

Study on the Strategies of “Reading Circle” Teaching Mode Used in English Reading Class of Junior Middle School

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Abstract: Nowadays, with the emphasis on cultivating the core literacy of the subject, the traditional English reading teaching has been unable to meet the needs of students' reading ability. The reform of teaching methods has gradually brought the “reading circle” mode into the vision of English teachers in China. As a new reading teaching mode, “reading circle” effectively stimulates students' interest in reading, cultivates their cooperative inquiry ability, and improves their English reading literacy through roles division, independent reading, in-class communication, and post-reading extension. The author takes the English textbook for the second volume of Grade 7 in the PEP edition as an example, and discusses the application of the “reading circle” teaching mode in English reading class in junior high school. It is an effective way to improve students' English reading literacy and enrich the teaching strategies of English reading in junior middle school.

Keywords: strategies, reading circle, English reading class, junior middle school

1. Introduction

The “English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education” (2022 Edition) requires teachers to focus on the cultivation of students' reading ability. At the same time, students are guided to explore the inherent meaning of reading materials through independent thinking, and cooperative inquiry learning, so as to develop their language skills and critical thinking. However, according to the current situation of the English reading class in junior high schools, there are still a few implicit problems that hinder the educational reform, such as teachers' over-guidance, students' passively reading, and mechanical interaction in class. In this background, the “reading circle” teaching mode has been applied to the English reading class of junior middle schools in China..

The “reading circle”, also known as the “literature circle”, is not only a teaching method to help students develop conducive reading habits and enjoy reading, but also an effective form of cooperative group learning. The reading circle teaching method follows the steps of “Read-Think-Connect-Ask-Connect”, and is committed to promoting the transformation of students' roles from traditional participants to organizers and leaders, so that students can actively participate in reading activities, learn to cooperate and share with classmates, and improve themselves reading ability^[5] (Daniels,1994). In view of the fact that reading ability is very important for English learners in junior high school, and there are a lot of difficulties exist in their process of reading such as inadequate of reading quantity, lack of reading interest, and inappropriate reading habits. Taking the English textbook for the second volume of Grade 7 in the PEP edition as an example, this paper aims to conclude the strategies and explore the effective way of reading circle teaching mode used in junior high schools' English reading class. It is hoped that by using these reading strategies in class, students' English reading ability as well as their self-confidence in reading can be effectively improved, so as to form a beneficial and life-long reading habit.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Literature Review

The foreign research on the “reading circle” teaching mode has a history of more than twenty years, which has also been widely used in practice. Many foreign language teaching scholars also tried to apply the “reading circle” teaching model to foreign language teaching, and this attempt presented

numerous positive results^{[6][3][8][12][15]}(Daniels, 2002; Burda, 2000; Furr, 2009; Mark, 2007; Shelton-Strong, 2012). Many experiments showed that the reading circle mode is an effective way to promote learners interest of reading. Blum et al.^[1](2002) introduced the reading circle teaching mode into English reading teaching. After teaching experiments, they found that discussion with group members can improve students' understanding of the article. The group work in the reading circle pedagogy improves their skills of communication, expression, analysis and comprehension. Furr^[8](2009) believed that the "literary circle" reading mode has referential significance for foreign language teaching. Through four-year practices, Burda^[3](2000) found that the reading circle teaching mode can prompt students to reflect in the process of communication, and enable students to learn from each other's strengths and improve themselves. A Japanese foreign language teaching researcher named Mark^[12] (2007) conducted a one-semester study on freshman in non-English majors in a Japanese university. The results showed that learners had a positive attitude not only towards the "reading circle" teaching mode, but also towards English reading class. Shelton-Strong^[15] (2012) conducted a one-year study on two groups of Vietnamese foreign language learners at different levels. Through teachers' observation and students' evaluation, they affirmed that "reading circle" are very important for higher and intermediate foreign language learners. The positive effects of the study promoted the learners' ability of independent learning and peer assistance, so that they can read confidently, consciously and voluntarily.

In conclusion, the author found that the theoretical and practical research on the reading circle teaching mode tends to be mature. Through teaching experiments, many scholars have proved that the reading circle teaching mode can enable students to read in a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere. Additional, it can cultivate students' critical thinking ability as well as improve their ability of communication and cooperation among peers, which lets students learn from each other.

2.2. Domestic Literature Review

The vigorous development of "reading circle" in foreign countries and its positive effects have prompted domestic foreign language teaching researchers to explore the referential significance of this reading method for China's reading teaching practice. Dai^[4] (2018) and Ding^[7] (2015) began to extend the reading circle teaching mode to English reading. The teacher selected the English articles, and let the students complete their own discussion outlines based on their past experiences when the students finished reading. Due to the different cultural backgrounds of students, this mode made students look forward to engaging in discussions more wholeheartedly. The experimental results showed that the practice in reading circle mode can improve students' reading ability, change their reading attitude, stimulate their reading interest, and cultivate their autonomous and cooperative learning ability. Some scholars believed that the teaching mode of "reading circle" is an effective way to promote English extra-curricular reading in middle schools. The researchers discussed the specific steps of the teaching method, including how to develop the students' ability of reading, thinking, sharing and evaluation, guiding students to broaden their horizons, activate their enthusiasm and improve their comprehensive ability when completing reading tasks^{[9][19][17][20]} (Li, 2018; Yi et al., 2018; Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2020). The new curriculum standard proposes that teaching should be designed and implemented in the unit of discourse, and it is beneficial to cultivate students' language learning ability through guiding students to observe and analyze the structure and language features of specific discourse in teaching. Miao and Luo^[13] (2020) took *Climate Chang and a Low-carbon Life* as an example to discuss the design and implementation of reading circle activities, pointing out that discourse is the main carrier of language learning, which enables students to deeply understand, learn and use language in reading process. The researches on the application of reading circle teaching mode mainly focused on the basic educational stage, which has greatly promoted the reform of English teaching in junior and senior high schools as well as enhanced the reading teaching quality.

To summarize the above literature review, the reading circle teaching mode has begun to attract the attention of the domestic educational circles, and it also has been gradually applied to the English and Chinese classrooms, which has produced good teaching effects.

3. Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis of the "reading circle" teaching mode is the constructivist learning theory. According to this theory, learning is a process in which the learner's original cognitive structure interacts with the sensory information received from the environment, and actively constructs the

meaning of information. Among them, “scenario”, “collaboration”, “communication” and “meaning construction” are the four essential elements. The “reading circle” mode is also a practice originated from the concepts of “discovery method” and “cooperative learning method”. Bruner^[2] (1962) believed that students’ learning is a kind of discovery, and the method of teaching should be to let students discover, answer and solve problems by themselves with the help of teaching materials or relevant materials provided by teachers. Students should “discover” the conclusions or regular knowledge, and make themselves the discoverers of knowledge rather than passive receivers^[10] (Li, 2007). “Cooperative learning” is a learning activity in which students use groups as the basic form to mobilize all positive factors in the teaching system, promoting their ability of cooperation, interaction, exploration and knowledge construction, to achieve the purpose of developing students’ initiative, positive and comprehensive reading^[11] (Li, 2010). Influenced by this theory, the process of reading is viewed as the interaction between the reader’s original language knowledge and the new information provided in the text. In this interactive process, readers process, store, extract and use new information actively. At the same time, readers need to cooperate and communicate with their peers in a certain situation, and through cooperation and dialogue, they can selectively perceive external information and construct the meaning of current things. In the “reading circle” mode, students discuss the topics of reading in the form of group cooperation, summarize the reading chapters, analyze the reading paragraphs, expand the use of reading vocabulary, and then transfer the reading content. In the process, knowledge was discovered and the knowledge system was reconstructed. The essence of this model is a cooperative “discovery learning”.

“Reading circle” is also known as “Literature circle”. In the 1980s, an American teacher applied this reading mode to primary school’s class and found that it could promote the students’ autonomous and cooperative learning ability and reading ability^[16] (Short & Pierce, 1990). Daniels^[5] (1994, p. 251) defined the concept of “reading circle” as following:

A reading circle is a small, student-led, demonstration reading discussion group composed of students who choose the same reading material. Each member independently reads through the text, completes targeted reading according to their specific roles and responsibilities in the group, and writes a role diary. Afterwards, members share their views in the group. After completing this round of discussion, the group members rotate to form a new reading group, select new reading materials, and enter the next reading circle.

A complete “reading circle” teaching process consists of the following six parts: (1) Choosing reading materials independently: There is no specific range limit for the selection of reading materials, and students can choose works based on their own interests and learning ability; (2) Forming a temporary reading group: Students choose 4-6 people to form a reading circle, and members in the circle can freely and fully participate in reading, discussion and presentation of results; (3) Assigning roles independently: Each member reads the selection carefully and independently. After deciding on the material, students should take on different roles and tasks according to their own interests and level, and then carry out targeted reading. (4) Writing a Role Sheet: The members of the group record the reading content and thoughts in writing according to the requirements of their respective roles. This is the first step to test the effectiveness of students’ independent reading, and it is also the transformation from reading input to writing output^[18] (Wang, 2017); (5) Sharing and discussing reading results: Members in the group express their opinions, share the reading results, and then carry out communication and sharing between groups; (6) Evaluating reading results: “Reading Circle” teaching mode focuses on formative evaluation, and adopts a combination of teacher’s evaluation, student self-evaluation and student mutual evaluation. The evaluation content mainly includes the writing of the role log and the discussion within the group^[5] (Daniels, 1994).

4. The Strategies of “reading circle” teaching mode Used in junior middle school’s English reading Class

This chapter selects 6 units from the English textbook for the second volume of Grade 7 in the PEP edition as texts, designs the corresponding teaching procedures according to the 6 teaching steps of “reading circle”, and puts forward some valuable teaching implications.

4.1. Choosing Reading Materials Independently

In actual English reading class, the teacher should play a personal guiding role without interfering too much with students’ reading activities, and guide students to choose reading materials according to

their personal preferences. If the reading circle activities are to be carried out successfully, firstly, the teacher should select books that are appropriate for junior high school students to read and learn; Secondly, when students choose reading materials, they need to combine their personal learning ability instead of selecting completely according to personal interests, and the most appropriate is the best; Finally, the graded reading way is used to help students choose the appropriate reading materials. Whether it is a course-related reading or an extra-curricular reading, as long as it can improve students' reading ability, it can be chosen.

For example, when learning “*Why do you like pandas?*”(see Table 1), the teaching goal of this course is to help students to be familiar with animal-related vocabulary, and master the knowledge of animals by discussing various characteristics of animals in the reading activities. Students can also master animal nouns and adjectives that describe animal characteristics, and can flexibly use “*what*” and “*why*” to ask special questions, and use “*because*” to express reasons. When teaching, the teacher can prepare English stories about animals for students to choose according to their personal preferences and interests, such as “*The Wolf and the Stork*”, “*The Donkey and the Grasshopper*”, “*The Bat and the Squirrel*”, etc.

Table 1: *Why do you like pandas?*

Units	Topics	Functions	Structures
<p>5</p> <p>Why do you like pandas?</p> <p>Page 25</p>	Animals in a zoo	<p>Describe animals</p> <p>Express preferences</p>	<p>Why, What, Where questions</p> <p>Because ...</p> <p>Adjectives of quality</p>

4.2. Forming a Temporary Reading Group

Different from the previous study groups, the reading circle does not have specific requirements for students' personal English level, but emphasizes the formation of different reading groups according to the reading materials selected by the students. It is best to assign 4-6 people to each group members because too many group members will easily affect the effect of group discussions; too few group members will reduce the enthusiasm of students to participate in reading activities. In addition, the reading ability of each member in the group is quite different. The formation of reading group is convenient to help students cooperate with each other, which can not only cultivate students' cooperation awareness and ability, but also help students with reading difficulties to better integrate into English reading activities which gradually improves students' personal English reading ability.

For example, when learning “*What did you do last weekend?*”(see Table 2), the teaching goal of this section is to help students master words such as *away, mouse, shout, language*, etc., and continue to learn the simple past tense. After learning, students can use the following sentence patterns flexibly, such as “*What did you do last weekend?*” “*Who visited her grandma?*” “*Where did she go last weekend?*”. After students choose reading materials according to their personal interests and preferences, they will be divided into the same reading group for students who have selected the same materials, regardless of the English reading level of each student, and they will be guided to conduct group discussions according to unified teaching standards. If there are students with relatively poor reading ability in the reading group, the teacher should give appropriate encouragement and guidance in actual teaching, encouraging such students to actively participate in group discussion activities, and adopting a cooperative and mutual aid approach to accomplish the goals of English reading teaching. In view of the comprehensive consideration of the various abilities and levels of each reading group member, the teacher should make some adjustments to ensure the effectiveness of reading circle teaching. Each member of the group has the opportunity to express their views and opinions, so that they can achieve the teaching effect with all members of the reading group during the reading process.

Table 2: *Why did you do last weekend?*

12 What did you do last weekend? Page 67	Weekend activities	Talk about past events	Simple past tense (II) What questions Who questions
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4.3. Assigning Roles Independently

After the reading group is formed, it is necessary to assign appropriate reading roles according to the individual characteristics of the group members, such as group leader, illustrator, article interpreter, syntax and lexical expert, etc.^[6] (Daniels, 2002, p. 374). By taking on different functional roles, students can really feel the function of the role and make it work for the learning efficiency of the entire reading group. In the actual operation process, it is necessary to ensure that each member of the group is assigned a suitable role, so as to ensure the smooth progress of reading activities. At this stage, each member of the group must be familiar with personal roles, and gradually improve personal reading ability through continuous reading practice.

For example, when learning “*Don’t eat in class*”(see Table 3), the teaching goal of this unit is to make students master the expression of rules by learning the meaning of “*don’t*” imperative sentences and “*can*” expressions. In the actual teaching process, students can play corresponding roles according to their own personal characteristics, for example, one plays the role of the headmaster and the other plays the role of the student, discussing some rules that should be paid attention to in school. After determining the reading materials, teachers need to guide each reading group to assign roles independently, and let each role receive the corresponding reading task according to the content of the reading materials.

Table 3: *Don’t eat in class.*

4 Don’t eat in class. Page 19	Rules	Talk about rules	Imperatives (<i>Don’t ...</i>) <i>Can</i> for permission Modal verbs <i>have to, must</i>
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4.4. Writing a Role Sheet

After each team member clarifies their roles and responsibilities, the teacher issues a pre-made Role Sheet. The role diary is an auxiliary tool to guide students to clarify their roles, tasks and responsibilities. In the initial stage of the implementation of “reading circle” teaching, it can effectively help students establish role awareness and perform their own duties in the group. Each role journal includes a description of the role’s responsibilities and tasks to be completed during the group discussion phase. Each member of the group records the reading content and experience in written form according to the specific requirements of each role.

For example, when studying the unit “*Is there a post office near here?*”(see Table 4), the teaching goal of this course is to be able to ask others for locations or give directions by learning to use the “*there be*” structure and “*where*” to ask questions. In the actual classroom application of “reading circle”, the group leader needs to clearly divide the reading goals of each group member, record the places and things involved in the reading materials according to the content of the textbook. The article interpreter needs to describe the short text and conclude the viewpoints of this group. The illustrator needs to draw the story scene according to the chapter, and the syntax and lexical experts need to summarize the key words, sentence patterns, grammar, etc. in the text.

Table 4: *Is there a post office near here?*

<p>8</p> <p>Is there a post office near here?</p> <p>Page 43</p>	<p>The neighborhood</p>	<p>Ask for and give directions on the street</p>	<p>There be structure</p> <p>Where questions</p> <p>Prepositions of place</p>
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4.5. Sharing and Discussing Reading Results

In order to ensure the effect of discussion, teachers need to do a good job of importing the text in the early stage, and guide students to interpret the text and discuss the content of the text according to the role assignment of the constituent members. Each member of the group needs to discuss with others according to the characteristics of their personal roles. The teacher will give appropriate guidance without affecting the students' discussion. In response to the mistakes in the discussion process, the teacher should correct them timely to avoid excessive deviations. At the same time, teachers should encourage students to participate in group discussion activities actively, dare to speak out and express their ideas and opinions to form a good reading atmosphere, so that it can help students better understand the content of reading, and also ensure the quality of reading.

For example, when learning "*How was your school trip?*" (see Table 5), the teaching objectives of this unit mainly help students to master language skills, language knowledge, learning methods and cultural awareness. After learning this unit, they can use "*was*" to form a simple past tense with declarative sentences, negative sentences, interrogative sentences and answers. In the actual teaching process, the teacher guides each reading group to discuss the topic "*how was your outing?*", so that students can learn the usage of the simple past tense through independent reading and discussion, and gradually improve students' listening, speaking, reading and writing ability. In the reading discussion, it is necessary to start from the actual situation of teaching content, and appropriately create some teaching situations, such as life scenes, etc., so that students can use their imaginations to deepen the learning of this section in the process of inspiring and helping each other.

Table 5: *How was your school trip?*

<p>11</p> <p>How was your school trip?</p> <p>Page 61</p>	<p>School trips</p>	<p>Talk about past events</p>	<p>Simple past tense (1)</p> <p>How questions</p> <p>Yes/No questions and short answers</p> <p>Adjectives of description</p>
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4.6. Evaluating Reading Results

The group members should comment on each other, which aims to confirm the effectiveness of English reading teaching in the reading circle mode. When each reading activity is completed, the teacher needs to guide each member of the group to evaluate each other. The main evaluation includes performance, reading level and knowledge mastery in the activity. The use of mutual evaluation can not only effectively arouse students' desire to win, but also enable students to quickly enter the learning state, gradually forming a positive competition within the class, which plays an essential role in the development of students' thinking ability and the improvement of reading level.

For example, in learning "*I'd like some noodles*" (see Table 6), the teaching goal of this lesson is to help students learn food-related vocabulary and express what they want to eat. After studying this unit, students can use English flexibly to order food in restaurants. After completing the independent material selection, reading group formation, role assignment and other links, teachers should encourage

students to make independent evaluations in the later stage of teaching. First, they need to briefly describe the content of this section, and through mutual communication and interaction, they can complete the language learning goals, which maybe stimulates their reading interest, and help them master effective reading methods. The teacher should guide members of the group to comment on each other, mainly commenting on performance, reading level and knowledge mastery, etc., and give appropriate guidance to allow students to better complete teaching tasks, which can enhance students' self-confidence in learning and reduce the difficulty of applied learning. In addition, after each reading activity, the teacher should lead students to consolidate what they have learned independently.

Table 6: I'd like some noodles.

<p>10 I'd like some noodles. Page 55</p>	<p>Food</p>	<p>Order food</p>	<p>would like What questions some/any</p>
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5. Conclusion

To sum up, the use of the reading circle mode in English reading teaching in junior high schools is conducive to cultivating students' interest in English reading and arousing their enthusiasm for learning. The teacher can guide students to complete reading tasks independently according to their actual learning level and ability, and share with group members to achieve the effect of developing thinking ability. At the same time, it can also effectively improve students' English reading ability and lay a solid foundation for better English learning in the future. However, this paper only relies on the text to explore the teaching model, and does not confirm the effectiveness of this model through empirical research, which is also the direction that the author needs to work on in the future.

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