

Procedures of Web-based English Reading Course

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Abstract—Web-based English reading courses offer students many ways to gain access to different reading materials to improve their reading ability, yet what is still urgently required in many classroom reading tests is a greater awareness of the actual processes involved in reading and the production of appropriate exercise and test materials to assist in the mastery of these processes. This paper discusses the testing procedures for web-based English reading courses, including appropriate methods of selecting texts, writing items, interpreting test results and testing and evaluation. This is intended to provide teachers with a more scientific reading test for the courses.

Keywords—*testing procedures; reading tests; web-based reading course*

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the application of web-based technology is influencing almost every aspect of Chinese Education including course design for English teaching. There are many and diverse reading skills development strategies for use in students' everyday English study. The web-based English Reading Course which is considered as a relatively newly-emerged subject of English majors is gaining in popularity. When students are exposed to abundant reading materials on the internet, their interests are stimulated, and it seems that they are more likely to be involved in the process of reading. Teachers cannot ignore that the reading requirements are intended to improve students reading skills, therefore, appropriate ways of testing students progress are of great significance to the English teachers.

In spite of the wide range of reading materials, much of the test material is still limited to general comprehension questions based on short reading extracts. As with listening comprehension, reading comprehension test material is very closely related to the type of practice material used by the teachers to develop the reading skills. Yet, what is still urgently required in many tests is a greater awareness of the actual processes involved in reading and the production of appropriate exercise and test materials to assist in the mastery of these processes. (J.B. Heaton, 1988) For a time it was taken for granted that it was more difficult to construct reliable and valid tests of writing and speaking than of reading and listening, due to what was considered the subjective scoring of writing and speaking as opposed to the more objective listening and reading testing methods. Similar concerns were expressed regarding web-based English reading. This view of the relative difficulty could be quite mistaken, as we can see clearly from the accrual testing procedures in reading. Before we examine

these procedures, we should analyse the characteristics of Web-based English Reading Courses first.

II. DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS OF WEB-BASED ENGLISH READING COURSES' TEACHING

Teaching design or pedagogy, is the application of systematic methods to analyze problems in teaching process, and to discover the best way to solve the problems, especially those related to the basic theory or methodology. The teaching design of Web-based courses always focuses on a specific learning purpose, or special teaching materials, or creating a different learning atmosphere. Therefore, teaching design involves some special characteristics.

First we will consider the design for a web-based teaching plan. Traditionally, considering the long-termed stability of the teaching material, teachers must carefully select what is suitable for the students. However, there is no limitation of the web-based reading. On the contrary, as long as the material is written in standard English, and can effectively improve students ability in reading, it can be chosen for students. Therefore, the teaching plan should always contain materials relating to the latest events or some literary works that arouse the public attention. On the website, students choose to read material that interests them, and can enquire what they don't understand by simply accessing key words. Teachers are provided with a management interface, which can help them to update or modify the electronic teaching plan.

Secondly, we analyse the design for students' autonomous learning. There are many ways for students to learn autonomously. The most popular way of learning reading via the Internet is to learn the target material unsystematically. Often students are given several chapters to finish in the way they like, and there is a "guide" which can direct students to finish all the tasks, so that they will not become confused. Compared to traditional reading, methodology, students enjoy more freedom to learn in their own way, and they tend to solve problems via discussion with their classmates or checking references on the Internet.

Finally we can assess the design for cooperative study. Cooperative study can be very helpful when students are taking web-based reading classes. The cooperation not only takes place among students but also between students and teachers. Teachers can design tasks for the students, which help the students learn how to finish their work with the assistance of their teammates. Moreover, cooperative study is more likely to occur with in theme-related language

atmosphere, so teachers also play the role as a “bank” of information.

III. TEST DESIGN PROCEDURES

A. *Selecting texts*

Because of the characteristics of web-based English Reading courses, the selected texts have their own features as well. For reading, there are two different kinds of complementary reading activities students are usually exposed to. They are classified as intensive and extensive reading. Most reading tests concentrate on intensive reading to the exclusion of extensive reading, probably because it is more economical to have a large number of items based on a short reading extract than a few items based on a much longer one.

When selecting texts, we should realise that there are many text types for reading comprehension in addition to the usual, more literary prose extracts: e.g. newspaper articles, instructions for using appliances and machinery, directory extracts, public notices, timetables and maps, advertisements, etc. The inclusion of such text types will not only provide a more realistic and reliable means of assessment but will also help motivate students by demonstrating how the target language is used in real-life situations. Different genres of text are doubtless variously familiar to and easy for particular readers, especially adults who are familiar with a range of text types from their first language reading. So when we select texts, we should guard against bias by selecting a variety of different text types, at least in those test settings where no one type is expected to predominate.

Secondly, except for the text type, we must remind ourselves that difficulty, caused by text topic, for a text is also of great importance. While students are reading online, they are exposed to different types of literary works. An individual’s understanding is considerably affected by the text’s content. In reading texts we wish to measure how well a student can understand a given text, not what he knows about a topic. We should choose a number of texts for our reading tests on a range of different subjects, where we trust that one student’s advantage on one topic will be cancelled out by a lack of prior knowledge on another text.

Last but not the least, the length of a passage obviously affects how long it takes a student to read and answer the questions. We believe that students may feel tired if they have to finish the reading of a long passage on the computer. So, we teachers use short, paragraph-length texts for our tests. Yet we want to encourage our students to read selectively: reading to satisfy a given purpose, making judgments about relevance, main points and subsidiary detail, and so on. Therefore, teachers can choose several texts that are of one page or more in length, to enable the teachers to test these skills.

B. *Writing items*

After deciding what skills teachers wish to test, extensive online browsing, and selecting texts, teachers now need to decide the method that will be used to test text comprehension, and skills application. It is obvious that there is no one best method for testing reading. No single test method can possibly

be satisfactory for all the different purposes teachers wish to test, nor for all the skills and texts teachers want to assess.

1) *Procedures for writing items*

After a careful reading of the text, having the specified operations in mind, teachers should highlight the selected texts, especially the main points. The next step is to determine what tasks it is reasonable to expect the candidates to be able to perform in relation to these, and then, write draft items. In doing so, it’s better for the teachers to remind themselves that paragraph numbers and line numbers should be added to the text if items need to make reference to these. After finishing writing, items and even the text may need modification. In practice, the only way to ensure that the teacher has written a good test item is to experiment on colleagues, friends, relatives, or even better, on similar students to those who will take the test eventually. It is very difficult to predict all responses to and interpretations of test questions, and therefore some form of pre-testing or trialing of the questions is desirable, indeed essential if the test has important consequences.

2) *Advice on item writing*

Arthur Hughes (1989) provided item writing advice, also applicable for web-based reading courses.

--- In a scanning test, we should present items in order, in which the answers can be found in the text. Not to do this introduces too much random variation and so lowers the test’s reliability.

--- Do not write items for which the correct response can be found without understanding the text (unless that is an ability that we are testing).

--- Do not include items that some candidates are likely to be able to answer without reading the test.

3) *Different techniques*

There are a variety of techniques in testing reading, including multiple choice, short answer, cloze test, gap-filling test. Every technique has its advantages and disadvantages. What is of vital importance is that teachers realize that the techniques used should interfere as little as possible with the reading itself, and that they should not add a significantly difficult task on top of reading.

For example, multiple choice is a common device for testing text comprehension. The candidate provides evidence of successful reading by giving a correct answer from a number of alternatives. So multiple choice is widely employed in tests especially proficiency tests, such as CET4, CET6, TEM4, TEM8 in China. Although multiple choice items are sometimes the most suitable instruments for testing reading comprehension, they should not be over used. We should also be aware that True/False questions, often found in many tests, are a form of multiple choice, with only one distractor and a 50 percent probability of choosing the correct response by chance.

On the other hand, when unique answer items are not possible, teachers may use short answer questions. Some experts believe that reading ability and writing ability can not

be measured separately and to read well is to write well and express well, which sees short answer questions prevail in many tests. The teacher can interpret students' responses to see if they have really understood the passage, compared with the multiple choice, in which students produce nothing. However, short answer questions are not easy to construct: it is essential to design the question so that all possible answers are foreseeable. Otherwise, the teacher will be left with a wide range of potentially correct responses.

As for the cloze test and gap-filling tests, to some extent, they are the extension of the guided short answer technique and share its qualities. They permit the setting of several reliable but relevant items for a relatively short passage. For the cloze test, most test writers do not really know what is being tested, teachers simply hope that if enough gaps are created, a variety of different skills and aspects of language use will be involved. Yet, the words are deleted in a fixed order, the text constructor has minimal control over what is tested. Compared with cloze test, gap-filling tests have an equally simple procedure, but are more under the control of the teacher. The teacher decides which words to delete, but tries to leave at least five or six words between gaps to avoid undue difficulty. Typically, when teachers are trying to test overall understanding of the text, it is better to delete words which seem to carry the main ideas, or the cohesive devices that make connections across texts. Of course, teachers need to check, having deleted key words, that they are indeed restorable from the remaining context. In doing this, it makes sense to give the test to colleagues, or other students to see whether they can restore the missing words.

C. Interpreting test results

After testing, the results of the test should be interpreted carefully. The result of reading tests are most often reported as numbers or scores, just as in other language tests. Because test results are commonly used to help in making decisions about individuals, the methods used to arrive at these scores are a crucial part of the measurement process. Teachers can see who has "passed" the test and who has "failed". There are two usefully different approaches to deciding how to interpret test results. One called "norm-referencing", rank orders students based on their score on the test, and then compares them with other students who have taken the test, at the same time, or previously. The problem with this approach is, that even those who score lower than other students may still read adequately. The other, called "criterion-referencing" requires deciding what an adequate understanding of the text being tested is. Students know that if they perform the tasks at the criterial level, they will be successful on the test, regardless of how other students perform. This methods motivate students. Which approach should be taken is decided by the difficulty of the text, the nature of the tasks, and the purpose of the test. Both of these approaches provide some means of reaching difficult decisions. Luckily, with the aid of computers, the results of the test can be analyzed more easily than previously.

D. Testing and evaluation

Evaluation is the last step of a test. The final purpose of writing a test, either online or not, is to see how well the test

reflects the students reading ability, and teachers can know how successful the course has been, or how well teachers have taught the course. Of course, there are many different ways to evaluate our teaching. However, the advantage of tests is that in order to construct them, the teacher is obliged to consider what the objectives were, how far they have covered the syllabus, and what aspects of the syllabus were most important. The experience of devising tests is a good opportunity for teachers to look at what they are trying to teach, and what has been achieved. Test results work as feedback from students, which may help the teachers to adjust their teaching methods.

IV. CONCLUSION

Procedures for writing a web-based English reading test require clarity of understanding on several levels. Teachers should keep in mind different techniques, reading a variety of texts and items, as well as the text syllabus, know what the tests really measures, and the possible reaction of the candidates. Additionally, teachers should keep pace with development and changes in society in order to provide students with the latest reading materials. The typical way to construct a well-organized reading section of a proficiency test for Chinese students is to use multiple choice questions as the major technique and add a proportion of other suitable techniques, such as short answer questions or cloze text, etc. To give a scientific reading test based on the web is a bigger challenge for teachers. Whichever test teachers give to students, it is necessary to encourage students to see that the final purpose of a test is to encourage their study, to improve their English language abilities, as well as helping them to form a good habit of learning, with an overall outcome of acquiring knowledge by checking their everyday environment.

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