Extensive reading in an ESL class in the United States: Some good points

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reports classroom observations in one of the ESL classes at the American Language Institute, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, USA in which the students are from Taiwan, Korea, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia. The focus of the class was on reading for pleasure or extensive reading. The classroom observations were conducted in five class periods consecutively. This paper discusses the advantages of extensive reading by highlighting specifically-observed behaviors, namely: (1) teacher lesson opening; (2) student awareness of self-learning determination; (3) teacher scaffolding; (4) student awareness of learning pace; (5) student empowerment through varied reading skills; (6) dynamic interactions between students and a teacher; (7) the nature of questions arising from classroom interactions, and (8) roles of observers. This report sheds crucial light on the implementation of an extensive reading program in an ESL context, and in turn it may be a useful yardstick for the implementation of extensive reading programs in an EFL context (i.e., Indonesia).

Introduction

The class observed was ALI 390, an ESL class at the American Language Institute, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, which ran for one semester from late September to mid-December 2007. Each of the class periods was 90 minutes long and was conducted from 6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. There were nine female and six male students in the class. Most of the 15 students were Taiwanese, but there were also students from Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia. The instructor was an American with overseas teaching experience currently working on a Ph.D. in TESOL and Composition at the same university.

The focus of the class was on reading for pleasure, also called extensive reading, where language skills involved were mainly reading and speaking. The reading materials were novels with a wide range of themes (e.g., romance, humanism, adventure, autobiography, detective). In the class, the instructor de-emphasized form-based instruction (e.g., grammatical errors or mistakes). Instead, he put great emphasis on fluency in speaking. More importantly, the instructor asked the students to talk about the characters and events in the novels they read, and

then develop opinions about these characters and events in the context of their own lives. In short, the class was tailored for facilitating speaking derived from reading activities.

In these classroom observations, I served as a non-participant in the first class period and a participant observer in the rest of the class periods. In one class period, I served as a teacher that the instructor assigned for an ice-breaking activity before the students took a mid-term test. Throughout the classroom observations, I employed an attentive-observing technique requiring a continuous high level of attention to detail. In doing so, after every observed class period was finished, I jotted down what the class was doing.

Therefore, in this paper, I briefly describe selected behaviors in each of the class periods observed in unobtrusive and non-judgmental ways (see Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999), and then connect the practices observed to related theories. In this regard, based on the observational notes written from the first to last classroom observations, I highlight eight main selected behaviors as consecutively presented as follows: (1) teacher lesson opening; (2) student awareness of self-learning determination; (3) teacher scaffolding; (4) student awareness of learning pace; (5) student empowerment through varied reading skills; (6) dynamic interactions between students and a teacher; (7) the nature of questions arising from classroom interactions; and (8) roles of observers.

Description and analysis

Teacher lesson opening

Firstly, in each of the class periods, the instructor always informed the class of what the students were going to do or provide present activity previews. This behavior is called an opening phase intended to start the lesson so that students know what to do in the classroom and build learning activities that encourage the students to practice all extensive reading processes (Farrell, 2006). In other words, such a phase reflected the concept of "structuring" (Richards, 1990) where the teacher's intention was made clear, and reading activities were sequenced on the basis of logic and structure which students could perceive. As a result, the students were well-informed of the intention of any activity that they did and why they performed it in the classroom.

Student awareness of self-learning determination

Furthermore, in every class period, the instructor asked the students to discuss in pairs the novels they read outside the class and share their ideas with the whole class. According to Brown (2007), reading novels or other longer texts outside the class is a characteristic of reading for pleasure or extensive reading whose goal is to achieve a general or global understanding of the reading materials usually chosen by the students themselves. The instructor allowed the students to choose their own reading materials, e.g., novels—adventure, fiction, humanism, detective, and autobiography, because this would motivate and encourage them

to read (see Bell, 1998). Self-selection of reading material is deemed the key to extensive reading because students choose books which they easily understand and not those which force them to read and comprehend every word or sentence, thus hardly engaging themselves in reading for pleasure (Day & Bamford, 2002; Harmer, 2007). Day & Bamford (2002) suggest that one of the ways to get students to read a lot is to make sure that they read material that contains vocabulary and grammar within their linguistic competence.

Teacher scaffolding

Thirdly, not only the students, but the teacher also read novels outside the class. In one instance, the teacher summarized what he read and asked the students to ask questions about it. In this case, the teacher became a role model of what a good reader is like (Day & Bamford, 2002), thus making it possible for the teacher to recommend reading material to individual students. In this way, the teacher and students build an informal reading community, experiencing together the value and pleasure derived from the written words (e.g., novels). Moreover, such an effort can be considered "teacher scaffolding," which enables students to receive support from a teacher who, for example, makes particular tasks possible for students to perform at a new level. In other words, teacher modeling of good reading practices for students is a useful form of scaffolding (Yang & Wilson, 2006).

Student awareness of learning pace

Next, in every class period, the teacher suggested to students that they were free to stop reading any material when they got bored. In this regard, the teacher did not force the students to read as many pages as possible. It means that a student could read at his or her own pace. It also suggests that the quantity of reading is not an absolute number of hours or pages. It depends on a variety of changing factors to do with types of reading program, levels of student proficiency, and other variables (Susser & Robb, 1990). More crucially, because students are given opportunities to choose their own reading material, they are able to focus on their own reading processes, thus their anxiety is reduced and motivation is either maintained or heightened. Therefore, this means that a teacher needs to recognize the fact that every student has a different capability of doing a certain task (Day & Bamford, 1998).

Student empowerment through varied reading skills

Interestingly, the information which the students shared with one another was about characters, events, conflicts, and personal comments on the reading materials. This encouraged the students not only to generate a global comprehension of the novels, but also to develop their specific reading comprehension skills. These skills included (1) reorganization—summarizing what they read; (2) referential—hypothesizing characteristics of persons (e.g., give the reasons why characters are bad or good); (3) evaluation—judging the worth, desirability, and

acceptability of characters' actions; and (4) appreciation—emotional response to content (verbalizing feelings about the selections and demonstrating sensitivity, antipathy, and empathy with characters and events) (see Alderson & Urquhart, 1984). These skills can promote interactive and meaningful reading activities that posit an interaction between a reader and a text, and in turn encourage the students to speak up on the basis of their own opinions. Furthermore, in a framework proposed by Vygotsky, it is indispensable for students to interact with others (e.g., peers or a teacher) because it is through this that they naturally develop and extend their linguistic knowledge.

Dynamic interactions between students and a teacher

The teacher also always led the class through pair sharing, sharing with him, and whole-class sharing. In pairs, the students were encouraged to talk about the characters, events, and conflicts in the novels they read, and then ask questions if more information was needed. Sharing with the teacher allowed the students to see him as a partner with whom they could share ideas about what they read. Lastly, the teacher initiated whole-class sharing by asking three or four students to talk about what they read with the entire class. Sharing with peers, with the teacher, and with the whole class is aimed at maximizing student involvement in follow-up activities after reading outside the class. Such various kinds of sharing help students (1) discover what they understood and experienced from reading; (2) keep track of what they read; and (3) monitor their attitudes toward reading (Day & Bramford, 2002). Harmer (2007) explains that keeping track of what students read is one of the ways to keep them reading the material (i.e., novels). More importantly, allowing various interactions in the classroom means that a teacher helps students achieve three types of competence, namely (1) participative competence—the ability to respond appropriately to reading tasks, (2) interactional competence—the ability to interact appropriately with peers while sharing information about what students read, and (3) academic competence—the ability to acquire reading skills.

The nature of questions arising from classroom interactions

It was observed that when information sharing took place in pairs and in the whole class, many inferential questions from the teacher and peers arose. This was because in extensive reading activities, the students were not required to demonstrate their understanding by answering comprehension questions per se; rather, they were required to demonstrate their capabilities of communicating the text. Inferential questions—which differ from display questions because the latter simply elicit information already known to the teacher—are (1) be purely exploratory, (2) ask what the teacher and students genuinely wish to know, and (3) have no right and wrong answers. In the classroom, such questions can promote genuinely communicative interaction and stimulate complicated language output from students (Ho, 2005).

Roles of observers

The teacher assigned five participant observers in the second class period until the last class period. In this case, we got involved in student-student interaction which made the students feel comfortable because they started to regard us as members of their learning groups or reading community. In turn, they started to see us as their co-learners or partners, not strangers. Thus, being participant observers and observing the class more than three times could help turn "the observer's paradox" into a positive phenomenon in the classroom—the presence of an observer positively affects the behaviors of those being observed, such as a student who begins to talk more because of the presence of an observer (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Mckay, 2006). More crucially, participant observers are able to record the nature of student-student interaction thoroughly and accurately.

For example, when I closely observed the students in pair sharing, I found that a Taiwanese student consulted her Chinese-English electronic dictionary for words she did not understand. When I asked her why she used this device, she said that she needed to "translate the words into Chinese to grasp their meaning". Translation in this case is a reader-initiated strategy as a support or backup device (Kong, 2006). It is a way for some ESL learners to confirm their own understanding of words and texts.

Conclusion

Overall, extensive reading activities encourage students to read for pleasure both inside and outside the classroom, to read for meaning, and to engage in sustained silent reading. Such activities could lead to reading independence and autonomy (Bell, 1998). More crucially, extensive reading can empower students to be fluent readers who draw connections between reading and their own lives and, in the process, make new information a part of their own knowledge or schemata (McDonough & Shaw, cited in Landry, 2002).

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