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The Real Purpose of Reading Teaching

In 2007, the Education and Youth Affairs Bureau launched an online reading platform, giving primary and secondary students free access to online reading resources. Over these years, there have been different opinions about the platform. Some people regard it as an additional learning channel for students, while some doubt its effectiveness with regard to improving students' reading ability. In view of this, Macao Pui Ching Middle School, in 2012, conducted a survey and distributed questionnaires to 40 primary teachers to collect their opinions about reading Chinese and English materials online. Each teacher was asked to choose about 10 articles from those posted on the platform in November 2011 to read deeply, so as to list the pros and cons of the articles and give his/ her opinions. It was hoped that the survey could help evaluate the effectiveness of the platform and improve the school's teaching of reading.

Opinions from Teachers

Opinions of the 40 teachers are generalized as follows:

Reading contents and types of exercises of the platform

Most of the teachers agreed that the online reading platform was a language learning platform which included the four linguistic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, covering the definition of words and expressions, Chinese character stroke order (i.e. how Chinese characters are written), use of idiom, writing practice and grammar. Teachers were particularly in favour of the platform's text-to-speech function that could read texts aloud in Cantonese, Putonghua and English. They thought this feature could help students pronounce words correctly. The platform also had a recording function, which could record students' voice when they were following the speech. There were some Chinese articles that have both Putonghua and Cantonese audio recordings, which could help students grasp new words.

Without the knowledge of language, one will not be able to read. Indeed, the term "reading skills" denotes the close relationship between "reading" and "language skills". Through reading various types of articles, people form ideas, join social activities and experience the pleasure of reading. Therefore, some teachers regarded reading as a training for comprehensive skills, saying that putting undue emphasis on language exercises actually represented a biased view towards reading. Besides, it was pointed out that the exercises on the platform were primarily in multiple-choice format - students were asked to select the best possible answer out of four choices when doing exercise. It was believed that this type of closed questions was not conducive to developing students' critical thinking.

Types of articles on the Platform

Some Chinese language teachers thought that there were various types of articles on the platform, including narration, exposition, argumentation, description, along with prose and poetry. The articles usually comprised five main parts with clear learning objectives. Similarly, English language teachers also thought the platform offered diverse types of articles such as poetry, children's rhymes, advertisements and stories. Moreover, some teachers felt the articles could reflect real-life situations, such as global warming which could raise students' environmental protection awareness and introduction of festivals like the Chinese New Year. There were also articles about

moral virtues, love and friendship, which were believed to be able to broaden students' horizons.

Nevertheless, some teachers thought the platform's articles were too easy, while some thought the articles were too difficult. For example, primary 1 students were asked to give summary of each paragraph of an article and to tell whether the poem Chun Xiao (Spring Dawn) written by the Tang Dynasty poet MENG Haoran was a jueju (quatrain) or a lüshi (eight-line regulated verse), and primary 3 students were asked to deal with English sentences and grammar structures that they had not even learned. Some of the materials provided were even not correct. Some of the teachers, therefore, thought that students of lower grades might feel very confused if the reading materials were too difficult for them.

Effectiveness of reward games

Some teachers thought the platform had a user-friendly interface and the animation was eye-catching and interesting. There were games for students to play every week, such as the Chinese language game "Bugs Become Billionaires" and for English learning, there were games for learning grammar. Games of both languages rewarded students with digital coins to stimulate their interest to read. With the "coins", students could, in the virtual world, buy a house and furniture, dress up the house owner and even make their pets grow faster. Teachers also indicated that, from their observation, students would read regularly every day in order to get the rewards.

While it was effective to draw students to the platform through games, some teachers worried that students went to the platform for the purpose of getting the rewards, instead of reading. Students should read for self-improvement, but the rewards and ranking system of the games on the platform might lead students to build a competitive mentality, thus developing a utilitarian attitude in an imperceptible manner. A scholar once said, "A happy reading experience is an important driving force for children to read. If too much attention is paid to the pragmatic purpose of reading, it is hardly possible to develop children's interest in reading. Children who lack self-motivation will never learn how to read deeply and extensively, which will affect their reading skills and eventually create negative impact on their studies." This view has clearly shown what consequences there would be if students just read for the game rewards.

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Author's Opinions

When I was going through the questionnaires, I noticed that some teachers viewed the online reading platform as an all-encompassing learning platform, while some held the view that reading was a natural way of acquiring knowledge – it was not necessary to test students with questions and exercises. Indeed, it is common that people of the education sector always have different views on a certain teaching aid. This difference in views is always generated by the different teaching experiences of teachers, the different situations of their students and the different demands of parents. I think we should respect different opinions and take them into consideration before we make a judgment about a teaching aid. Hence, after summarizing the aforesaid opinions, I would like to give some thoughts and suggestions.

1. Purpose of Reading

Reading is generally viewed as a way to achieve the six goals of getting high scores in exams, solving problems, having fun at leisure time, acquiring new knowledge, improving one's quality, and strengthening one's core values. However, this view only represents a superficial understanding of reading. If we view reading from an academic perspective, we will find that all self-aware readers are reading to attain cultural knowledge, unleash creativity, and communicate with their inner self, society, and nature. Therefore, it is not the reading quantity that matters, but the good reading quality that counts.

This being said, what we should consider is whether the platform can achieve this goal. The idea that "quantity is more important than quality" is simply a misunderstanding of reading. It is inappropriate for the platform to lay stress only on students doing online exercises every day, getting awards or promotion of rank after they select the correct answers, but should put more emphasis on the "three C's core values" of reading, namely, Creativity, Culture, and Communication.

2. From 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'

In 1983, Professor Jeanne Chall, a researcher from Harvard Graduate School of Education, divided reading development into two parts and six stages. Part I is "learning to read", which covers three stages. The reading development of the first three stages is expected to be carried out by Primary 3. It is hoped that students can learn spontaneously through reading. Part II of the reading development is "reading to learn". It also involves three stages which are to be carried out from Primary 4; children are expected to be able to master reading skills. Generally speaking, a Primary 4 student is expected to be able to recognise words immediately, develop strategies to guess the meaning of words and expressions, as well as to summarise a text. Only acquiring of the aforesaid knowledge can readers be able to analyse and criticise through reading when they enter secondary school. The development of reading skills is a long-term process. If students miss the golden stage of learning and fail to acquire the reading skills, it is very likely they will lag far behind.

However, it was found that in terms of content and difficulty, although the articles for students of different grades were different, the reading strategies that students were expected to develop were virtually the same - students basically underwent the same process (Think about It -> New Words Learning -> Article Reading -> Exercise -> Writing Practice) when reading an article. I suggest the platform take into consideration the reading development needs of students of different age groups.

Relationship between the platform and the teaching of reading

As noted above, the teaching of reading should be incorporated into different subjects, instead of being limited to language lessons. As a result, some scholars advocate the ABC principles of reading teaching, i.e., "Authentic" teaching materials and activities, "Balanced" teaching methodology, and "Copious" reading experience.

At present, the platform seemed to be nothing other than an extension of language lessons – it only placed importance on the definition of words and expressions, pronunciation and writing skills, etc. It should, on the contrary, highlight the essence of the teaching of reading, i.e. reading comprehension strategies, to help students first consolidate their reading skills before they receive the training of thinking.

Author's Suggestions

As an educator, I absolutely understand that the online reading platform is only a supplementary learning tool. It is a mission impossible to rely on the platform to fully complete the reading teaching task. However, if we integrate teachers' opinions, reconstruct the platform and design exercises for students in accordance with the key issues of the teaching of reading and students' different abilities, we will be able to improve the platform and it can play a greater role in helping with the teaching of reading.

As for teachers, I suggest that they, before carrying out the teaching of reading, must understand its significance first. They should never teach students how to read through a platform, a pile of books or even a textbook. Instead, they should lead students to the reading world and focus on developing their reading skills as well as to teach them to think with an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach. In addition, teachers could also refer to the successful reading teaching methodologies of other places, such as the well-known "skills approach" and the "whole-language approach" of Europe and America, and integrate them with the current educational situation of Macao, so as to form a set of pedagogies suitable for local students and to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching of reading.

In recent years, the government has been more committed to encouraging students to read and improving the reading environment by introducing many hardware resources into schools. However, there should also be software in order to implement a plan and maintain its sustainable development, and carrying out research on reading is one of the essential parts. For example, one of the U.S. presidents put forward the "Reading First" programme and the US government has been investing USD 1 billion every year in research and studies on reading. Through relevant studies and research, we will be able to see whether the contents of the reading project are suitable, while in the meantime, we can formulate a teaching policy for the region and evaluate the teaching quality so that we can know our strengths and weaknesses.

"Whenever we open a book, we are opening a window to the outside world, for reading is at the heart of education." The online reading platform is just a scene viewed from the window. It is teachers who really lead students to open the window and inhale the fresh air. If students only see the scene without taking in the fresh air, the window could never fully play its real role.

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Excerpt from "Perfect Parents" (Issue 35, August 2012)**

