the book, “Recess Mess” together and paused to the unfamiliar words. She pretended reading them wrong with confusion and waited for students’ correction. Some of the students knew they were incorrect and the class was guided to learn new phonic rules and review the ones they might have acquired. The teacher then gave out a small handout to the each student, “Flip the Sound” (See Picture 3), the combination of some variant phonic words. For instance, letter “a” was in words of “apple” and “ape” and sounded respectively for short and long “a” sounds.

They went through the handout quickly and then

Picture 2

D. Listen, Read, and Circle

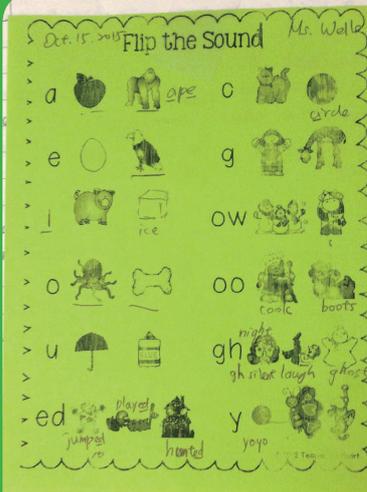


Jacky and Jenny are good friends. Jacky is in New York. Jenny is in Taichung.

Jacky: How's the weather (witch) in Taichung?
 Jenny: It's (snowy / sunny). How's the weather in New York?
 Jacky: It's (windy / snowy) outside.
 Jenny: Er ... Sorry, my mom and I are going out so
 Jacky: Where are you (going / doing)?
 Jenny: We are going to the (zoo / library).
 Jacky: Cool! Have a good time.
 Jenny: Thank you. See you!
 Jacky: Bye!

Picture 3

Oct. 15, 2015 Flip the Sound Mr. Wells



a apple ape o wide
 e egg g gum
 i ice ow owl
 o octopus oo comic boots
 u umbrella y yo-yo
 ed played y yo-yo
 jumped hanted yoyo

together read the book a few pages for practicing this new skill. Later, every student read out loud individually and took notes with the tricky words they found. Eventually, they shared their notes with adjacent classmates and exchanged new words. The whole learning process was a discovery and learning journey. There were obstacles getting on the way, yet students overcame them independently with the teacher's guidance. They learned by doing with their own learning paces, different from the deductive teaching in Taiwan. Being aware of rules is only meaningful when a learner discovers them intrinsically in contexts.

As I reflected on my phonics teaching, I realized the importance of presenting phonic words or rules in sentences. I usually gave out a bunch of phonic examples for students to induce the target rule. However, this may be insufficient when they encounter a new text, since they learned it in segments. There might be a gap between their competence and performance, while the context makes a bridge to shorten it. Providing students with opportunities to finding out answers in meaningful materials is important, which I would like to strive for in my future class.

Moreover, "Chunk Monkey" (See Picture 4) was also an interesting and useful strategy when solving the new words. The teacher started with a book reading to the class and paused when they found a new word. He blocked it with a post-it and asked students to brainstorm what may fit in the gap. They guessed freely but with certain clues from the context and the chunk of adjacent words. This relied on their skills of associations and references. While doing this, their prior knowledge was recalled and refreshed by contributions from peers. If the new word was still puzzling for the class, the teacher referred further back to the topic and sentences for more associations. Students were again free to make mistakes while they were working on problems and seeking out for solutions.

In Taiwan, we use the so-called "Substitution" to introduce word families, for a drilling practice or versatile use of the vocabulary, but lose the concept of using them in meaningful texts. What regards highly here is the techniques for students to tackle with new words and to comprehend texts without assistance either from a dictionary or teacher. Learning a strategy to solve problems is more essential than the language art itself. I would like to teach my students this strategy by finding the keywords in the reading texts. Making guesses and mistakes are unavoidable when they are figuring out, which is simply part of a natural learning process. They need to take more responsibility for their own learning and become autonomous learners.



2. Connections

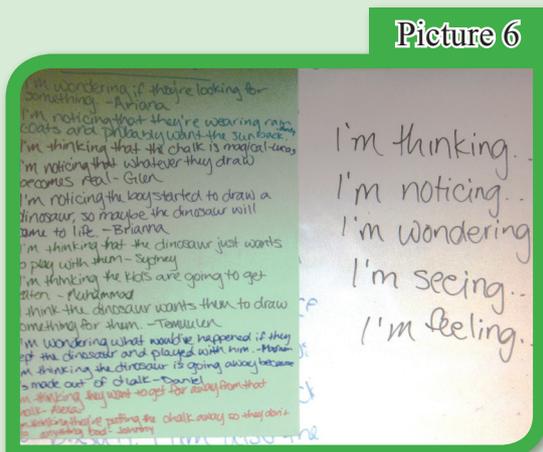
Using strategies to discover new words in a contextualized reading passage is part of successful comprehension. As a proficient reader, he requires higher-level strategies for dealing with challenging texts and makes connections to his life, i.e. retrieving information

from his schema. In one grade 2 class observation, the teacher requested the students to give opinions or comments to one student finishing her show-and-tell (See Picture 5.). The topic was about her weekend leisure and other students shared their experiences with positive feedback. They were not only exchanging information, but also making “connections” from the verbal text to their real life. Later, the teacher even brought out this term, “connections” and asked students to infer its meaning. American young learners have been learning reading strategies at an early phase.



Furthermore, one grade 5 class was reading a chapter book about the encounter with dinosaurs. They had derived some crucial quotes and main ideas from the author, Bill Thomson. By using key phrases, such as, “I’m thinking”, “I’m wondering” and “I’m feeling”, (See Picture 6 and Picture 7) they began expressing ideas and thoughts. In addition, they summarized the book and exchanged inspirations or made comments about it. While they were doing this, they were actually making connections to their life and personal experiences. Reading doesn’t exist alone in texts, but undergoes a process of reader-author communication.

The relationship with the reader and reading passage generate different interpretations, according to readers from varied backgrounds. A strategy embodying the concept above is QAR (Question and Answer Relationship). It categorizes questions into four types, “Right There”, “Think and Search”, “Author and Me” and “On My Own.” Among them, “Author and Me” and “On My Own” require the learner to use their prior background knowledge. It is beyond the text itself, but from a higher standpoint of the reader’s assumptions, where the real reading takes place. However, these two kinds of questions are unlikely to be seen from reading texts presented in our current textbooks. They may be challenging to our young EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners; alternatively, it is possible for high achievers to speculate and ponder from a broader viewpoint of the text. Differentiated instruction can be made in my future class in terms of QAR. Readers may reflect on their own previous experiences or even pose unsolved inquiries when interacting with reading texts, which provokes their inferences or predictions to the reading.



2.1 Inferences

“Inference is a foundational skill — a prerequisite for higher-order thinking and 21st century skills.” (Marzano, 2010) Of all my class observations, one grade 5 class read a wordless book together, so they verbally created the story to some extent. The teacher recognized their effort, and more importantly, elicited students to think how they could do this. Students began contributing their ideas and opinions and then induced the notion that they brainstormed the story by making inferences from the pictures. The teacher again clarified and reinforced what inferences are, and how they use clues or hidden messages to attain this purpose. In addition, a few books, namely “JFK (John F. Kennedy) Assassination” and “Mysteries of Dinosaurs Extinction” were introduced to students to recycle the skill of making inferences. Students learned to perceive and ponder incidents from various viewpoints. They inferred their own facts by means of the evidence shown in the book.

When observing it, I was impressed by their controversial and serious reading assignment and yet realized its purpose for the inference strategy. Back to my real class, my students may not be able to do such high-level inferences, but they could try inferring meanings of new words through the context or adjacent sentences. Take my grade 6 reading passage for example (See Picture 8), students didn’t know the word, “convenient” but they could infer its meaning by key words, “quickly and easily”. I was glad that my students could try to make inferences from the text and tackle the new word. The problem solving ability is the one I expect my students to possess.

Picture 8

1 Sean, Joy, Kevin and Lilly are in Linkou. Sean and Joy go to school by bus because it's convenient. They can go to school quickly and easily. Kevin goes to school on foot because he likes walking. Lilly goes to school by car because she can talk to her younger brother, Kyle. They all like to study in Ruiping Elementary School.

	True	False
1. Sean goes to school on foot because it's convenient.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. They are happy to study in Ruiping.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Kevin likes walking.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Lilly can talk to Kyle in the car.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. "Convenient" means(意思是) quickly and easily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Picture 9

WELCOME!

As I travel around the country visiting schools and talking to my readers, many kids tell me how much they want to write, but they have trouble getting started. They even think of an idea to get the story going.

"Where do you get your ideas?" they ask me. It's not an easy question to answer. A friend of mine, who's also a writer, answers that question by saying, "I get my ideas at the Idea Store."

Too bad there isn't really an Idea Store. Or is there? How do writers get ideas? And how do we figure out how to make a story interesting, suspenseful, or funny?

HERE'S A WRITING SECRET: There are three places that ideas come from. Let's think of them as the three departments of the Idea Store. The first department of the Idea Store is full of everything we see and hear and find in the world around us. The second department is jam-packed with all of our experiences—things we wonder about.

LET ME GIVE YOU SOME EXAMPLES:

Department One: EXPERIENCE
Once I saw a boy getting onto an airplane by himself. I watched him as he set down and started to read a letter. Who was the letter from? What did it say? I don't know, but it gave me an idea for a book. The main character has to leave home and live with her cousin. When she arrives, she finds a letter in her suitcase. The letter is from her mom. It tells her that she is about to begin a secret life—and she will never come home again.

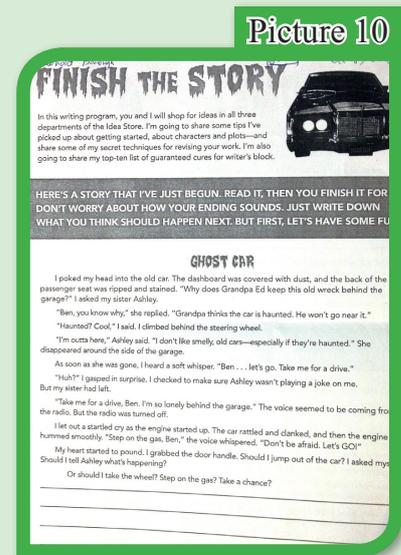
Department Two: MEMORY
For another story, I remembered my favorite book, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury. That book is about a very scary carnival. It gave me the idea for writing a book that starts in a carnival. In my story, a girl named Maggie goes to a fortune-teller at a carnival. The fortune-teller tells Maggie she's in a... Of course, Maggie doesn't believe her—until the terrible accidents start...

Department Three: WHAT IF?
I started wondering what it would be like to have a double—someone who looked just like you. And before I knew it, I had the beginning of a story about Ross and a boy who not only looks like him—but acts like he is him.

2.2 Predictions

The prediction strategy is a simple but powerful way to help readers connect what they know with what they are reading. The speculations are made from smart guesses in accordance with clues provided in the reading text. One grade 6 class from Freehold Borough Public School demonstrated how they tried making predictions. They seemed to have a short discussion about predictions in advance, and they were given a handout (See Picture 9) with key elements and phases of making predictions.

Together with it was a scary story about a ghost car (See Picture 10). They needed to read the passage first, marked the clues they found, and then tried writing a possible conclusion to the story. Apparently, students relied on other than their reading ability but the writing skill as well. Students may tend to be more comfortable with the structure of a narrative text, i.e. the ghost car, than with the feature and structure used in an informational text. Their curiosity was aroused and satisfied which made this task worth challenging to them. This learning technique was introduced to my students in the “pre-reading” phase when they were about to read conversations or picture books. The implied hints were usually pictures, which also gave students a general idea of what may happen in the upcoming content. Learners need to refer to the implications or clues autonomously.



Conclusion

Students were viewed as self-reliant learners in terms of using reading strategies. They sorted out learning problems and attempted to construct their reading ability for spontaneous learning. From the class observations, some schools even taught students metacognitive strategies. Wenden (1998:34) suggested that “metacognitive knowledge includes all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations.” In a sense, metacognitive strategies are skills used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity. With the applications of both cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies, students are becoming autonomous learners. For instance, schools in New Jersey showed posters with a reading goal or current status of their sustained silent reading. One of the posters was written that “Our class reads for twenty minutes. Our goal is to read thirty minutes by the end of October.” Moreover, a graphic chart visually indicated the quantity of books read was in sight in the classroom (See Picture 11). Thus, students could be overtly aware of their reading progress and monitor their own learning.

American teachers were building learners’ autonomy cognitively and metacognitively and students learned to take charge of their successful learning. On the contrary, Taiwanese students tend to depend on their teachers’ direct instructions but lack independent thinking. Changes are not easy to be made; nevertheless, I would endeavor to develop students’ learning autonomy, making this American visit worthwhile. I have been implementing some reading strategies in my class and students are adapting themselves to handle



problems unaided. They may gradually develop varying degrees of independence throughout their learning, as they are shifting the learning responsibility from teachers to themselves. I have confidence in guiding my students toward the right direction of learning.

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