

## Application of “Reading Circles” in College English Teaching

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**Abstract**—Reading Circle is popular in libraries, educational institutions in the USA, Canada and some other countries. It has become an effective technique to improve students’ reading ability and socializing skill. The application of reading circles in the teaching of College English in a Chinese college is a meaningful trial. It can cultivate students’ critical thinking, improve their reading and speaking abilities, and their team spirit and cross-cultural awareness can also be enhanced.

**Keywords**—reading circles, college English teaching, application

### I. INTRODUCTION

College English is a compulsory course that every non-English major has to take at college. According to The College English Teaching Curriculum Requirements issued in 2007 by the Higher Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education of China (2007: 1), the teaching objectives are to cultivate students’ comprehensive abilities, especially the abilities of listening and speaking, so that they can communicate effectively in English in their future studies, careers and social lives, to enhance their autonomous learning ability, and improve their cultural literacy so as to meet the needs of social development and international communication. The emphasis on listening and speaking in teaching doesn’t mean that reading and writing are ignored, for reading still remains the primary source of English input.

Reading is an essential part of English teaching and learning. Research on teaching English reading as a second/foreign language can be found in a range of books and journals, effective methods and techniques including the theory of schemata, the interactive approach, etc. To improve the reading comprehension ability and some other competences is what every teacher of English is thinking about.

### II. WHAT IS READING CIRCLE?

The idea of reading circles, also called culture circles, literature circles or book clubs, was first put forward by a renowned Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. It means small, heterogeneous, peer-led discussion groups in which members discuss the same text that has been chosen and read (Daniels, 2002). The purposes of reading circles include: to develop a reading habit, to improve reading fluency and

comprehension, to create a context for discussion and problem solving, etc. The participants gather regularly to discuss what they have read. There are different roles in a reading circle, such as discussion leader, culture collector, passage person, summarizer, word master, connector, illustrator, researcher and so on (<http://www.oup-bookworms.com/reading-circles.cfm>).

Reading Circle is one kind of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning refers to “classroom techniques in which students work on learning activities in small groups and receive rewards or recognition based on their group’s performance” (Slavin, 1980: 315). The students communicate with each other, establishing an interactive relationship different from traditional teaching techniques. The concept of cooperative learning requires each member be an indispensable part in group work. Both cooperation and individual accountability are important. This student-centered technique creates an ideal language learning setting where students can practice their listening and speaking abilities.

Reading Circle is also one form of autonomous learning. Autonomy, contends Holec (1981: 3), means “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”. The students’ choosing a text, reading it and making preparations in their spare time for the reading circle is a process of autonomous learning.

Reading circles are widely used in educational institutions, libraries, communities in the USA, Canada, etc. The instructional approach is popular among language teachers, and it’s effective to improve students’ reading comprehension and social skills (Anderson & Corbett, 2008; Blum, Lipsett, & Yocum, 2002).

In China, the research and application of reading circles in education lags behind, and the focus is on reading in the Chinese language in elementary education. Few applications can be found in the teaching of English reading.

Therefore, the application of reading circles in the teaching of English as a foreign language is a meaningful trial.

### III. ITS APPLICATION IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

#### A. Setting

This approach is applied to about 70 non-English majors (two classes) in a Chinese college. Before they entered this college, the students had learned English for about 9 years. Most of them are of intermediate level.

The schedule for the course of College English is 5 periods per week. According to the curriculum requirements, the students have to improve their abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. Therefore, the teacher schedules one period every two weeks for the reading circle.

### B. Managing the Reading Circle Process

#### 1) Introducing Reading Circles

To Chinese students, the reading circle is a new thing, alien to them. Therefore the teacher has to introduce it, explaining how it is carried out, and making them understand its significance to ensure its smooth performance.

After that, the teacher should help the students get access to English reading materials by offering them sources like libraries, newspapers, magazines and websites. The students have some reading material at hand, but that's not enough. The teacher should encourage them to choose a variety of reading topics and text genres.

Grouping is essential to carry out reading circles. Based on the current situations at the college, a group consists of 6 members: discussion leader, culture collector, summarizer, word master, connector and presenter. Each member plays a different role in different rounds of reading circles. The teacher explains and demonstrates the responsibility of each role to the students.

The following table is the responsibilities of each role.

#### 2) Procedures

##### Step 1: Preparations before a reading circle

The discussion leader chooses the appropriate reading text, and notifies group members to read it. If group members find it difficult to get access to the reading text, he/she should provide the photocopy. Then the leader assigns different roles to group members, and makes them make preparations for the coming reading circle.

##### Step 2: Reading circle in class

The students discuss in groups, each group with a different reading text. The discussion will last for 20-25 minutes. The discussion ranges a variety of contents, such as the text's main idea, word meanings and word use, cultural differences, social reality, enlightenments drawn from the text, etc. Through discussion, the students have a better understanding of the text, and improve their literacy appreciation.

##### Step 3: Presentation

Each group takes turns to present what they discuss, sharing their reading insights and exchanging opinions. It will last for about 15 minutes. This step is the integration of language input and output, providing a platform for students to practise their oral English and the ability to make public speech in English.

##### Step 4: Teacher's feedback

After each group's presentation, it's the teacher's turn to give evaluation and feedback. The teacher praises those who perform excellently and points out the good points in their accomplishment of the task. Meanwhile, the teacher should also figure out the weak points.

#### Step 5: Evaluation

The students evaluate their own and group members' performance.

#### 3) Some considerations concerning reading circles

To carry out the reading circle successfully, the teacher should make good preparations and activate the students' interest in it. Some considerations are as follows:

##### 1. Grouping

Grouping is essential in reading circles. According to theories of cooperative learning, there are two major types of grouping: homogeneous grouping and heterogeneous grouping. Homogeneous grouping refers to grouping based on the same or similar traits, ages, abilities, language level, etc., while heterogeneous grouping means the opposite. Teachers can group students based on different tasks and objectives. Reading circles are held regularly, and the students switch roles every time, so it's better to group students heterogeneously, and group members are relatively fixed, ensuring the good preparations for and smooth execution of reading circles, and students' opportunities to practice their different skills.

##### 2. Teacher's role

Reading circle is a student-centered classroom technique, with group work as its characteristic. The teacher acts as the activity designer, facilitator, helper and monitor. He/she should keep track of what's going on before the reading circle, go around the classroom to make sure every student involves in the discussion, offer help when necessary, and sometimes participate in group discussion.

### IV. CHOICE OF READING MATERIALS

Choosing appropriate reading materials is important. Too easy reading texts pose no challenges, and are not good for improvement in reading ability; too difficult texts make students frustrated, and are hard to maintain their interest in reading. Based on the curriculum requirements, the teacher should guide students to refer to different sources, and choose suitable reading texts of varied topics and genres.

### V. DESIGN OF ROLE SHEETS

The teacher should design role sheets and hand them out before the reading circle to ensure full preparations, and ask the students to hand them in after each reading circle for evaluation and further research.

Role sheets can be designed as follows:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Role: \_\_\_\_\_

Book/Article: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: \_\_\_\_\_

My understanding: \_\_\_\_\_

Table 1. The Responsibilities of the role

Role	Responsibilities
Discussion leader	Before the reading circle: choose the reading material, inform group members how to get access to it or even copy and hand it out to members. During the reading circle: lead discussion.
Culture collector	Explain the cultural elements in the reading text, and make comparison with the Chinese culture.
summarizer	Summarize the reading text, and get its main idea.
Word master	Determine the meanings of words in the reading text, and explain denotation and connotation.
Connector	Connect the reading text with social reality or one's own experiences.
Presenter	Present group discussion to the class.

Table 2. Assessment Items

Assessment Items	Leader Name	Culture Collector Name	Word Master Name	Summarizer Name	Connector Name	Presenter Name
Discussion contributions						
Understanding what is being discussed						
Intelligent questioning						
Using evidence to support ideas						
Interested, active listener						
Good preparations for own task						
Showing exceptional insights						
Score						

## VI. EVALUATION & REWARD

Which reward structure has the most positive effects on performance? Slavin asserts “it depends on the task, the performance and its measure, and many other features” (1980: 317). To complete the group task, every member should take responsibility of his/her own task, and try to influence and help other members. In a reading circle, the teacher should evaluate the students as a group, not individually. Meanwhile, the teacher should take multi-dimensional evaluation into consideration, including students’ self-evaluation, peer evaluation and evaluation from other groups.

One sample of evaluation sheets:

(Adopted from Blum, Lipsett & Yocom), (2002:104)

- 1 = nonproficient
  - 2 = partially proficient
  - 3 = proficient
  - 4 = advanced
4. Conclusion

College English teaching is not only language teaching. It should attach importance to the cultivation of students’ cultural literacy. The application of reading circles in college English teaching provides students an opportunity to select their reading materials independently. Through reading and analyzing texts, and group discussion, the students can enhance their critical thinking, improve their reading and speaking abilities, and socializing skills. Their cross-culture awareness and team spirit can also be strengthened.

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