

Effects of Input Hypothesis Theory on Improving Students' Reading Attitudes to English and English Reading Ability in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract: Reading is a basic skill of English learning and the base of developing listening, speaking and writing skills. As a way of “knowledge input”, reading is also the major pathway for research and exchange of science and technology. In Higher Vocational Colleges, due to fewer reading classes and their relatively weak English foundation, most students produce negative reading attitudes towards English and their English reading ability is poor. In order to cultivate students with strong English reading ability to adapt to social development, the author chose 63 students from a higher vocational college as subjects and carried out a ten-week reading program under the guideline of Input Hypothesis Theory. Before and after the program, the students were asked to finish surveys about reading attitudes to English and do English tests. During the program, the students were asked to read a English novel every week. Meanwhile, the author monitored the program all the way to ensure its smooth progress. After ten weeks, by collecting, comparing and analyzing data from surveys and English tests, the author understood deeper the influence of Input Hypothesis Theory on students' English study. The result indicated that, after the reading program, those students improved not only their reading attitudes to English, but also their English reading ability to a great extent.

Keywords: Input Hypothesis Theory, Reading Attitudes, Reading Ability, Students in Higher Vocational Colleges

1. Introduction

Reading is the most basic skill of learning language and the main method of language-input. Reading is also a complex “cognitive process” of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning, and is a complex interaction between the text and the reader which is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitude, and language community which is culturally and socially situated [1].

International Reading Association once indicated in a report that the reading level can directly influence a country and nation's future. English is a global language, and English reading is the major way of research, development and exchange of science and technology. People can acquire more comprehensive and updated information through English reading. With the world becoming a global village, many corporations need university graduates with a high level of proficiency in English. It was reported from a survey of entrepreneurs and college graduates that “English skills,

especially English reading, writing and translating, are frequently used in works. Most graduates from Higher Vocational Colleges pay more attention to the English material related to their majors, and they use English mostly in reading product descriptions, operation manuals and equipment specifications. [2]” Those prove that basic skills of listening and speaking can't meet people's profound needs of applied English. Thus, graduates from Higher Vocational Colleges must have strong English reading ability to adapt to social development.

However, due to fewer English reading classes and their relatively weak English foundation, students in Higher Vocational Colleges generally find English reading difficult, boring and then produce negative attitudes, which definitely weaken their reading ability. “Children with positive reading attitudes tend to be willing to read, enjoy reading, become proficient, and even become lifelong readers; however, children with negative attitudes toward reading may only read when they have to read, tend to avoid reading, and may even

refuse to read altogether. [3]” How to improve the students’ reading attitudes to English and improve their reading ability has been the research topic for English teachers.

Through reading literatures, the author found that in recent 3 years (after 2016), there were 59 articles about research on Input Hypothesis Theory, but only few about relations between the theory and the English reading in higher vocational colleges, and none about relations between theory and students’ reading attitudes to English [4]. In these articles, Zhao Ziwei put forward the reform strategies of college English reading teaching based on Input Hypothesis Theory [5], Mo Na applied “pleasure reading” of Input Hypothesis to her English reading teaching and approved its positive effects by comparing two reading tests [6], Liu Caixia discussed how to apply Input Hypothesis Theory in extensive reading class [7], and Xiang Huiping illustrated the enlightenment of Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis to English reading teaching in five-year Higher Vocational College based on her teaching experience [8]. Although these authors confirmed positive aspects of applying Input Hypothesis Theory to English reading teaching in articles, lack of enough data analyses decreased their credibility. In this research, the author applied the Input Hypothesis Theory to reading classes in a higher vocational college by carrying out a reading program. Through surveys, English tests, collecting and analyzing data, the author studied empirically the effect of Input Hypothesis Theory on improving students’ reading attitudes to English and their English reading ability.

2. Concept of Input Hypothesis Theory

The theoretical base of this research mainly derived from the Input Hypothesis by Krashen. The Input Hypothesis Theory is core of five hypotheses of Second-Language Acquisition developed by the linguist Stephen Krashen in the 1970s and 1980s, with other four hypotheses being the Acquisition-learning Hypothesis, Monitor Hypothesis, Natural Order Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis. The hypotheses attach prior importance to the comprehensible input (CI) that language learners are exposed to. Krashen once stated the “Input Hypothesis” in this way: “Only a second language learner receives the comprehensible input, which means the second language input is slightly higher than the learner’s current language level, and focuses on the comprehension of ‘meaning’ or ‘message’ rather than on ‘form’, acquisition can be produced and the second language can be learnt effectively [9]”. Krashen called this comprehensible input “i+1”. “i” referred to the learner’s current language level and “1” referred to language materials slightly higher than the learner’s current language level. “i+1” referred to the learner’s next stage of language development. Only when the learning material belonged to the level of “i+1”, it could function positively in the learner’s learning [10]. In the opinion of Krashen, the ideal “language input” should have the following four features:

- 1) Comprehensibility. The language of learning material should be a little difficult for the learner at his or her

current level, not very difficult. Linguists think that the new words of a reading material shouldn’t be over 3%. In this way the rate of comprehension of the learner can reach 70% [11].

- 2) Being interesting and relevant. Input material should be interesting and relevant. In this way the learner’s attention will be paid to passage comprehension and message absorbance more than to deep analysis of passage’s structure, such as emphasizing extremely the grammar and words. As a result, the learners’ study interest will be stimulated and they will finally acquire language unconsciously and easily.
- 3) Non-grammatically sequence. Krashen thinks that the key to language acquisition lies in practical meaning of language input rather than language forms like grammar and so on. So it’s unnecessary and unworkable to teach foreign language according to grammatical procedures. It will even constrain the production of language acquisition.
- 4) Enough input. Second language acquisition and second language teaching mainly depend on enough language input. New language structure can only be acquired through continuous and extensive reading. The more learners read material, the stronger their acquisition ability will become.

3. Methodology

In order to verify the effect of Input Hypothesis Theory on improving students’ reading attitudes to English and English reading ability in Higher Vocational colleges, the author mainly adopted methods of surveys and comparative research, investigating students’ reading attitudes to English and testing on students’ English reading ability respectively before and after the reading program.

3.1. Questions

- 1) Can application of Input Hypothesis Theory improve students’ reading attitudes to English?
- 2) Can application of Input Hypothesis Theory improve students’ English reading abilities?

3.2. Subjects

The subjects in this research were 63 students of Commercial English majors in Wuhan Engineering Institute (a higher vocational college). Reading Course is a compulsory course for English majors from the second term of Grade 1 to the first term of Grade 2. The teaching goal is to train the students’ basic skills to read commercial articles to lay solid foundation for further professional studies. Objectively speaking, due to weak foundation and fewer classes (2 hours per week), most students regard reading course uninteresting.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Questionnaires

The questionnaire used in this research was derived from

“Reading Attitude Survey” by Stoeckel, Reagan and Hann [12]. This survey was selected because its firmly-grounded theory and similar context to ours. The questionnaire was composed of 25 statements and five choices from “totally disagree” to “totally agree” for each. The questionnaire was well designed, including statements about not only reading cognition such as “I can get various forms of information if I read English” and “Reading English is useful for my future career”, but also about reading emotions such as “I feel relaxed if I read English” and “I feel tired if I read English” or “I feel refreshed and rested if I read English”.

3.3.2. Reading Tests

PRETCO (Practical English Test for Colleges) papers were used for pre- and post- tests. The papers were designed for students in Higher Vocational Colleges by College Practical English Test Council and our national education ministry. According to the test syllabus, the part of “Reading Comprehension” measures the students' ability of acquiring useful information from the written materials. The total amount of reading is about 1,000 words. Articles include general style and practical style such as advertisement, product specification, contract, abstract, correspondence, etc. In a word, this test was very suitable for the subjects in this research.

3.4. Procedures

The reading program lasted for about 10 weeks by combining teacher's in-class instruction and students' out-of-class practice. Before the program, a survey about reading attitudes towards English and a pre-test were carried out. Then, the teacher introduced the reading material *Bookworm* to students and asked them to read one book and

write one reading report per week. *Bookworm* was jointly published by Oxford University Press and China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, which was made up of 102 stories in 6 levels. The higher the level is, the longer the story is and the more new words are. According to the principle of reading for pleasure, students could choose the book he likes based on his language level and grammar was not strictly required in writing the reading report. Sun Yunmei once said: “Because reading is finished by students independently out of class, so if the teacher ignores effects of social environment and students' personal feelings on reading, the students will produce negative attitudes even resistance to reading [13].” So the teacher's supervision, guidance and encouragement were crucial to the smooth implement of the program. After the program, the same survey about reading attitudes towards English and a post-test were carried out again.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Questionnaires

Since only one group was involved in the program, we used paired-samples t-test. The author set different values from 1 to 5 for five choices from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”. Meanwhile 7 “backward questions” among the 25 items of questionnaire were changed into “forward questions”. The valid number of questionnaires was 62. The author first added each of subject's total scores on the questionnaire before and after the program, and then conducted the t-test to see the change of students' attitudes to English reading. Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 were the results of the questionnaires.

Table 1. Results of Mean and Standard Deviation.

Paired Samples Statistics		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-	76.87	62	7.900	1.003
	Post-	88.7097	62	7.41153	.94126

From Table 1 we can see clearly that the mean scores of students' attitude toward English reading improved by 11.8397 from 76.87 to 88.7097; the standard deviation decreased by 0.48847 from 7.900 to 7.41153. The two changes indicated that students improved their attitudes to English reading and there was less variation among students' attitude after the program.

Table 2. Paired Samples Correlations.

Paired Samples Correlations		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Pre- & Post	62	.313	.013

The function of the paired samples statistics is to verify the correlation between two variables. These two variables represented the results of the questionnaire of the same group at different time. In Table 2 the correlation of 0.313 and the Sig. of 0.013 (<0.05) showed that there was linear correlation

between the two variables at the level of 0.05.

Paired samples test compared the means of the two variables at different times. All these figures indicated that there was a statistically significant difference on students' reading attitudes toward English before and after the reading program.

Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 helped the author come to the conclusion that the reading program, under the guidance of Input Hypothesis Theory, had clearly improved students' reading attitudes towards English. Findings revealed that the reading program converted students' negative attitudes to positive attitudes to a great degree.

4.2. Reading Tests

English reading tests were organized before and after the reading program. The test papers were at the same difficulty level with the same question styles. Because about 10 students

failed to take part in pre-test or post-test, the valid number of subjects is 53. Since only one group was involved, the author used paired-samples t-test to see the change. Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6 were the results of the tests.

Table 3. Paired Samples Test.

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean					
Pair 1	Pre- Post-	-11.83871	8.98486	1.14108	Lower -14.12044	Upper -9.55698	-10.375	61	.000

Table 4. Paired Samples Statistics.

Paired Samples Statistics		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	80.49	53	13.977	1.920
	Post-test	87.40	53	10.279	1.412

Table 5. Paired Samples Correlations.

Paired Samples Correlations		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pre& post-test	53	.511	.000

Table 6. Paired Samples Test.

		Paired Differences			t	df	Sig.
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pre-test, Pos-ttest		-6,906	12.415	1.705	-4.050	52	.000

We can see clearly from Table 4 that, the mean scores of students' reading test increased by 6.91 from 80.49 to 87.40, and the standard deviation decreased by 3.698 from 13.977 to 10.279, which indicated that the students' reading abilities was improved and there was less variation among students' reading comprehension after the reading program.

In Table 4, the correlation of 0.511 and the Sig. of 0.000 (<0.05) showed that there was linear correlation between the two variables.

Paired samples test compares the means of the two tests at different times. All figures in Table 6 indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in students' English reading abilities before and after the reading program.

Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6 showed that the reading program, under the guidance of Input Hypothesis Theory, had obviously enhanced students' performance in English reading ability. Findings revealed that after the reading program of 10 weeks, their English reading ability was significantly improved.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Main Findings

Under the guidance of Input Hypothesis Theory, the author carried out a 10-week reading program for students in a higher vocational college. Through questionnaires about reading attitudes to English and English reading tests before and after the program, the author collected, compared and analyzed the data. The findings are:

- 1) Students' reading attitudes to English was improved. Students preferred the relaxing reading over the reading

in class, because they realized that reading was not boring as before and they were happy to form a reading habit. They even urged themselves to overcome sluggishness and insisted reading more English materials.

- 2) Students' English reading ability was improved. Change in attitudes to English reading definitely contributed to students' good studying performance. During the reading program, the enough language input made students accumulate more vocabulary, become more proficient in applying reading skills and more confident in reading articles. All these aspects led to a boost in students' English reading ability. The increase in mean scores of pre-and post-tests was the best proof.

5.2. Pedagogical Implications

Since the effect of Input Hypothesis Theory on improving students' reading attitudes to English and English reading ability is significant, as teachers we should try our best to apply the theory in our teaching. Here are some suggestions:

- 1) Pay attention to choice of teaching material content.

Based on features of the ideal language input in Input Hypothesis Theory -- "intelligibility", "interest" and "relevance", teachers should pay attention to difficulty, interestingness and major relevance when choosing teaching material. However in reality it's hard to find such material having those features all together. So teachers also should learn to choose teaching content according the students' level, then take the essence and discard the dross.

- 2) Increase students' extracurricular reading quantity.

Based on the feature of "enough reading input" in Input Hypothesis Theory, besides the text reading in class, teachers

should encourage and supervise his students to read more after class by recommending them good English reading material or website too. Here teachers should pay attention two points: Firstly, recommendatory reading materials should have various difficulty levels to satisfy reading need of students with different English levels. Secondly, supervision and guidance of extracurricular reading must be implemented really. If teachers just assign the reading task without any follow-up work, it's difficult to achieve the effect of activity.

3) Attach more importance to extensive reading than to intensive reading.

Intensive reading is an important reading strategy, which is the careful reading of short but complicated passages with a view to full comprehension. Although intensive reading teaching is the mainstream of English teaching, it doesn't mean that it's the perfect teaching method, because intensive reading teaching doesn't stress the full interaction between readers and books or considerate the readers' experience and attitudes, it is just a language course explaining a series of language points [14]. To speak strictly, intensive reading course can't be called "reading course" [15]. At present, English reading classes are mainly taught through intensive reading method in Higher Vocational Colleges. Extensive reading is another teaching mode in reading class. It was originally put forward by linguist Palmer for distinguishing it from "intensive reading". In Palmer's opinion, "Extensive reading is that readers read books fast one by one in order to entertain themselves and get information. "Readers pay attention to textual meaning rather than language itself" [16]. The linguist Bamford and Day also concluded some features of extensive reading teaching: "reading material is easy and relevant to wide topics; learners choose reading material themselves and read as more as possible; readers read for recreation, information and rough comprehension; reading itself is a kind of reward; reading speed is usually fast; reading is done by one person quietly; teachers guide students' reading; teachers also read and set examples for his students" [17]. From the above-mentioned we can see that extensive reading is closer to definition of "reading" because it emphasizes the process of reading and considers the knowledge level and emotions of readers. Moreover, extensive reading teaching fully embodies four traits of Input Hypothesis Theory: comprehensibility, being interesting and relevant, enough input and not-grammatically sequence. In other words, extensive reading teaching is the best practical teaching mode of applying Input Hypothesis Theory. Just like Krashen once said: "Non-conscious language acquisition produced by happy reading is more successful than conscious learning, and more lasting" [18].

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