

The importance of cultural vocabulary acquisition in practicing reading skill of foreign language learners

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Abstract: Reading comprehension is considered one of the four main skills when learning a foreign language. It seems to be a burden to overcome if learners do not regularly practice. Among obstacles they encounter are a lack of effective reading strategies and insufficient new cultural words of all fields. Obviously, equipping themselves with a wide range of these words is one key to success in obtaining best results for language learners' reading tasks. This paper aims at analyzing how students of French Faculty at Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE) improve their reading scores after the lecturers assist them to study and memorize new cultural vocabulary from textbooks for 15 weeks. Reliable findings are discussed profoundly and implications for teaching and learning French are recommended.

Keywords: cultural vocabulary, reading comprehension, French

1. Introduction

It seems to be that a wide range of vocabulary is one key factor to conquer reading tasks for any language learner. Al-Khasawneh, F. (2019) confirmed that "vocabulary knowledge contributes to mastering reading, listening, writing and speaking skills." Students at HNUE are among these learners. It was seen obviously that many students faced hardships in getting high scores because of inadequate cultural vocabulary. A limited percentage of them found it quite easy to comprehend reading texts and questions accompanied with a variety of cultural vocabulary of all fields. These words can be taken from the textbooks that they were using while learning French in class. Another well-known author called Nation, P. (2000) asserted that, good vocabulary knowledge supported good comprehension.

This research paper aims at investigating in what ways students at French Faculty of HNUE raise their reading scores after the lecturers of French assisted them to study and memorize new cultural vocabulary from textbooks for 15 weeks. Hence, hereinafter are research questions for this piece of writing:

What difficulties do students at French Faculty of HNUE encounter to get high scores for reading tasks?

What methods are students applying to acquire new cultural words?

These 2 research questions are responded thoroughly in details in this succinct piece of writing.

2. Content

2.1. Vocabulary knowledge and success in master-

ing reading skill

Vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are tightly related since lexical knowledge can assist foreign language learners (FLL) in grasping the meaning of written texts. In addition, reading may help in developing learners' lexicon (Nation, 2001). Copper (1984) depicted vocabulary knowledge as the key component for successfully reading foreign languages paragraphs and texts, while Laufer (1997) pointed out that "no text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text's vocabulary".

Karakoc & Kose (2017) investigated the relationship between vocabulary development and reading performance among 175 students studying in an intensive language program in Anadolu University, Turkey. The researchers used a 2000-word-level receptive vocabulary knowledge test and a 2000-word-level productive vocabulary knowledge test for collecting the data in their study. The results of this study showed that the students' receptive vocabulary knowledge was higher than their productive vocabulary knowledge. It also revealed a significant relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension.

Anjomshoa & Zamanian (2014) studied the role of vocabulary on FLL's reading comprehension. The researchers used a questionnaire to collect the data which revealed a high correlation between vocabulary knowledge and the students' performance in reading comprehension. The results also suggested focusing

students' attention on vocabulary knowledge due to its significant contribution in comprehending reading texts.

It could be seen that there have been numerous studies on the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Nevertheless, specific research on the importance of cultural words in conquering reading comprehension is still limited. This paper aims at investigating this issue for explanation, analysis and implications in teaching and learning foreign languages.

2.2. Research methods

2.2.1. Participants

The researcher invited French majors who are of their third year at HNUE. They consist of 70 students, both male (2) and female (68). As the writer could see, they tended to be diligent; some of them, possessed good levels of French while a few found it a burden to conquer reading skill of French. In addition, those students struggled even more with reading tasks as their speed of reading was comparatively slow. One major reason is their lack of cultural key words so as to comprehend content of reading passages deeply.

2.2.2. Instruments

Instruments of the research were reading passages in textbook *Compréhension écrite III* (equivalent to level B1 CEFR) together with cultural key words included in them and tasks accompanied, which were assigned to students during semester I when students are expected to learn 10 different themes of reading skill.

Selected cultural key words were taken from reading passages for lecturer to apply appropriate techniques to pre-teach students before they started reading. Moreover, some more words on similar topics were also introduced to these learners to widen their vocabulary range.

2.2.3. Methodology

The following methods are implemented during carrying out the research, that is, in-depth interviews for students, class observation and statistics of students' reading scores after the research was done in class. The two classes of 70 students were observed for 15 weeks in French Reading lessons. The lecturer noted down essential information related to the lesson procedure, what is good and especially, the lecturer also provided the new cultural key words related to each topic of each week which is beneficial to mastering reading comprehension skill. Additionally, the lecturer also gave students some

activities to apply and memorize these new words.

After 15 weeks, 10 students were selected among all the 70 ones of both classes for in-depth interviews. Naturally, the topic of the interviews focused on teaching and learning cultural key words and reading comprehension skill, which were crucial for them to obtain better scores.

Finally, at week 15, lecturer gave student a reading comprehension test for 50 minutes, after that the papers were collected for analysis purpose, to find out how useful the tasks of cultural key words were to students to achieve higher scores. After that, statistics are taken out for discussion. The test was designed with two tasks including: matching concepts, key words with their definitions or synonyms (10 questions) and reading the text then answer the questions (10 questions).

2.3. Findings and Discussions

Class observation: As can be seen obviously from French reading lessons during 15 weeks, picking up new cultural key words plays an undeniable role for students' in reading comprehension skill. Before the lecturer applied techniques to teach cultural key words taken from reading texts, students did not know how to manage to get all or most correct answers for different reading tasks. More specifically, they didn't comprehend the questions or ideas in the passages; therefore, they tried to make a guess the answers to all the questions without knowing for sure which ones were correct. Some of them looked up new vocabulary in online apps of dictionaries in their smartphones; however, they spent too much time on this job, they looked up all new cultural words that they encountered from the texts.

When lecturer gave students tasks of new cultural key words as a way to assist them to take it easy for reading exercises, effectiveness could be witnessed clearly in the lessons of reading. They took less time to figure out what the more likely correct responses were. They did show their cheer when finishing reading tasks more quickly and correctly. At that moment, most of them were able to understand the questions, options and main idea of the passages. For 15 weeks, different techniques were utilized to encourage students to acquire cultural key words, both from texts and reference materials. They also included Quizizz, Kahoot! Game, Microsoft PowerPoint slides and effects, printed hand-outs, blackboard, and chalk. Among them, Kahoot! Games tended to be the technique that created largest

motivation and eagerness for students.

In-depth interviews: Some selected questions will be analyzed in this part.

For question “What difficulties do you have to get high scores for reading tasks?”, the most noticeable answer is, “I lack a wide range of vocabulary to comprehend the questions and text well enough. Thus, I don’t figure out the content of the text and translate the questions into Vietnamese.”

To answer question about “Do you need to know the meaning of all the words in the text to finish reading comprehension tasks? Why?”, there were different answers. Two different types of answers were recorded: Some said it isn’t necessary to know all the words; instead, they only need to understand the cultural key words from the text and questions. Others stated that knowing meaning of all cultural key words contributes to fully comprehending the text and questions for high scores.

About the question that focused on methods and their effectiveness in order to assist learners to get high scores, student *clarified that they possessed a variety of methods to memorize new cultural key words, including noting new words down in notebook, then practicing writing them for many times; or seeing movies, reading stories, watching music videos... Each method has its own benefits and drawbacks.*

The question that seemed to be most interesting question for students was: *Of all the techniques that lecturers utilized in class to aid students to learn new cultural vocabulary, which one do you think is effective for students at HNUE now? Why?* Students expressed *different ideas relating to this question. Some choose Quizizz and Kahoot! as they created fun and exciting atmosphere in class. Several others said they approved of Microsoft PowerPoint slides since the screen was colorful and vivid. Some others asserted that it was Printed hand-outs that were helpful, especially they can look back at those hand-outs whenever needed. Some said all the techniques did them good in different situations.*

2.4. Implications in teaching and learning vocabulary for French reading lessons

Hereinafter are a collection of techniques to assist students learn new cultural key words from textbook of Comprehension écrite III (B1 CEFR) for better performance in reading comprehension:

2.4.1. Design vocabulary tasks and activities on Kahoot! and Quizizz, then lecturers ask students to join

in the games online in class. The tasks/ activities are possibly multiple-choice questions, open questions, matching words and images, matching words and definitions or synonyms, discussion questions.

2.4.2. Making use of Microsoft PowerPoint as an effective tool for typing vocabulary tasks with pictures, music, and effects to make them vivid and eye-catching for students’ understandable accomplishments.

2.4.3. Create mind-map of new cultural vocabulary on Canvas, typing tasks and new cultural key words from the textbooks and reference books then print them in hand-outs for students to pass all over the class and write down their answers with pens.

3. Conclusion

Based on findings from the research above, it can be said that, acquiring vocabulary including cultural words contributes significantly to French learners’ success in reading skill. In details, those students who were hard-working in picking up cultural vocabulary in every lesson were more likely to get higher scores in reading tasks or tests. Despite hardship students encountered when learning cultural words from textbooks and other reference materials in French, the results were rewarding and worthy.

For limited time and scope of study, the paper needs to be further researched for more reliable and profound results which can be applied for FLL at HNUE and other educational institutions as well.

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