Developing ESL/EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension of Expository Texts

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Expository texts are written to convey, describe, or explain non-fictional information. It is more difficult for ESL/EFL learners to understand these types of materials than narrative texts because they have specific text structures, contain technical vocabulary, and require readers to have background knowledge. This article explores effective strategies that enhance ESL/EFL learners' understanding of informational texts. After examining elements of expository texts, this paper lists the differences between skillful readers and struggling readers. Some recommended strategies then follow.

Introduction

Many early childhood educators ignore the teaching of expository texts (Duke, 2000). Expository texts include biographies, essays, how-to books, encyclopedias, reference books, experimental books, scientific reports, newspaper articles, and so on (Reutzel & Cooter, 2007). The decrease in the teaching of informational texts causes a lot of children to have difficulties in understanding these materials. The neglect of learning through expository texts in the early grades affects children's reading success after the third grade (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). Providing children with more opportunities to explore expository texts is encouraged (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Yopp & Yopp, 2000, 2006).

This notion can be applied to English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learners, for their experience and practice reading expository texts will help them establish useful skills for better reading comprehension in more complex texts. How do ESL/EFL readers develop their reading comprehension in informational texts? This paper will answer this question while addressing the following concepts: elements of expository texts, characteristics of skillful readers, and suggested strategies.

Elements of Expository Texts

Before discussing what teachers can do for ESL/EFL learners to develop their reading comprehension in expository texts, it is critical to understand their features: text structure, technical vocabulary, and background knowledge.

Text Structure

Expository texts have clear text structures: (a) cause and effect, (b) comparison and contrast, (c) description, (d) question and answer (e) simple listing, and (f) time order (Reutzel & Cooter, 2007).

a.   **Cause and effect** presents how an event or fact brings about another event or result.
b.   **Comparison and contrast** analyzes similarities and differences among concepts and events.
c.   D**escription** explains an idea or concept.
d.   **Question and answer** presents a problem with a solution.
e.   **Simple listing** arranges a group of facts, concepts, or events.
f.   **Time order** organizes information into a chronological sequence.

Readers who know how an expository text is organized have a better idea of how to read and understand its content. When they know a text has a cause and effect structure, they can focus on finding the cause(s) and result(s) that the text is highlighting. Once they know what to focus on while they are reading, they get a clear frame of the text, which helps them better comprehend content.

Technical Vocabulary

Expository texts contain more difficult vocabulary and concepts than narrative texts (Duke & Kays, 1998). In non-fiction texts, readers may see complicated words they do not normally encounter or use in their daily lives. The more frequently ESL/EFL learners come across unknown words, the more likely they are to get confused about comprehending what message or messages a text carries. Additionally, expository texts are harder to read because they explain particular contents unlike fictional texts in which readers can easily follow the plot. This causes ESL/EFL learners to feel that it is difficult to read informational texts.

Background Knowledge

Authors of informational texts assume that readers already have some prior knowledge of the topic. They leave out information they expect to be part of the readers' previous knowledge. Thus, they do not give readers detailed background information regarding their materials. In other words, expository texts require readers to infer content. Therefore, these types of texts have low cohesion, which means that they have less explicit explanations. Readers who do not already know the subject in general have a hard time understanding the concepts.

What Skillful Readers Can Do

There are three characteristics skillful readers have when they read expository texts: activation of their background knowledge, making inferences, and possession of rich experience.

Activation of Background Knowledge

When skillful readers happen upon information or words they have not learned, they activate their background knowledge to relate the new information or words to previously acquired information or word knowledge. Even when they simply read passages, they can bring out connected information as much as possible from their prior knowledge. For example, while reading a text about fish, they tap their schemata to gather information regarding fish, such as types of fish, places they live, and their characteristics. Making associations with the text information helps them understand the text. On the other hand, struggling readers do not connect new information or words to old by making use of their background knowledge. This isolates struggling readers and causes increased difficulty.

Making Inferences

Readers have to read between the lines and relate the text information that has a less explicit explanation to their existing knowledge for better comprehension. The use of background knowledge assists readers to grasp the content of expository texts, as they can refer to their prior knowledge in order to fill in gaps between old and new information. On the other hand, struggling readers have no idea what to do when they read a text because their critical thinking does not get involved in their reading process. They either keep reading without understanding much of what is written, or stop reading when they think they cannot understand any further.

Possession of Rich Experience

Another aspect of skillful readers is that they have rich experience; whereas, struggling readers generally lack experience and fail to establish their vocabulary knowledge or reading understanding. For example, if readers have a variety of experience with animals, it is less complicated for them to categorize animals, understand their characteristics, and learn new vocabulary related to animals. Reading can be more concrete to them because they know, or at least can guess, what a text is talking about. However, struggling readers who have less experience with animals may have a hard time understanding the content and making inferences from unfamiliar information in texts, for they do not have prior knowledge with which to make any connections.

Suggested Strategies

There are some strategies that are recommended to develop a reader's vocabulary base and activate background knowledge for better understanding of expository texts.

Use of Transition Words

It is beneficial for readers to learn and practice recognizing key and clue words. If a text contains transition words such as "first," "second," and "third," readers know this text structure is listing some concepts or events in order. When readers know contradictory key words including "however," "but," and "on the other hand," they know they are going to read something opposed to the information they have just read. Additional clue words like "moreover," "in addition," and "also," assist readers in expecting that they will gain extra facts or concepts related to the information they have read so far, or in understanding that the sentences they are about to read will describe events, concepts, or facts before these particular transition words. In sum, learning to spot major and clue words aids readers to read the text clearly.

Organizing Text Information

Awareness of text pattern is indispensable for readers (Peregoy, & Boyle, 2001). Since expository texts contain specific text structure, it is useful for readers to know each text frame. If readers know they are reading passages that compare and contrast two things, events, or concepts, they can categorize information into appropriate groups. Koda (2005) points out the effectiveness of teaching how texts are organized by using first language experiences or knowledge. Reading a text with the understanding of its text framework helps readers organize information. This facilitates their reading comprehension.

Establishing Vocabulary Knowledge

Because expository texts tend to have complicated vocabularies, it is essential for readers to develop their vocabulary knowledge. Understanding new vocabulary should be meaningful to them. Memorizing new words without connecting them to readers' schemata may work in their short term memory. However, if readers learn unfamiliar vocabulary by associating it with something they already know, it is more effective for them to capture its meaning and store its information in their long term memory.

Semantic mapping is a graphic display that shows clusters of related words. Readers write down a key word or concept from their reading in the middle of a sheet, then add and connect linked information or terms from their prior knowledge. Relating words to their existing knowledge is important (Vacca, J. L., Vocca, R. T., Gove, M. K., Burkey, L., Lenhart, L. A., & McKeon, C., 2003). This facilitates readers to connect their old and new information, which requires them to activate their background knowledge and cognitive processes.

Another approach for establishing vocabulary knowledge is making a "vocabulary card bank." On an index card, readers write a new word, its definition, and an original sentence using the new term (not just copying a sentence from a dictionary), as well as some pictures that can trigger them to remember the new vocabulary. This gets the readers involved in relating new vocabulary to their existing knowledge. In short, associating new terms with meaningful information is significant for readers to develop their vocabulary knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has examined expository texts in terms of elements of expository texts, characteristics of skillful readers, and useful approaches. High-performing ESL/EFL readers enjoy reading because they have the ability to manipulate their background knowledge in order to comprehend unfamiliar information, words, or concepts. They make inferences so that they can fill in gaps between new information and existing knowledge. Vocabulary and prior knowledge are closely correlated. Stepping back to look at the whole picture of expository texts with their text frameworks also helps readers better understand the content. On the other hand, struggling readers face challenges in understanding non-fiction texts because they have limited experience associated with vocabulary or concepts they encounter. This causes them to lose their motivation to read. To

improve the abilities of struggling readers, teachers can help them by using the strategies described above. It should be noted that teachers need to be aware that teaching learners how to relate their prior knowledge to and interact with a text critically guides readers' deeper understanding of texts. This will foster ESL/EFL learners to become more powerful readers in other types of reading materials.

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