

# THE INNOVATION IN TEACHING READING TO THE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS HO CHI MINH CITY

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## I. Introduction

The aim and objectives of teaching English in University of Economics, HCM City are to train future graduates who can use English in their future work and most importantly read specialized materials in their specific fields. At the university, the medium of instruction is the mother tongue but the students have to read a great number of specialized texts available in English. The reading ability is a crucial tool in their learning process. Without it, the students cannot deal with the specialized materials in English that they have to read during the study and after graduation. More importantly, reading actively, efficiently and thoughtfully should be required in order to succeed in their college work and real life. For them, the ability to read efficiently has both short-term and long-term importance. In order to achieve the main goals, reading skills have been considered and focused on by all the teachers for the students at University of Economics, HCM City. According to Richards (2002), the students need to develop effective analytical processing skills through reading, problem solving and critical thinking, and to develop technical reading skills rather than those used for literary reading.

Therefore, an attempt to incorporate the integration of the four language skills into the teaching of reading to the students at the university to enhance the students' reading comprehension and make a reading class more interesting and interactive is a necessity.

## II. Literature Review

### 1. What is innovation?

*"Curricular innovation is a managed process of development whose principal products are teaching (and /or testing) materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters".* (Markee, 1997:46).

First, Markee (1997) emphasizes the fact that the primary goals of any project in curricular and teacher innovation must be to promote deep, on-going professional change, which specifically involves engaging teachers in developing new materials, methodological skills, and values. Second, he suggests that curricular innovation always takes place within a matrix of cultural, political, economic, institutional, and administrative variables that directly influence the ability of project participants to innovate in meaningful ways. Third, he also implies that the extent to which innovations are accepted or rejected by adopters is influenced by the personalities and previous experiences of participants and a number of attributes (relative advantages, complexity, form, explicitness,...).

In general, curriculum innovation is both a highly complex phenomenon ( Fullan, 1993; Markee, 1997) and one that requires further research and investigation (Stoller, 1994).

#### 1. Integration of the four skills in a reading class

In communicative activities, the learner has to activate and integrate his communicative knowledge and skills in order to use them for the communication of meaning. Therefore, the process of teaching reading can be made student-centered instead of teacher-centered through the use of communicative or interactive activities in the classroom. The aim of the activities in the reading class is to help students focus on the reading skill but the listening, speaking and writing skills should not be overlooked since the study course is conceived as an integrated course. Even in designated reading class, the reading skill should not be separated from other skills and activities that include listening, speaking and writing are well motivated.

*"Interactive, integrated skills approaches to language teaching emphasize the interrelationship of skills. Reading ability will best be developed in association with writing, listening, and speaking activity. Even in those courses that may be labeled "reading", your goals will be best achieved by capitalizing on the interrelationship of skills, especially the reading-writing connection"*, (Brown, 1994:283)

The overall competence in the foreign language involves performing the four skills in an effective combination. It is the activity which links reading with other forms of communication will provide a reading integration of the language skills. Integrated skills activities bring together the four skills in a natural and realistic way, and provide a balanced method for students to practice and develop their language skills. In other words, the process of integrating language skills involves linking them together in such a way that what has been learnt and practiced through the exercise of one skill is reinforced and perhaps extended through further language activities which bring one or more of the other skills into use.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **1. Procedures**

It is important that the teacher should discuss the advantages of the new method-the integration of the four skills in a reading class with the students so that they can see the benefits they might get from what the teacher has tried to do for them. In this way, the students are more motivated in a reading class, which contributes to the success of the innovation (Markee, 1997).

On the first day of innovation, the students were given a reading comprehension pretest. The teacher made the best use of the results of the pre-test by pointing out to the students which areas they were weak and needed to improve. During the reading course, the teacher integrated the four skills in teaching reading in order to help the students enhance their reading comprehension and make reading classes more interesting. At the end of the course, the post-test was given to the students to measure if they make any progress in reading comprehension and the questionnaires were administered to all of them to see if they enjoy the new method of teaching reading. Both the tests and questionnaires are used to collect feedback from the students to find if the innovation really works in the classroom. In addition, the teacher has been observing the students' performance, their attitudes and the atmosphere of the reading class during the innovation to make the evaluation more valid and reliable.

#### **2. How to implement the innovation**

The integration of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) with the emphasis on the reading skill in a reading class must be applied efficiently by the teacher. This approach provides a variety of tasks and activities for a learner-centered reading class, which makes the reading lessons more comprehensible and enjoyable. In the reading class, the teacher plays integral role on all the activities to motivate students and set a mood conducive to reading. The teacher must be able to monitor students' progress, provide feedback and encourage them at appropriate time. However, the teacher must not play the active role while the students are reading (Nuttall, 1996). The teacher should try to reduce the students' anxiety and promote a sharing of information, negotiation by members of the groups.

During a reading lesson, the teacher should always change from one activity to another and change the pattern of interaction from time to time, so that for some parts of the lesson, the students are working with each other in pairs or in groups rather than relating directly to the teacher. By that way, there will be more interaction when contributions from the students are constantly made. To help prevent the students from word-by-word reading, the teacher should set the reading tasks that force them to use the strategies of skimming, scanning, looking for key words and phrases. In this way, the students can improve their reading speed and therefore, the teacher builds up their confidence. The teacher should also remember to set the time limit for each task or activity. The students have opportunities to practice new strategies with the teacher's guidance and improve the ability to read English for sustained period. (Grellet, 1981; Heaton, 1989; Nuttall, 1996).

#### **3. Classroom activities in the teaching of reading**

Nuttall (1996) suggests tasks with the outcomes involving spoken language (speaking and listening) and the outcomes involving writing in a reading class.

##### **3.1. Listening activities:**

To hear the recordings which suit students' need and which are related to the content of the reading text is a good way to activate students' background knowledge as well as linguistic knowledge and also arouse the students' interest in the text. This helps to make the reading class more enjoyable. However, the listening

exercises should be short and easy enough for the students to do in a few minutes. These activities can be done at the pre-reading or post-reading stage.

### **3.2. Speaking activities:**

Oral activities can occur during the reading process, at the pre-reading, core reading or post reading stages. The interpretation and oral response at the core reading or post reading are highly desirable for checking the students' comprehension and facilitating the process of understanding. Thanks to the students' feedback and the interaction between the teacher and the students as well as between the students and the students, the teacher can give necessary response to help the students in the reading process. But first, the teacher must give them guided questions to activate their awareness of the topic or short revision of the previous lesson of similar theme at the pre-reading stage.

### **3.3. Reading activities:**

The reading teacher must assess the potential of a text for the various kinds of reading activities. Most texts offer opportunities for practicing some of the reading skills. During the activities, the students should be made aware of the skills so that they could apply them to other texts. The students must also be shown how to interact with the text in a logical, systematic manner, how to alter their reading speed, how to vary their reading approach to suit their reading purpose and content demands of the reading, and finally how to relate their prior knowledge and experience to the text.

In class, the students have practiced the following skills:

- Deduce meaning of words from contextual clues
- Understand conceptual meaning, explicit and implicit information
- Understand relations within the sentence, between parts of a text through both lexical devices and grammatical cohesive devices, connectives...
- Perceive temporal and spatial relationships and also sequences of ideas
- Anticipate and predict what will come next in the text.
- Identify the main ideas and other salient features in a text
- Skim, scan as well as read critically, generalize and draw conclusions

### **3.4. Writing activities:**

Some of the most interesting ways of exploiting texts involve written outcomes as reading and writing are closely associated, and they support each other. Writing activities should usually be done at the post-reading phase, and sometimes at the pre-reading phase.

## **IV. Findings & Discussion**

It is surprising that the students have done better performance in the activities and the reading classes are more interactive and interesting.

For the questionnaire, 68% of the students find the integration of the four skills suitable and enjoyable. 22% of the students indicate that they are still reluctant in following the new method of teaching reading because they are quite low students. They need more time on reading aloud and translation the English texts into Vietnamese (traditional approach). 10% of the students find it difficult to follow the new method because they belong to 'passive' style. However, there is a possibility that these students will get used to it sooner or later as the majority of their classmates can adopt the new method easily. The teacher should give special help to these kinds of students.

For the post-test, the number of the students who gets higher marks is 60%, 26% of the students get the same marks and 14% get lower marks. The results of the final test in comparison with the results of the test at the beginning of the reading course have proved that the students have made progress in the reading skills. They have been quite familiar with the reading tasks and activities they have practiced in class. As a result, they could

read more quickly and they could apply skimming, and scanning skills in reading comprehension. Most students get higher marks at the final reading course.

To sum up, the results prove a success in applying the new method in teaching reading to the students at the university.

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