
A Profile of an Effective L2 Reading Teacher

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Abstract

In order to discover the strategies employed by an effective reading teacher, a series of lessons taught by the teacher was video-taped and the teacher was interviewed about his approach to teaching his class. The study was motivated by an attempt to understand the kinds of planning and decision-making made use of by an effective EFL reading teacher. The results are presented in the form of 9 principles employed by the teacher. Implications for teacher preparation and teacher self-development are discussed.

Introduction

The field of second language reading has been revitalized in recent years by changes in our understanding of the nature of the reading process. On the one hand, reading theory and research has contributed notions such as top-down and bottom-up processing. Reading is no longer viewed as a process of decoding, but rather as an integration of top-down processes that utilize background knowledge and schema, as well as bottom-up processes that are primarily text or data driven (Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 1988). In addition, researchers have focussed on readers themselves and have sought to identify the strategies employed by successful readers as they interact with a text during reading. Using thinking aloud and introspective/retrospective research techniques, students perform reading tasks and verbalize their thought processes, reflecting upon the cognitive strategies and heuristics they employ when dealing with different kinds of reading problems (Hosenfeld, 1984).

Both sources of information are potentially useful to the second language reading teacher. An understanding of the differences between top-down and bottom-up processing and of the role played by schema and background knowledge in reading, will lead the teacher to look for classroom strategies which encourage L2 readers to use an appropriate combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies when they approach a text. And information on differences between effective and ineffective reading strategies can help the teacher look for effective reading behaviors in learners, encourage wider use of these strategies, and be on the look out for learners using less effective strategies.

Missing in the growing literature on second language reading, however, is consideration of teachers themselves and what it is that effective teachers do in the reading classroom. What teaching and learning behaviors can an observer expect to see in the classroom of a good reading teacher? In preparing student teachers for classroom observations, it is useful for them to consider this question *before* they begin observations of reading classes, as a way of creating a schema for their observations. When students do an exercise of this kind, however, they should restrict their

speculations to only those behaviors and qualities that apply to a reading class, as opposed to any well taught ESL class. Hence general teaching characteristics such as good classroom management skills, good pacing, and evidence of careful preparation of the lesson, should be excluded from consideration. The reader is invited at this juncture, to pause and perform such an exercise, and to generate a short list of characteristics that one would expect to observe in a good second language reading class.

The notion of good or effective teaching, is not a fashionable one in current conceptualizations of second language teaching or learning. Second language acquisition research has virtually excluded the teacher as a participant in the process of second language teaching. As van Lier (1988 : 23) observes, "We thus have the curious situation that most second-language acquisition theorizing ignores the L2 classroom as a relevant source of data and as a relevant place to apply findings". While classroom-based research has been more willing to acknowledge the teacher's presence in the classroom, the kinds of teaching behaviors that are typically investigated are restricted to those that are readily quantifiable or which can be described in terms of units of linguistic analysis. They reflect a *quantitative approach* to the study of teaching. Hence much classroom research is reduced to frequency counts of such things as moves and transactions, interaction patterns, or question types (Chaudron, 1988). While this approach is necessary if one is primarily interested in the linguistic or discursal structure of lessons (Cazden, 1987), other approaches are needed in order to try to understand the nature of classrooms and of good teaching. This often necessitates more of a *qualitative approach*, that is, one which looks at the meaning and value of classroom events.

As has been argued elsewhere (Richards, 1987), in order to build a theory of second language teaching, it is necessary to go beyond the tabulation and quantification of low-inference classroom behaviors. What are needed are ways of discovering the higher level concepts and thinking processes that guide the classroom teacher and ways of understanding the means by which the effective language teacher arrives at significant instructional decisions. This paper is an attempt in this direction, and reports on a series of observations and interviews with an ESL reading teacher.

1. The Teacher and the Class

The teacher who participated in this study was completing his master's degree in teaching English as a Second Language at the University of Hawaii.¹ Denis entered the master's program with several years teaching experience and was in the final semester of his master's degree at the time of the study. He had already completed a large number of content courses on different aspects of L2 teaching and learning. Denis was also a teacher in the English Language Institute at the University, where he taught study skill courses for foreign and immigrant students. One of the classes he had taught several times was an advanced reading course for graduate students. Students in this class were either local immigrant students who had lived in Hawaii for up to five years and had attended local high schools, or foreign students who had just entered the University for graduate studies. The class met daily for a period of 60 minutes.

The subject of this study was selected for closer observation both in order to learn more about the teaching of advanced reading, and because of a more general interest in the notion of effective teaching. The concept of effective teaching is a familiar one in research on mainstream instruction (Berliner, 1984, 1985; Blum 1984). This research deals mainly with teachers of content subjects, particularly math and reading at the elementary level. In these studies, effective teachers are defined as teachers whose students achieve higher than expected levels of performance on standardized achievement tests. In addition, reports of supervisors, school principals, colleagues and students are also used to identify superior teachers. In the present case, the reasons for focussing on this particular teacher's class were :

- a) a highly positive impression of the teacher's teaching based on observations and comparisons with other reading teachers in the program
- b) positive reports on his teaching by a supervisor
- c) positive student evaluations of his teaching

The teacher agreed to be observed on a regular basis, to have some of his classes video recorded, and to be interviewed about his teaching and his class. The goal of the observations and recordings was to attempt to identify how the teacher conducted his teaching and what accounted for his apparent success. The purpose of the interviews was to find out what his teaching philosophy or approach was, what teaching strategies he employed, what learning tasks and activities he made use of and the uses he made of them.

2. The Course

Although the general goals for the reading course were set out in the course description prepared by the English Language Institute, the teacher had developed a set of seven instructional objectives for his class. These were communicated to the students at the beginning of the course and referred to when appropriate throughout the semester. The objectives were:

1. to develop an awareness of reading strategies necessary for good reading comprehension
2. to expand vocabulary and to develop techniques for continued increase of vocabulary
3. to develop an awareness of linguistic and rhetorical structures found in advanced level reading texts
4. to increase reading speed and fluency
5. to promote an interest in different types of reading materials
6. to provide individual feedback on progress in improving reading skills
7. to provide practice in extensive reading

The materials used in the class consisted of two texts--a vocabulary building text and an advanced reading text--and the SRA kit.

3. Observation of a Lesson

What follows is a report of one of the teacher's lessons, based on analysis of the video recording and on information obtained from interviews with the teacher. The lesson discussed here occurred about half way through the semester. During the course of the lesson, four different activities took place:

1. students worked on the Reading for Understanding section of the SRA kit, focussing on inferencing skills
2. Ss worked with the rate-builder portion of the SRA kit, focussing on reading fluency
3. Ss worked on exercises from the vocabulary text
4. Ss began an extensive reading activity

These activities were selected to address objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 from the list above.

Notes on the lesson

The lesson begins promptly. The teacher writes a brief lesson outline on the board, listing the four activities which will constitute the lesson. This is to give Ss an awareness of what activities they are going to take part in, what will be expected of them during the lesson, and to give them a sense that they are taking part in activities that are planned and structured.

Activity 1: Students work on the Reading for Understanding section of the SRA kit, focussing on inferencing skills

Ss are instructed to form pairs and work on cards from the Reading for Understanding section of the SRA kit. The cards contain 10 short passages. Beneath each passage is a set of 4 choices for completing the passage. For example,

Physiology and chemistry are two sciences that contribute directly to our well-being. Laboratory scientists, however, cannot afford to concern themselves exclusively with the utilitarian possibilities of their research. The major theoretical advances in the sciences came from the researchers absorbed in their work as something vitally interesting in itself. They devoted themselves to the investigation of particular phenomena and relationships without bothering about

- A making practical applications.
- B investigating theoretical models.
- C studying physiology and chemistry.
- D cooperating with other scientists.

Ss form pairs and discuss their choices. The teacher explained that this kind of activity is designed to be completed individually, but he regards individual use of the materials as testing, rather than teaching, since Ss get no feedback on their performance if they work alone. He prefers Ss to work in pairs and to verbalize aloud their reasoning in deciding on particular answers to the comprehension questions. The Ss spend about 15 minutes on this activity. The teacher explained that Ss keep a record of their performance on a graph, working through a progression of the cards graded according to difficulty. He stops using the cards when Ss reach a certain level because he finds that Ss performance is more variable when Ss reach a higher level, perhaps because the materials are not designed for ESL learners but are intended for use by native speakers. Topics are often too culturally specific at the more advanced levels. At this stage Ss move into reading materials taken from their regular academic courses.

As the activity progresses, the teacher moves about checking how the Ss are doing and answering any questions they may have. Selecting the right answer to the questions requires Ss to make inferences and to deal with all the information that has been presented in the passage, or to make use of cues within the text. In responding to Ss questions, however, the teacher consistently refers them back to the text and draws their attention to cues they should be able to use to identify the meaning of a word or to select the correct answer. For example,

S : What does "torso" mean here?

T : [pointing to a word in the passage] It's something to do with this word--right?

S : With the human form?

T : Right. It's not the head and it's not the legs.

S : The part in between?

T : Yeah.

In answer to another student's query about the meaning of a word, the teacher points to another word in the text and asks :

T : What do you think it has to do with the meaning of this word?

S : Is it the opposite?

T : That's right.

After Ss have worked for about 15 minutes on the cards, the teacher asks them to put them aside and the next activity begins.

Activity 2: Ss work with the rate-builder portion of the SRA kit, focussing on reading fluency

This involves the use of comprehension cards from the SRA kit. Ss choose a card which contains a text of perhaps 2 to 3 pages, followed by detailed comprehension questions. The goal is for them to try to increase their reading speed by answering the questions within a time limit. The teacher explained that he uses this activity to focus on choosing appropriate strategies for reading a text. Ss are given the choice of 4 different strategies for reading a text. In order to select a strategy, Ss first skim quickly through the text to get a rough idea of what it is about and how difficult it is. Based on this initial reading they then choose a suitable strategy. The four strategies are:

Strategy A: Read the text, read the comprehension questions, then go back and skim for answers. This is the most detailed way of reading the text.

Strategy B: Read the questions, read the text carefully to find the answers, then go back and check the answers against the questions.

Strategy C: Skim the text, read the questions, then scan for the answers.

Strategy D: Read the questions then skim for the answers. This is the fastest strategy.

This part of the lesson begins by the teacher writing the choices on the board:

A	B	C	D
Read	Questions	Skim	Questions
Questions	Read	Questions	Skim
Skim		Scan	

The Ss go to the reading kit and select a card to work with. The teacher asks a few Ss around the class about the text they have chosen.

T : What passage are you going to read?

S : Malaria.

T : Do you know much about that topic?

S : Not really.

T : So what strategy are you going to choose?

S : Strategy B.

T : So you want to read it a little more slowly.

S : Yes.

T : [to another student] What's your topic?

S : Methods of experiments in science.

T : How do you feel about that?

S : I'll choose A.

The teacher explained that he checks to see what strategy the student has chosen and why he or she has chosen it. Generally Ss will choose a slower strategy if they are unfamiliar with the topic. The teacher is trying to sensitize the Ss to the fact that they should choose appropriate strategies according to the kinds of material they are reading. Ss spend about three minutes on each card and are under pressure to choose a strategy which will enable them to read the card quickly. They record their scores throughout the semester and work on the cards once or twice a week. The teacher finds a general improvement in their reading speed and comprehension levels throughout the semester. Once the Ss have each completed a card, the teacher checks their scores and their timing and asks which strategy they used. If their score is not very good, he asks if they think a different strategy would have been better.

T : What did you get Maria ?

S : I got a 5. I think I mis-read this sentence right here.

T : How did you read it? What strategy did you use?

S : C.

T : So you read it pretty fast.

T [to another student] How did you do?

S : Not so good.

T : You chose a B for this passage. Do you think if you had read it more slowly it would have helped?

S : Yes, the subject is not clear, not too easy for me. The topic is about stamps.

After some 10 minutes the next activity begins.

Activity 3 : Ss work on exercises from the vocabulary text

The teacher then announces the next activity and the time Ss should spend on it (about 10 minutes). The teacher explained that he sets a time limit for each phase of the lesson to make sure that Ss work seriously on each activity and attempt to get through it within the allotted time. The third activity involves working with the vocabulary building text. As Ss return their SRA cards to the kit (which takes a little time), Denis uses this time to read out the students' answers to a homework assignment from the text. The students have written sentences using new words they have studied, and the teacher reads sentences out and asks the class to comment on them. The teacher regards this activity as a time filler to occupy the students while they are getting their cards back into the SRA kit. Ss then begin work on exercises from the vocabulary text.

The exercises in the book deal with vocabulary in context, analogies, derivations, collocations, definitions and paraphrases. One set of exercises requires students to decide if the second sentence in a pair is true or false based on how the word is used in a preceding sentence : For example,

Unions often *agitate* employers by striking to get better working conditions for union members.

It would be reasonable to expect some emotional response from a friend you have *agitated*. True False

As with the first activity in the lesson, although the exercises could be completed individually, the teacher asks the Ss to work in pairs and to negotiate and discuss their answers. Then he checks their answers by having a student read out his or her answer. Rather than confirm whether the answer is correct, the teacher asks the other Ss to give their opinion.

Activity 4 : Ss begin an extensive reading activity

The last activity of the lesson is an intensive reading activity, involving reading a lengthy article from one of the class texts. The teacher explained that this is a study-skills exercise dealing with how to approach something that is going to be read intensively, such as a chapter in a textbook or an article. The teacher explained that he uses a modification of the S Q 4R technique -- (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review, Reflect)² but has added a K for "Knowledge of the World" to the beginning of the acronym. This means that before Ss begin reading the passage, they will take part in a pre-reading activity which serves to activate background knowledge about the topic.

The article they are going to read is on the Cultural Revolution in China. Before they begin reading, the teacher asks each student to write down 3 facts about how China has changed in the last 20 years. He then collects the comments and invites three students from China to move to the front of the class, read the students' comments to the class, and comment briefly on them. Following this, the teacher reminds the Ss of the S Q 4R technique and the Ss begin reading the chapter individually. The remainder of the lesson is taken up with this activity and discussion of the comprehension questions is assigned to the next class. After some 8 minutes the teacher announces that time is up and the class concludes.

4. Reflections on the Lesson

The purpose of observing this teacher's class was to attempt to identify what went on in his class and why. While description of what happens in a lesson is relatively easy, moving beyond description to interpretation and evaluation is more difficult. The observer tries to avoid being anecdotal and subjective, and/or merely describing his or her own value system. However, this is a risk which has to be taken in order to try to understand the meaning and value of real classroom events.

Having viewed the video of the lesson many times and explored with the teacher his philosophy of teaching, the following principles seem to account for why this particular lesson took the form it did, why this lesson can be described as an effective one, and how this teacher approaches the teaching of reading.

(1) Instructional objectives are used to guide and organize lessons.

The teacher uses statements of course objectives to help him plan and organize his teaching. For the lesson observed, the teacher was able to formulate what the lesson was intended to accomplish and how its goals were to be achieved. While the objectives he used were not couched in the jargon of behavioral objectives, for the teacher they served as a way of clarifying and formulating his own intentions and selecting appropriate learning experiences.

(2) The teacher has a comprehensive theory of the nature of reading in a second language, and refers to this in planning his teaching.

The teacher is not guided by "common sense" or a quest for lively and interesting techniques to occupy class time. Rather, he refers to his understanding of the nature of the L2 reading process, to his understanding of L2 reading strategies, to schema theory and the role of background knowledge in reading, and uses this information to help him select and plan learning experiences. The lesson observed demonstrated the truth of the saying that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory".

(3) Class time is used for learning.

In this lesson, as in other lessons observed, the teacher consciously attempted to maximize the amount of class time devoted to reading activities. Students were on task for some 50 out of the 60 minutes of class time, the remaining time being taken up with procedural matters. Even time needed for classroom logistics (such as when students returned their SRA cards to the kit) was utilized productively as an opportunity to check students' answers to a homework assignment.

(4) Instructional activities have a teaching rather than a testing focus.

On a number of occasions, the teacher justified his departure from the format suggested in the materials or class text by distinguishing between a teaching versus a testing focus in activities. Activities with a teaching focus provide opportunities for learners to develop or improve their use and understanding of reading skills and strategies. Activities with a testing focus require learners

to demonstrate how well they can use strategies and skills. The teacher emphasized that more opportunities are provided for learning through pair work rather than individual work, for example, and by having students verbally express the decision making processes they employed in arriving at the answer to a question or the meaning of a word. The teacher commented, "the only way I believe the Ss can tap into the reading process itself is by talking about it, by talking about what they do as they read, to verbalize what they are doing when they are reading".

(5) Lessons have a clear structure.

In the lessons observed, the teacher communicated to the students at the beginning of the lesson, the kinds of activities they would be taking part in and the order in which they would accomplish them. Purposes for activities were clear. When students moved into a new task, the teacher announced the time allowed for completing the activity, to give the Ss a time frame and end point for the activity.

(6) A variety of different reading activities are used during each lesson.

The teacher provides a variety of different learning experiences within lessons. In the lesson observed, four different activities were used and this variation in activities may have contributed to the positive attitude of the students towards the classroom tasks as well as the active pacing of the lesson.

(7) Classroom activities give students opportunities to get feedback on their reading performance.

In this lesson, students were not merely practicing reading. They were also getting information about the kind of reading strategies they were using for different reading tasks and how effective those strategies were, a primary goal of all reading lessons according to the teacher.

(8) Instructional activities relate to real-world reading purposes.

In the lesson there was a progression from "micro" activities dealing with specific reading strategies, based on specially prepared pedagogic materials, to a "macro" activity which required students to integrate the different strategies in reading a longer academic article. The teacher explained that as soon as is appropriate, students bring their own textbooks to class and these are used as the basis for many classroom activities.

(9) Instruction is learner focussed.

Although several opportunities arose during the lesson for the teacher to lecture or talk about reading strategies, he consciously stepped back and encouraged the learners to try to work things out by themselves. The teacher sees his role as that of a consultant or resource person in this class.

To summarise the 9 principles :

1. Instructional objectives are used to guide and organize lessons
2. The teacher has a comprehensive theory of the nature of reading in a second language, and refers to this in planning his teaching
3. Class time is used for learning
4. Instructional activities have a teaching rather than a testing focus
5. Lessons have a clear structure
6. A variety of different reading activities are used during each lesson
7. Classroom activities give students opportunities to get feedback on their reading performance
8. Instructional activities relate to real-world reading purposes
9. Instruction is learner focussed

These principles appear to explain why the teacher approaches the teaching of reading in the way he does, and why the lesson which was observed took the form it did. They go a considerable way towards explaining why the lesson was an effective one and why the teacher can be described as an effective teacher of reading. Of course, in order to validate the principles suggested here, it would be necessary to observe the teacher and the class over a much longer period of time. But how useful is this approach to the understanding of teaching? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to briefly compare the qualitative approach to the study of teaching illustrated here, with quantitative approaches.

5. Implications for Classroom Research and Teacher Preparation

Qualitative approaches to teaching focus on higher level generalizations about the phenomenon being studied and make use of introspective and observational approaches to gathering data. They seek to understand the meaning and value of the phenomenon being examined. Quantitative approaches, on the other hand, focus on isolating and measuring in precise quantifiable terms, causes and effects, treatments and outcomes. They have a degree of scientific rigor often said to be lacking in qualitative research. As van Lier (1988, xiv) observes, quantitative research leads to

finding cause-effect relationships between certain actions and their outcomes. This aim leads to a concern with strong correlations, levels of significance, definability and control of variables, and all the other requirements of scientific method. The price that is paid for scientific control is an inevitable neglect of the social context of the interaction between teachers and learners. Without this social context it is difficult to see how classroom interaction can be understood and what cause-effect relationships, if they can ever be conclusively established, really mean. At the risk of oversimplification, research can be divided into a type which wants to obtain *proof* and a type which wants to *understand*.

Both kinds of research are needed. But the danger of applying the scientific method to classroom research is that in so doing, one tends to lose sight of the object of enquiry itself. Often the process of generating data has little practical value because of the restrictions arising from quantitative research. With quantitative research, in order to be able to quantify the behaviors under investigation, only low-inference behaviors that is, phenomena which can be readily operationalized, can be studied. Categories such as question types and wait time are categories of this type, and hence are amenable to investigation from a quantitative approach.

However, teaching cannot be described only in terms of low inference categories. Higher level categories are essential to a theory of teaching. The notion of time-on-task, for example, is an obvious category for investigation through quantification. But time-on-task is closely related to other dimensions of teaching, such as classroom management skills. A well-managed class is one in which time is well used and in which there are few distractions resulting from discipline problems or a poorly planned lesson. Classroom management, however, is not a low-inference category but an aspect of teaching which has to be inferred by observing a teacher for a period of time in a number of different settings. It may take a number of different forms, varying in nature from one teacher to another. It cannot be reduced to a finite set of directly observable and quantifiable components. Likewise, even a simple skill such as the use of higher-level versus lower-level questions is dependent upon knowing when one kind of question might be appropriate. As Medley (1979) observes,

the ability to ask higher-order questions is a competency; clarity is not. There are times when higher-order questions are inappropriate, when the teacher who can ask them should not do so; there is no time when clarity is inappropriate. Research in teacher competencies must take account not only of how teachers behave, but when and why they behave as they do. (p. 16)

The principles of effective teaching which have been proposed here are mainly dependent upon making high-inference categories. They cannot all be spelt out in operational terms but are crucially dependent upon the teacher's understanding of the nature of reading, his philosophy of teaching, and his theory of second language teaching and learning. Identifying this kind of information requires a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to the study of teaching. While the information arrived at through this process does not have the kind of reliability obtained from controlled experimental studies or from multiple independent coding of the same events, it is still invaluable in helping us understand the nature of teaching and learning and the kinds of planning and decision making teachers make use of.

At the same time, it should be stressed that the process of investigating teaching is valuable for its own sake. Teachers and teachers in preparation need to be involved in the investigation of their own teaching and the teaching of others, in order to generate an understanding of how good teaching comes about. It is this process of looking at teaching and reflecting about it which is of greatest value, rather than the results of a particular investigation. In teacher-education, this involves novice teachers working with experienced teachers, observing them at work, and gradually exploring with them the hidden dimensions of their classrooms. For the reflective teacher, it involves self-monitoring and self-investigation--an ongoing program of gathering data about one's own teaching through journal accounts, self-reports, or audio or video recordings, in order to gain a deeper understanding of one's own teaching.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Denis Day for allowing me to scrutinize his teaching in this manner.
2. The S Q 4 R technique involves :

Survey : Ss look through the chapter to find out how long it is, what charts, pictures, questions, headings, summaries, etc. it contains, and think about what can be learned from the chapter, how useful the information might be, how it relates to their class etc.

Question : Each heading and subheading is turned into a question.

Read : The reader reads purposefully to answer the questions. Main ideas are marked and question marks written beside any sentence that is not understood.

Recite : After reading a paragraph, the S covers it and checks it to see if the main idea can be understood or expressed in the S's own words. If not, it is marked with a question mark to indicate that re-reading is necessary.

Review : After finishing, the S looks back at the markings and reviews the main ideas noted. Any sections not understood are re-read.

Reflect : After reading the chapter, the S reflects on how useful the information will be. The S pays attention to the connections between the chapter and the S's own knowledge so that it can be remembered when needed.

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