The Effects of Engaging Students in Literature Circles on Reading Comprehension: An English Reading Program in a Senior High school

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ABSTRACT

How to propitiously enhance the reading comprehension of Chinese students in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) environment remains an arduous challenge for numerous Second Language (L2) teachers in senior high schools. The paper analyzes a one-month case study of adopting and implementing Literature Circles (LCs) for an English reading program in a senior-high boarding school in the Hunan province of China. Employing mixed research methods, this study implies that LCs assuredly influence participants' reading competency in the experimental group. Furthermore, students' perception of reading (e.g., aptitude, propensities, incentives, and fondness) has substituted positively.

Keywords: Literature Circles, Reading comprehension, Perception of reading, EFL students.

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Chinese senior high school EFL students reading English texts, one of the most significant complexities they encounter is not the lack of resources or guidance but an average reading competency. In the context of Chinese English language learning, some students find themselves in a critical cycle where their reading competency can credibly affect their yearning for English reading, which consequently hinders the enhancement of their reading competency. To motivate English reading, Literature Circles (LCs) cultivate response to text through communication and offer chances and platforms for students to engage in student-centered groups [1]. A successful LCs depends on three elements: book choice, small group, and teacher. Underpinned by social constructivism (a social learning theory), the use of LCs can potentially improve Chinese students' reading comprehension through active engagement in class.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

LCs are small, peer-led discussion groups and its participants will read a shared story, poem, article, or book together, using role sheets to understand text in a new viewpoint [2].

2.1 The Application of Literature Circles

In first language education, language teachers have successfully used LCs to motivate learners to read while promoting student literacy and literature appreciation [3]. The finding of Bendu (2013) [4] also provides strong support for the argument that as an instructional pedagogy, LCs promote reading comprehension and academic and intellectual engagement for all students, including culturally and linguistically diverse and struggling readers. Literacy improvement is attributed to implementing LCs. Nonetheless, some unexpectedly surprising results also took place. Perseverance and assiduity can foster in the course of LCs [5]. Blum's research indicated that this approach is conducive to students with special needs, such as the perceptions of their reading abilities have increased. LCs also forge learner independence through student-centered tasks, meaningful group talk, and comprehensive reading activities [6].

In an EFL classroom, are LCs more effective than conventional teaching reading activities? Irawati (2016) [7] noted in his study LCs positively affect students' literal and inferential reading comprehension. The method also involves students in interactive reading activities and fosters a context where teachers merely play a guiding role [8]. Mark (2007) [9] noted great

success in transforming passive shy and introverted students into ones who eagerly point at their texts to support their arguments while sharing their opinions in English using LCs. Liao (2009) [10], a Taiwanese scholar, argued that a significant improvement catapulted in LCs participants' critical thinking. Elements such as engagement, choice, responsibility, and research contribute to the success of similar models to LCs such as book clubs [11].

2.2 Reading Comprehension

Comprehension was defined by the Research and Development (RAND) Reading Study Group [12] as the process of simultaneously constructing and extracting meaning through interaction and engagement with written language. This research will apply this definition because it emphasizes the communicative course happening between the individual, the text, the reading activity, and the larger socio-cultural as well as develop a concept for the overall reading process activated within the individual [4&12].

For second language learning, reading literature materials can confer advantages on the prevision of some essential conditions. The necessity of reading is emphasized by the poor performance in reading comprehension with deficient exposure to extra-curriculum reading texts for many Chinese senior high school students, especially students living in less-developed areas or boarding schools. Regardless, most of the English reading materials that the students have access to are limited to textbooks or test materials. These mundane materials are of identical content, which fails to stimulate students' reading interest and improve their reading ability. Therefore, there is a call for introducing extra-curriculum reading materials.

To summarize, LCs remain under-researched in the context of senior high boarding schools in China. Therefore, the study can contribute to the improvement of empirical evidence of the use of LCs for improving reading comprehension among Chinese EFL students. The study is guided by the two questions below:

*Is there a significant difference in the scores of reading comprehension for Chinese EFL students, following the implementation of LCs in a senior high boarding school?

*Following the implementation of LCs in a senior high boarding school, how does it affect Chinese EFL students' perception of reading?

3. METHODOLOGY

Mixed research methods were employed in the study. Researchers resorted to qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather and evaluate data [13].

3.1 Participants

In this study, the participants were two intact classes of 11th-grade students at a senior high school in Hunan province. Moreover, Class A, as the control class (CC), was taught in the conventional reading class pattern while Class B, as the experimental class (EC), was taught English reading class with the implementation of LCs.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

A pre-test involving Independent Samples T-test of CC and EC was conducted to see any observed difference in reading comprehension between CC and EC. Intended to test the influence of LCs on students' reading ability, a similar post-test including both classes were arranged to examine the effects of LCs. Considering the study is situated in a senior high school, the New College Entrance Examination Paper is an ideal choice for the benchmarking tests. The data comprising pre-/post-test and Independent Samples T-test were analyzed by SPSS 26.0.

To acquire verbal answers to certain questions raised about a particular topic; the research will adopt the use of interviews because this entails interpersonal communication, which is a necessary way to uncover the students' perception of reading; especially, the students who seem to undergo a critical change in their reaction to the intervention. The interview content was coded and interpreted concerning research questions.

4. RESULTS

Prior to answer the research questions, it was vital to consider the individual difference in terms of reading competency between the two classes.

4.1 Comparison of the CC and EC in the Pre-test and Post-test

Judging from Table 1, the Paired Samples T-test implied that there was no explicit disparity between the control group and experimental group concerning pre-test and post-test as the indicator (P>0.05) shows.

However, the value of Sig. (2-tailed) in EC (P<0.001) presented in the Table 1 is obviously below 0.05, which indicates a critical change happened to EC in the post-test scores, following the deployment of LCs. Therefore, compared with CC, the enhancement of EC students' reading comprehension was more striking.

In summary, after a month of intervention, participants in EC have achieved progress to some extent, which implies that the deployment of LCs, an extra-curriculum reading drill, helps improve students' reading competency.

4.2 Comparison between CC and EC in the Post-test

Considering Table 2, the result of the CC was 65.06±14.42, while the score of the EC was 64.11±8.74. The result of the independent-samples T-test indicated that there was no significant difference between the control group and experimental group(P>0.05), which might have resulted from the individual difference between the two classes. Nevertheless, the interference of LCs is still meaningful according to the Paired Samples T-test presented in Table 1.

4.3 Interview

The below is from part of the face-to-face interview conversation, which demonstrates that learners in the EC benefited in various ways from the LCs:

Student A: "I think reading has become an enjoyable journey for me. Before I usually read English stories at home by myself, but now I have the chance to voice my opinion in group and listen to others' opinions."

Student B: "I always fail to understand long sentences in English. But through LCs, I found that my understanding of complicated English sentences has improved."

Student C: "Role sheets offered me a new insight into the novel we read, and I also learned useful expressions that seldom appear in our textbooks."

LCs not only contribute to the development of reading comprehension and writing skill, but also do wonders for learner autonomy such as increased engagement and a strong will to take part in purposeful group discussions. Researchers also note that raising higher-order questions in the peer-led group is beneficial to cultivate critical thinking.

5. CONCLUSION

In response to the two research questions, the researcher employed mixed research methods (e.g., SPSS 26.0 adopted for quantitative analysis while face-to-face interview used for qualitative analysis), following the implementation of LCs in EC for one month. For the first research question, LCs have a positive influence on students' reading competency, including a significant improvement in their reading test scores, and a better understanding of reading materials, which is in line with Irawati 2016 [7] research findings. However, we should also consider the individual difference for the betterment of the study.

For another research question, some participants claimed that they became more interested in English extra-curriculum reading and had more confidence in expressing their viewpoints in public. It is worth mentioning that many positive outcomes are discovered in LCs curriculum, for instance, the improvement of reading attitude and self-efficacy, and the cultivation of critical thinking and engagement in a group.

Therefore, what key ingredients account for the efficacy of literature circles? First, it is the intentional marriage of comprehensible input and effective output in association with collaborative peer and teacher dialogues, which also echoes Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis [14]. Second, giving students a clear yet challenging task, role sheets inspire group members to read a story from a different view. Last but not least, the essence of literature circles is a great story that touches student' heart in a manner not achievable by other purely academic textbooks.

Table1. Paired Samples T-test of Control Class and Experimental Class in the Pre-test and Post-test

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | | | |
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95%Confidence Interval of the Difference | | t | df | Sig.(2-tailed) |
					Lower	Upper			
Pair1	CC-Pre-test CC-Post-test	0.33	7.75	1.26	-2.22	2.88	0.263	37	0.794
Pair2	EC-Pre-test EC -Post-test	-5.37	6.68	1.08	-7.56	-3.17	-4.954	37	<0.001

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Control Class and Experimental Class in the Post-test

	Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std.Error Mean	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Scores	CC	38	65.06	14.42	2.34	0.348	0.729
	EC	38	64.11	8.74	1.42		

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