Designing a Mobile-Assisted English Reading Class for College Students

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Abstract. Traditional classroom teaching is changing with modern technologies. A mobile-assisted classroom teaching is designed in the study and is proved an efficient teaching mode. The most popular mobile App WeChat in China is used as a course platform which could be easily tailored for any course exclusively. At the same time, several English learning mobile Apps are introduced to assist the English Reading class for college students, for example Xiao Huasheng App, Liuli Reading App, Ximalaya App. In the WeChat course platform, we integrate these mobile Apps at different times in classroom teaching and motivate students to participate in the course learning in class and after class. Mobile technologies plus linguistic knowledge and a well-planned teaching design are three key factors for a successful course teaching. Furthermore, this WeChat course platform is easy to build and makes a mobile-assisted language teaching accessible to every language teacher who may have a limited knowledge about technology.

Keywords: Mobile-assisted language teaching · Course design · WeChat · English Reading class

1 Introduction

With a fast and wide spread of modern educational technologies in language leaning and research [1], traditional in-class teaching mode is fading away. Since MOOC courses and many free mobile Apps are accessible to everyone, in-class teaching mode is changing and yielding to various multimodal technologies [2]. However, there is no clear rule about the balance of how much modern technology should be applied into an in-class teaching. Besides, there are other factors which will also influence the balance keeping, such as course types, students' motivations and teachers' abilities in applying educational technologies. An effective college English Reading class relies on in-time and clear instructions from the teacher and a monitored and guided self-reading after class by students.

This paper depicts the design and teaching procedure of an English Reading class for college students, which combines in-class teaching with a mobile Apps-based

platform. In-class and after-class teaching are included in the study with the aid of mobile Apps to achieve an effective learning.

The mobile App WeChat helps grouping students together, and maintains the in-time interaction between a teacher and students. Meanwhile, WeChat is widely used in China and it is the most frequently used social software. WeChat helps teaching in many ways, such as students' attendance quick check, giving and reminding homework, giving answers, and in-time Q&A, etc. [3].

2   Methodology

One mobile social software and three English learning Apps are particularly integrated into the English Reading class—WeChat, Liuli Reading App, Ximalaya App, Xiao Huasheng App.

WeChat is a platform to keep interaction between a teacher and students in class and after class, the other three Apps are used to assist students to learn English after class. These Apps are believed to assist college students to achieve the aims of English Reading course: arouse reading interests, extend reading areas, and strengthen reading fluency. A WeChat-based course design with student performance records is illustrated in Table 1.

It is not wise to require students to read the same books after class, since they have their individual reading abilities and interests. And to achieve reading fluency and satisfaction, it is suggested to let students read easy materials. Suppose 'i' refers to an individual student's reading ability index, the difficulty index of the after class English reading should be 'i − 1' [4, 5]. Liuli Reading App and Xiao Huasheng App are used for students to choose after-class reading materials with suitable lexicon and grammar challenges.

Ximalaya App is audio corpus-based, which could be used to give students an audio input of those reading materials that they have read. The cognition effect of a reading material is believed more significant with multimodal inputs than singular input.

3   Class Design and Teaching Procedure

3.1   Before Class Preparation: A Survey on Students' English Reading Habits

There are 56 students participated in the survey [6], and the results show that most of the students read few English books after class. As for their English textbooks, the students focused on lexicon and grammar learning instead of achieving English reading joy. Some of them had tried to read English novels recommended by their high school teachers, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*. But they couldn't finish reading one whole novel at all, not even 50 pages of one book. It is therefore necessary to grade students' reading ability and recommend corresponding reading materials. Xiao Huasheng App offers an access to test one's reading ability and all reading materials offered in the App are marked with different reading grades.

Table 1. A WeChat Platform-based course design with student performance records.

WeChat Platform	Pre-class icebreaking-quotations sharing	Presentation team building	Text translation sharing	In-class interaction	Summary writing sharing	After-class reading monitor	After-class interaction
Student 1	*No one can give you brightness except yourself*	Topic 1	Text 1 Para 4–6	• quick response to questions • explain exercises • words' learning & translation • homework check • dictation • multi-modal instruction • giving answers	√ (omitted)	*Who is Elizabeth II?* ...	• supplementary words • prefixes list • fast reading assignments • reminding homework • Q & A • peers learning • team building
Student 2	*I am thinking, therefore I am*	Topic 3	Text 1 Para 7–8		√ (omitted)	*The Giver* ...	
Student 3	*Success is not final, failure is not fatal*	Topic 3	Text 1 Para 9–11		✕	*The Mysteries from A–Z* ...	
Student 4	*Life was like a box of chocolates*	Topic 2	Text 1 Para 12–14		√ (omitted)	*The Little Prince* ···	
Student 5	*Tomorrow will be better*	Topic 2	Text 1 Para 15		√ (omitted)	*Matilda* ···	
Student 6	*After all, tomorrow is another day*	Topic 5	Text 2 Para 4–5		√ (omitted)	*What was the WWII?* ...	
Student 7	*Water, a desert blessing, an ocean curse*	Topic 1	Text 2 Para 6–8		√ (omitted)	*Who was Da vinci?* ...	
Student 8	*Love all, trust a few, harm nobody*	Topic 1	Text 2 Para 9–10		√ (omitted)	*Charlotte's Web* ···	
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

3.2 Before Class Preparation: A Survey on English Reading Textbooks

There are two major parts for English reading course: in-class textbook learning and after-class self-reading. As mentioned in the previous section, after-class reading materials should be tailored for each individual with the aid of mobile Apps Xiao Huasheng. As for in-class textbook, it is the compulsory one for all students no matter how different their language proficiencies are.

Textbook language is different from that of novels and stories. It is much more formal and grammatically well-organized. Bernstein [7] noticed the phenomenon and classified the language in textbooks and for teaching as vertical language, while the language used in daily life and acquired at home is classified as horizontal language. For learners of English as a second language (ESL), English horizontal language couldn't be acquired during one's childhood. Most Chinese students are exposed to English vertical language first at school, which is grammar-oriented and translation-oriented. Thus English horizontal language input is far less enough for ESL students. Since English textbooks are full of vertical language, the input of English horizontal language could be supplemented after class only.

Taking into account the two facts: students with various reading abilities, and English textbooks lacking horizontal language input, this study claims two basic principles for an exact and comprehensive choice of reading materials for students after class: difficulty = i − 1, and horizontal language oriented.

3.3   In-Class Teaching and Learning: Mobile-Assisted Instructions

In the first class of the English Reading course, an exclusive course WeChat group should be built on spot. Students and the teacher are united here. WeChat group building works like an icebreaking. It is time-limited in class, the course WeChat group can help saving time in attendance checking and encourage the whole class discuss and express themselves at the same time. For example, instead of asking students to introduce themselves to us one by one in person, each of them is asked to type their favorite sentence in the course WeChat group platform. Within two minutes, about 30 sentences will appear in the platform, and they are clearly shown to everyone in class (compared with the traditional classroom icebreaking, speaking in public is sometimes not clear and couldn't be understood due to difficult words or bad grammar). ESL students usually read better and faster than they listen. With a quick glance at the favorite sentences sent in the WeChat group platform, the similar minds go together and feel accompanied, even though they don't know each other in face. Compared with introducing your name, your hometown to your classmates, this quotes sharing in the platform (partly shown in Table 1 Column 2) goes deep in one's soul, and it is more efficient. Thus a nice and comfortable class environment is built with the aid of the mobile App WeChat. And everyone who participates in it leaves a record for class participation and performance.

For the English Reading textbook, the texts are usually longer and more difficult than the texts from *Comprehensive English* course. The texts usually cross over various topics, ranging from football industries to bioengineering, from religions to tax collection systems. To finish learning a text within 4 teaching hours - with about 1200 words in each text and the text difficulty is above one's reading ability- is very challenging both to students and the teacher. The unfamiliar topics of the texts and the mountains of new words are two major obstacles for the text understanding.

Lead-in is usually the first step in text learning, and we suggest that reading motivation come ahead of new words understanding. To arouse all students' reading motivations toward those difficult texts is not easy, but it's always worth trying. Students are required to make related presentations about each text in turns, either about the background information, or the introduction of the persons and places appearing in the text. Every text topic will be presented by 4–5 students at most from different angles. We prefer to give them enough time to think about it, and let them sign up for the presentation in the course WeChat group platform after class. All of this is done efficiently out of class with the aid of the course platform. While the presentation team is working on a presentation preparation, the course teacher can send a list of frequently used words on the topic in the WeChat group platform to keep other students connected to and immersed into the topic.

3.4   In-Class Teaching and Learning: Mobile-Assisted Learning and Sharing

The learning of each text is supposed to be finished within 4 teaching hours (2 h in each week) according to the syllabus. The first 2 teaching hours are usually for students' presentation on the text topic, a quick check on the glossary of the text, and the teacher's explanation and interpretation of the beginning part of the text. The rest 2 teaching hours in the following week will focus on the reading comprehension of the text, exercises and worksheets.

In the first 2 teaching hours, with the student presentation in class and the glossary check in WeChat group platform, the backgrounding and study environment for a text are created. Most students are ready for the further study of the text. They are encouraged to discuss with their peer classmates about the meaning skeleton of the text and then type the main idea in the WeChat group platform. Students can quickly learn from peers by reading each other's main idea writing on spot. It doesn't matter whether the main ideas written by students are accurately correct or not. The key point is to encourage students to participate in the text study and to be critical to different ideas about the text. They may find thoughts alike in the WeChat group platform and these positive mutual recognitions will greatly encourage students to dig the text deep. For those who might find they hold different ideas with others in the platform, their ideas are valued too, and they may challenge others with their logic. This is a good chance to let everyone have a second thought about the main idea before they go further into the text learning. No matter they agree with each other in the WeChat group platform or not, the most important thing is that almost everyone in classroom is activated and participates in the text learning activity.

In the second and last 2 teaching hours, students are mainly guided to understand the detailed information of the text with the main idea drawn in the previous class. When the text learning is finished in class, students will be given a worksheet of the text, which looks basically like a mind map of the text. Students are required to finish the blanks of the worksheet. Two students co-work with one worksheet, in order to encourage them to discuss, to co-operate, to compare their understandings and to persuade each other. This task might take 10 min and it is useful to keep everyone being participative. When they finish the worksheet filling blanks, they can take a photo of it and send it to the WeChat group platform to share with each other. And the teacher may also publish his answer of the worksheet in the platform, which is efficient and crystal clear to each one. Finally, every one of the students will have one worksheet at hand and they are required to briefly retell the whole text based on the worksheet within 5 min. This works as the last step of the text learning: General (main idea drawing) – Details (paragraph translating) – General (worksheet and retelling).

This is a complete pattern of an English Reading class for 4 teaching hours within 2 weeks. When students are familiar with the procedure, they can follow it quite well and sometimes they read the whole textbook beforehand and tell the teacher that they are very interested in some topics and would like to make presentations on those topics. And some students would like to create the worksheet of a text according to his/her understanding, which turned out quite correct and well-organized. Students are more active and self-motivated in the mobile-assisted English Reading class.

3.5 After-Class Guiding and Learning: Mobile-Assisted Learning and Sharing

There are 6 days between the first 2 and the second 2 teaching hours. To keep students being active and participative in the text learning, WeChat group platform is used to guide students to study individually after class. Students are required to translate the paragraphs after class with the aid of Google Translate or Baidu Translate. Each paragraph goes to one student and the students take turns to do this. All the translation is required to be sent in the WeChat group platform within two days after class, so that all students can self-study the text after class with the sharing of text translation.

Students are encouraged to use different translation software to finish their homework. They will compare the different translations and make a final version based on them. This process helps students save time in simple translation and requires them to put more effort in advanced translation, such as logical relations between clauses, and translation concordance with the main idea of the text, which are hard for machine translation.

Another major part of after-class learning task is extra reading materials. There are two kinds of materials: one is for reading fluency and joy, and the other is for reading accuracy in a limited time. To read for fluency and joy, students are encouraged to use mobile Apps such as Xiao Huasheng and Liuli Reading to search for their reading materials with interests. Our survey showed that for ESL Chinese college learners, English novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, are not appropriate for students to achieve reading fluency and joy. Students are supposed to read something less difficult than the textbook in their after-class time. All these mobile Apps offer a broad range of books from fables, detective stories all the way to best sellers for teenagers. These "easy" reading materials serve as necessary reading gap fillings for the Chinese students, since they lack the English horizontal language acquisition in China. When they began to learn English, they learnt it at school and all they've been learning are from English textbooks, which belong to English vertical language. Furthermore, when they finish reading the interesting books, students are encouraged to listen to those books from the Ximalaya App, which is audio corpus based. With the two modes of input for one book - reading and listening, students will have a good language input and be expected to have good output: retelling and writing.

To read for accuracy in a limited time is always a must in every kind of language test and it is an important index to indicate one's reading ability. This exercise could be done by themselves after class and monitored by the teacher in the WeChat group platform.

4 Conclusion

A mobile-assisted college English Reading Class design is introduced in detail in this study. Since a WeChat group platform could be easily tailored and built exclusively for a course, it is efficient to communicate with everyone in class and after class. Students' performance could be monitored and guided on the platform. Students themselves also feel connected in the course WeChat group platform. This reading class design presents

a new and holistic approach to not only improving an English learner's proficiency on reading, speaking, writing, speaking, translation, multiliteracy synthesizing relying on emerging technology, but also motivating students autonomous learning.

It is noted that the efficiency of monitoring the on-going posts is handicapped by the display of posts on WeChat when there is an influx of posts on the group platform, for example, during the in-class dictation or Q&A session. While WeChat as an educational platform is credited for its instant interaction, users' stickiness, and multiliteracy interface, further discussion on refining its user interface for a teacher to monitor an inrush of posts is suggested.

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