

Teaching Newspaper Reading Course with Group Work Approach

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Abstract : As the most convenient way to access authentic modern English, newspaper reading has been brought into the spotlight in China especially at college levels. It is now taught as a course to non-English majors. Group work, a well researched area, is considered one of the most beneficial teaching approaches in other countries. This paper explores in depth five essential issues concerning implementing group work in English newspaper reading course in a Chinese college. This approach is proved to be feasible and effective in this course.

Keywords: newspaper reading; college level; group work; effective

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid increase of international exchange and cooperation, English newspaper reading has been attached great importance in China. It has been a compulsory course for English majors for years and it is now taken by many colleges and universities as an elective.

In Chinese tertiary education, clear guidelines are issued for English instruction to non-English majors. College English Curriculum Requirements^[1] requires in all the three levels (basic, intermediate, advanced) that students be able to read essays in popular newspapers and magazines published in English-speaking countries. So the ability to read and understand newspaper articles has become a significant measurement of college students' English proficiency.

In this paper, five essential issues will be explored in depth with regard to teaching this course at college level.

2. Why should students read newspaper articles?

Reading articles in the popular English newspapers has many advantages.

It is the most convenient way to have access to the modern English language for new words (such as coined words, buzzwords) usually first appear in newspapers and then they are widely used by people^[2]. Newspapers offer unlimited amounts of current, authentic, vivid, various and interesting English learning resources. They serve as a huge language corpus to satisfy the purposes of learning and research.

Besides, reading newspaper articles can effectively broaden students' horizons. The current reports bring them up-to-date information, helping them leave the Ivy Tower and face the real world. This is of much help to their overall development. They do not feel isolated and instead closely connected with the outside world.

Furthermore, newspaper reading plays a positive role in developing students' independent and critical thinking. Lou^[3] argues that reading skills and critical thinking could both be developed in reading newspaper articles.

3. What challenges does the course present?

As a relatively new course for Chinese non-English majors, it poses some challenges to both teachers and students.

To teachers, the biggest challenge is how to engage more students in a class of more than 60 students, which is often the case of Chinese English courses. Teaching newspaper reading is just like teaching swimming or cycling in which learners would never master the skills if they never try them in person. Facilitative instructions are also indispensable. If the teachers could get more students try it with the help of proper instruction, learning will more likely be a success.

On the other hand, the course is no easy task for students. Their difficulties may come from the unfamiliar styles (news, editorial, feature, etc.), background information, vocabulary (abbreviation, coined words, jargon, euphemism, doublespeak, etc.) and grammar (ellipsis, parenthesis, loose structure, tense, etc.). Effective instruction should be given to break these barriers.

4. Why is group work adopted as the teaching approach?

Group work is defined as students working together in a small group so that everyone can participate on a clearly assigned task^[4]. Moreover, students are expected to carry out their task without direct and immediate supervision of the teacher^[4].

Faced with the big challenge of engaging students in a large class, teachers are often advised by language experts to take group work approach in the context of large-class teaching. For example, Harmer^{[5]129} holds that "in large classes, pair work and group work play an important part since they maximize student participation". Brown^{[6]173-174} listed 4 advantages of group work for English language

classroom: 1) Group work generates interactive language; 2) Group work offers an embracing affective climate; 3) Group work promotes learner responsibility and autonomy; 4) Group work is a step toward individualizing instruction. With group work, students could talk more, feel more secure and comfortable, learn more, their unique needs and abilities will be more likely to be attended. Values of adopting group work in teaching are also discussed from psychological, culture, humanistic and democratic perspectives^{[7][8]}. In particular, Parrott & Cherry^[9] prove the success of using reading groups to facilitate both deep reading and active discussion.

5. How is group work approach implemented in the course?

Newspaper reading course is given as an elective at Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication. The students from all majors are free to choose this course. So it is a large class with about 80 students.

I have been teaching this course for 2 years. In the first year, the classes were given in lectures in which I explain in detail the articles in a textbook for newspaper reading course. This is the common practice in a large language class in China. However, what I found in that year were low class attendance, low interest, few responses, poor interaction and unsatisfying homework. Most students either played with cell-phones or did other work. In such a teacher-centered passive classroom, teacher talk dominated most of the class time and only a few students were involved. This is why I decide to try group work in the second-year teaching, hoping to see those advantages of the technique in this course.

5.1. Set up online QQ groups.

The whole world has witnessed the fantastic development of online social network like MSN, Skype, QQ, Wechat among which QQ and Wechat are most popular in China. They offer convenient means for people to communicate. Since this is a large class and students are not familiar with each other, it may be a great idea to set up QQ groups to organize this class.

I set up one big group for all the students of this course. Small groups (with about 6 students) also have their respective groups. The big group is used for handing out newspaper articles for class discussion, presentation or homework. The small groups are used for sharing materials and discussion. These groups worked well as a forum of communication either among students or between students and teachers. Suggestions and comments could be obtained more easily via QQ.

In here, students and teachers are not physically close to each other, but they help each other, share and discuss

materials, all of which are important in cooperative learning^[10].

5.2. Have the articles contributed by teacher and students.

End-of-course surveys show that students love to read new and interesting reports. They have their own favorite topics like sports and entertainment. Particular interests may also vary with individuals. The textbooks available in the market, however, are usually out-of-date (because it takes long time to compile and publish a textbook), somewhat boring (cause compilers' interest may not suit the students), more difficult in language (for textbooks aim at college students in general rather than a particular college).

In view of these disadvantages of present textbooks, I decided to have the articles contributed together. That is, both teacher and students are responsible for contributing articles (at least one article from each group). It is important to make the standards clear to students: recently published, interesting topic, suitable degree of difficulty. Krashen^{[11]273} claims that the language input should be "a little bit beyond their current level of competence" otherwise learners may feel discouraged. He believes that only comprehensible input could promote second language acquisition. Zhang^[2] also agrees that short, interesting, authentic articles should be used for beginners to arouse students' interest and build confidence and sense of success. With joined efforts, the "textbook" is constructed for class use.

5.3. Groups present, teacher facilitates.

Instead of the traditional teacher-centered class, I tried "groups present, teacher facilitates" mode. Groups (small size is preferred) take turns to give presentations on the assigned articles. Clear guidelines are necessary for a successful presentation. The teacher offers suggestions on what to present (such as background information, main ideas, key words, headache sentences) and how to present (such as components, pace, tone, picture-text design).

During the preparation session, the teacher should ensure that they work together for the same purpose and are assigned different roles at work. Such negotiation could be done in QQ groups if necessary. During the presentation, the teacher sits together with other students and takes notes. After the presentation, questions, comments and suggestions are encouraged from students as well as the teacher. If a controversial issue arises, the teacher can hold a further class discussion to promote students' language competence and develop their critical thinking. A formal summary of the group work is expected from each group in terms of purpose of the task, process and self-evaluation. The teacher is responsible for grading and facilitating their performance during the whole process.

5.4. Jigsaw reading groups

In group work, jigsaw usually refers to the situation in which students from different “expert” groups form new groups and teach their expertise to the others. Jigsaw reading likewise means that students first work in their original groups and then leave their groups to teach in “jigsaw” groups.

This is how Jigsaw reading works in the course: The teacher brings a new article to the classroom. The article is cut into several parts and assigned to different groups to read. For each part, students are asked to focus on things ranging from content, language to style. Comprehension questions could also be given as reading tasks. Each group is supposed to work together for some time (depending on the length and difficulty of the article). When time is up, these “expert” groups break up and form “jigsaw” groups. In the new groups, they take turns to share their reading part with the others. In other words, students work on the same part of the article in the “expert” groups but they work on different parts in the “jigsaw” groups to make the article a complete whole. An additional task for the “jigsaw” groups could be asking them to put the parts in order. This task is particularly helpful when the article is organized in certain logic. For example, the article is a report about a new study in a field. Such article may often follow such order: brief description-method-findings-significance. If students master this logic, their readings will be more efficient.

In this reading mode, reciprocal peer tutoring is what occurs in the classroom. Students instruct, question, share and help each other to learn. They can make up their own comprehension questions and offer hints until the others get the correct answers. During the process, students are given an opportunity to plan and think critically. The teacher, on the other hand, becomes a facilitator of learning rather than a deliverer of information. He or she takes the responsibility for setting the right mood, describing the activity, monitoring the activity and debriefing. Instead of the focus of the class, the teacher circulates the room and monitor for positive interaction. Suggestions are given when a group’s activity is not productive.

6. Conclusions

Group work is considered one of the most beneficial teaching strategies in education^[8]. Many previous studies with large classes have proved its effectiveness in engaging students, enhancing comprehension, reducing anonymity and promoting student accountability^{[12][13]}, but they are conducted in foreign context. So it is of some significance to examine whether this approach works effectively for this course in Chinese EFL context.

6.1. Teacher observation

After a year’s implementation, positive outcomes are observed by the teacher. The teacher could see the improved class attendance (about 80% in this semester). Most students are actively involved in the reading activities, which can be seen from their facial expressions and group performance. They demonstrate stronger interest in the course, increased self-confidence in reading newspaper articles. Seen from the assignments and final exams, their reading competence is enhanced, critical and creative thinking is cultivated to some extent. These positive results conform in some degree to those of Millis^[14]. It indicates that this teaching approach can fit well in Chinese EFL context.

6.2. Questionnaire survey

A written questionnaire survey is given to 74 students at the end of the course. For material selection, 89% of the students like the articles contributed together by teacher and students. In terms of group work technique, 95% of the students favor QQ groups for the functions of sharing materials and ideas; 86% of the students list group presentation as their favorite class activities while 82% rank jigsaw reading their favorite. In general, 92% give a strong yes to the course and hope to have more in the future. Students also give feedback to the course on QQ making positive comments and offering constructive suggestions.

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