Flipping Academic Reading for IELTS

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Abstract: The article focuses more specifically on the experiences teaching Academic Reading for IELTS in TTPU. Initially, in the paper it is given a brief description of the skills that are typically covered in the academic reading course. Afterwards, it illustrates how reading topics were traditionally taught and how they have been flipped. As the article demonstrates, flipped learning can allow more time for students to learn less cognitively demanding skills at home (e.g., definition, comprehension) and more time in class for Bloom's higher-order thinking skills. (e.g., analysis, synthesis, evaluation).

Keywords: academic reading for IELTS, reading for main idea, reading for specific information, flipping classes,

Introduction

To succeed in Reading Module of IELTS, students need a wide range of academic reading skills. Within this range, academic reading is arguably the most important, as students will read extensively in their target programs and need to understand and remember the content in their texts not only for taking the exam, but for their further study at their university. Grabe and Stoller (2014) state that at the most basic level, students need the ability to "identify main ideas and details; distinguish between fact and opinion; draw inferences; determine author's stance and bias; and summarize, synthesize, and extend textual information to new tasks (e.g., class projects, oral presentations, and examinations)". One of the challenges of teaching academic reading is that this skill is cognitively and linguistically complex and thus take time to learn. Another challenge for instructors is that students' academic reading abilities may vary greatly within one class. Second language readers have a wide range of reading comprehension skills, experiences reading in a second language, and linguistic resources (Grabe & Stoller, 2014); thus, finding readings and organizing class activities that are appropriate to all students' reading level can be difficult. All of these factors can affect students' language development in academic reading courses.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Advanced Reading: Course Description

Advanced Reading for IELTS is offered in the pathway program in the university, which gives prematriculated international undergraduate students the opportunity to receive English language instruction while earning transferable credits in content courses such as economy, calculus, and different sciences, among others. Students enroll in the program for either one or two semesters. In order to be placed into the first level of the university, they must earn minimum a score of 5.5 on the IELTS. Classes are capped at 25 students, yet the typical range of students includes 10–15 students. The course meets for 15 weeks in the fall and spring semester. The overall objective of *Advanced Reading* is to improve students' academic reading skills for IELTS. Students practice reading for main ideas, summarizing, and critically responding to texts throughout the semester. Students also read several academic

papers throughout the semester that center on the topics of language, identity, innovation, and globalization. These readings form the basis for in-depth vocabulary study and application activities during class.

Two Example Reading Topics

Reading for Main Ideas

Grabe and Stoller (2014) define reading comprehension as "the ability to extract, interpret, and use information from a print or digital text" Indeed, reading academic texts is an integral part of *Advanced Reading*, and students practice identifying the main idea of a passage using skimming in each text that they read over the course of the semester. In addition, students work on preparing for the mandatory exit exam in our program, which is based on the paper-based institutional placement test. Preparation for this test gives students the opportunity to practice multiple-choice reading comprehension questions that assess their ability to identify main ideas and the structure of a passage, make inferences, and determine the meaning of unknown words in context, among other skills. It is typically taken during the eleventh week of the semester.

Reading for Specific Information

The purpose of reading is sometimes to identify detailed information of the text by scanning where it is necessary to deal with some data such as a date, name of place or people, or some detailed information. This skill is helpful to practice some reading comprehension questions that assess their ability to identify specific information in completing tables, true/false or yes/no/not given types of exercises. Moreover, acquiring this skill is important to deal with students` science subjects that deal with numbers, formulas, and features of chemical elements.

Developing Out-of-Class Assignments

With a traditional approach, students were introduced to these two topics in class, and they worked on applying what they learned in class to complete their homework. The objective in assigning homework was to give students an opportunity to practice what they had learned in class. For example, students answered comprehension questions about finding the main idea or specific information of a passage after learning about it in the class. Out-of-class work generally consisted of students applying new material, which is at the top of Bloom's taxonomy (Brinks Lockwood, 2014).

While teaching in a more traditional way, it was often found that students did not always demonstrate understanding of the topics presented in class. For example, they sometimes missed key ideas while reading the texts or even misunderstood the prompt they needed to deal with. Also, some students struggled to apply what they had learned and did not tell the teacher until the next class. If the teacher knew that students struggled in doing homework, he would surely help. Instead, students came to class with incomplete work. Finally, students were seemed to feel rushed in assigning homework; they sometimes should have needed more time to learn and process the content. Unfortunately, this was not always possible when it was necessary to cover other material in class. They did not always have the time they needed in class to work with new material before leaving class to work on their own.

However, then it was found that by shifting the work that is done before class and outside of class by thinking more carefully about learning and how it was possible to ensure that all students understand the same instructions and expectations. It was realized that one key advantage of flipping was that all students would have the same access to the given materials whether they were in class or not, and more importantly, they could have the time and support they needed as they worked with the new materials. They could take a break, play videos several times, look up unfamiliar concepts and language, and learn the content at any time. Since it was started flipping, students have often reported that homework is quite simple, and they enjoy watching videos and engaging with the content. Instead of sending students home to work on more difficult skills, their peers and the teacher are now present to help them while they work.

Reading for Main and Specific Ideas

When students were taught reading with a flipped learning approach, they learn about identifying the main ideas of a reading before class either by watching a video about this skill or reading a handout that would have been presented and discussed in class. If they need extra support, the teacher presented both options to them. The teacher prepared a short yet informative video downloaded on LMS of the TTPU (3) about locating main ideas and supporting details, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Students were asked to watch the video before class and take notes by writing an essential question that the video answers, the main points of the video, their own questions about the topic, and a brief summary about what they learned. In class, students' notes were collected and sometimes they were given entrance tickets that include two or three short comprehension questions about the topic of the video. The teacher quickly looked at these tickets and saw if he needed to clarify any misunderstandings and/or conducted a mini-lesson on the topic. An alternative to assigning videos is using material that is already provided in the textbook (Brinks Lockwood, 2014). Flipping does not require the use of videos. Instructors can use materials from the course textbook to present content to students and engage them in it by asking them to take notes on the reading or fill out a worksheet as they read. In *Advanced Reading,* there is no required reading textbook, as students read authentic academic texts and work with supplemental materials that the teacher have created and refined over several semesters. As a result, students are encouraged to watch other videos or read about identifying main ideas from other sources if they need to. When students learn this reading skill before class, they have the opportunity to reflect on what they understood and take action if they need more help. This fosters independent learning and gives students a sense of control over their learning. For instance, students can watch additional videos, as there are several on YouTube that cover this reading skill in varying amounts of detail. Students can also look up more information online if they prefer; having the option to conduct research on a particular topic is an advantage of flipping. If the teacher were to present this topic in class, students would not be able to stop and look for more information. Students can also look for additional resources online (6) and read more about this skill, which serves the needs of visual learners who prefer to read rather than watch a video. While

all students should watch the video that they were assigned, they have a choice in terms of how they supplement their learning of the content.
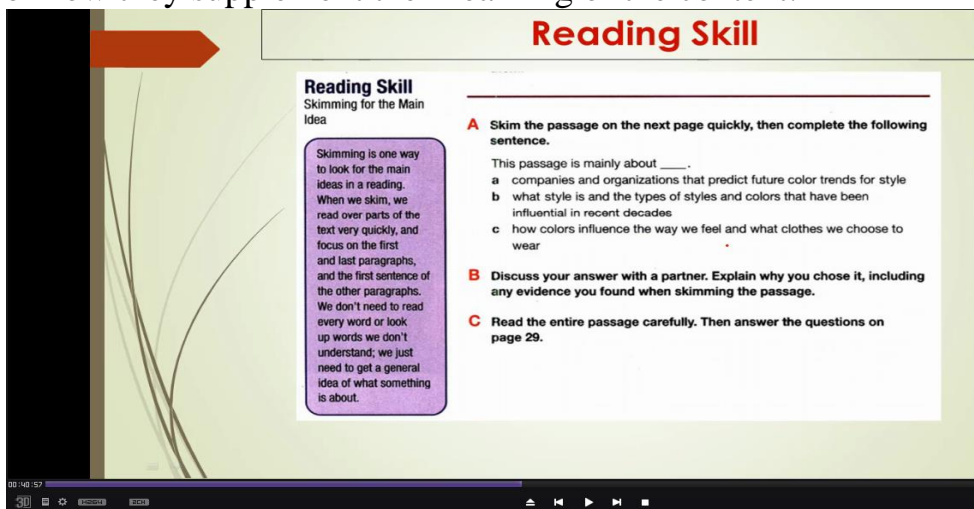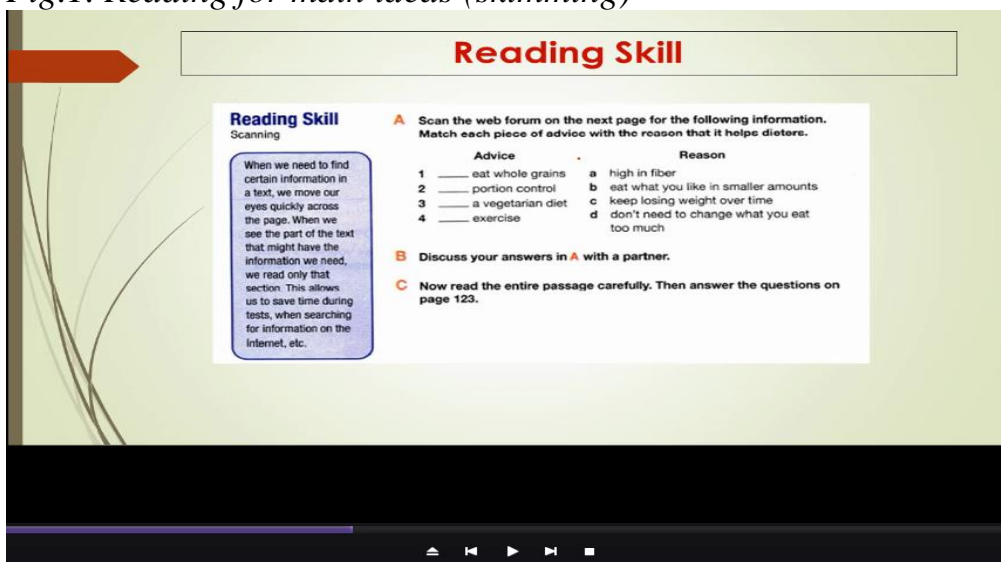

Fig.1. Reading for main ideas (skimming)

Fig.2. Reading for specific information (scanning)

Developing In-Class Assignments

Traditional teaching methods assume that instructors first introduce content in the classroom. In this course, for instance, students would learn about the concept of identifying main ideas in class. They would take turns reading a handout on this topic as a class to become familiar with basic concepts and strategies they could use to determine the main ideas of a reading. Students would read handouts in a jigsaw pattern and report what they learned to the class. Class time after the presentation of content was devoted to low-level skills on Bloom's taxonomy, such as comprehension and description. When this content was presented in class and students collaborated in small groups to read materials and prepare a short presentation, it was found that controlling the pacing of class was sometimes difficult. For instance, students who worked on less difficult skills often finished much earlier than other groups and would be looking for something else to work on. In those cases, students were asked to discuss content that other groups were working on. Another challenge was making

sure that students were able to apply what they learned when they left class to do their homework. The teacher was not always confident that when every student left class, he/she had a good enough understanding of the content to be able to apply what they learned. Assessment of students' learning was not effective, and as a result, it was noticed a wide range of students' understanding of the material on students' homework. One advantage of flipping these topics, and others, was that the teacher was now present to help students apply what they learned. Students work at a more even pace because they arrive in class with a relatively even understanding of the content. In the role as *Professional Educator*, the teacher is present to help students work through more difficult material and deliver more formative assessments during class.

Reading for Main Ideas

Following the flipped learning approach, students work through questions and activities about the readings together in class where their peers and instructor are present. This approach aligns with Grabe and Stoller (2014)'s assertion that class discussions of texts are an excellent way to teach students to understand the text they are reading although they "require an investment of classroom time" (Grabe & Stoller, 2014). Implementing flipped learning has given more time for these kinds of activities because direct instruction of these skills is moved out of the classroom. It has also helped the teacher better assess students' comprehension, as he is present during class while students are working through ideas, distinguishing between main and supporting ideas, and negotiating meaning about the readings. The instructor is able to move around the room, address questions, and help students work through challenges (Brinks Lockwood, 2014). Also, he is able to clarify any misunderstandings about the readings. An example of a task that students work on together in class is creating graphic organizers, defined as "visual representation of information in the text" (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). They can help students understand how discourse in an academic text is structured and how parts of a text relate to each other (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). Figure 3 shows a sample graphic organizer that students can use to start with. In class, they create a graphic organizer either in pairs or groups of three. Large pieces of butcher paper and markers are given to students to create their graphic organizer; they usually prepare a draft first on a smaller piece of paper. Students then collaborate to map the reading's basic ideas onto their large paper, all while discussing the reading as a whole, referring back to their printed copies of the readings and their notes, and engaging in a friendly debate about how ideas should be organized. This task also help create a *Learning Culture* where class is primarily student-centered and students are actively working with language; they are also using skills at the top of Bloom's taxonomy, such as evaluation, synthesis, and analysis.

Graphic organizers can also be created on a computer and saved for future presentation; students do not have to carry paper around and worry about losing or damaging their work. Another advantage is that students can easily move text boxes around, add arrows, and delete content as needed. These graphic organizers can be created in PowerPoint, for which no Internet access is needed, or on websites that specialize in visual design, such as Bubbl.us. When Internet connectivity is either

slow or unavailable, students can create graphic organizers on paper, as described in the previous paragraph.
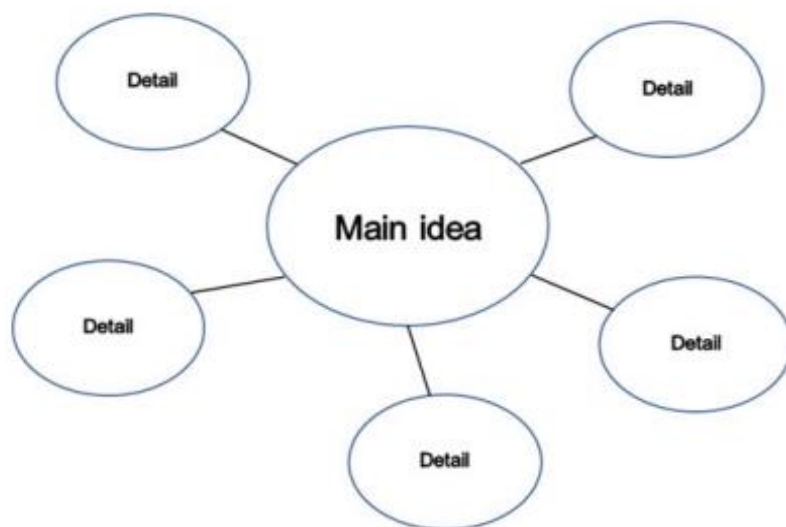

Fig.3. Sample graphic organizer

CONCLUSION

Nearly any academic reading skill can be flipped. Instructors can use materials that they already have in order to implement flipped learning. Instructors can flip a wide range of topics related to reading, such as determining the main idea of a passage, dealing with specific information. Flipping provides more time at home to watch video several times and stop it at any time as well as in class for interactive and collaborative activities that allow students to practice reading. Implementing flipped learning in this course and in others has also encouraged the teacher to reflect on what and how he teaches, experiment with different kinds of technology to support learning, and think of unique ways to assess learning.

References

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