A Review of Research on Cooperative Learning in Middle School English Reading Class

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Abstract: Cooperative learning (CL) has long been a popular teaching method. In the 1970s, the American educator David Koonts first put forward its concept and tried to put it into practice, after which research in this area has remained active in various countries until today. This paper intends to review several specific cooperative learning activities used in middle school English reading classes and to summarize possible ways of optimizing the cooperative learning method for English reading teaching. Three effective examples of CL activities, including reading circle, Jigsaw Reading, and picture tour, are the main focuses. Cooperative learning will be discussed as a whole, and why it is important in English reading class will be clarified. By reviewing the relevant literature, this paper attempts to analyze research on the three examples from their advantages to their effects on class and students, and also points out some limitations and suggestions indicated in these studies. It will come to an overall conclusion at the end of this paper.

Keywords: cooperative learning, English reading class, CL activities

1. Introduction

Cooperative learning (CL) is known as a teaching method that centers on interpersonal interaction in the teaching process, combined with group work. Those study groups usually consist of 3-6 members each, all of whom are defined roles that undertake detailed learning tasks. By implementing this method, educators hope to bring motivation towards not only students' learning capacity and cooperative ability but their activeness and creativity in class as well. Reading class, as a traditional and important part of the English learning process, needs to take such an effective method into serious consideration, yet implementation methods still deserve further practice. This paper will begin with the significance and some basic principles of the whole method. Reading Circle, Jigsaw Reading, and Picture Tour are three detailed examples that will be discussed below to show how this method can come into use and how it has been developed. The importance of cooperative learning will be concluded. Besides, in its process of evolution, some studies can illustrate more than advantages and improvements – some limitations may occur in practice, which usually cannot be avoided, yet can be solved.

2.   Cooperative Learning Activities

2.1.   Principle of Cooperative Learning

To make sure that the method generates meaningful discussion among all group members, five basic elements should be taken into account, and they are as follows: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing [1].

Positive interdependence is the perception that each group member needs and can benefit from the work of the others.

Individual accountability is to ensure that everyone in the group should take responsibility for their assigned tasks.

Face-to-face promotive interaction indicates that the academic success and cognitive development of group members can only be achieved through their efforts to promote those of other members.

Social skills are essential for effective collaboration among group members.

Group processing suggests a constant effort to make wise decisions, achieve set goals, and maintain effective working relationships.

2.2.   Examples of Empirical Research on Cooperative Learning

2.2.1. Reading Circle/Literature Circle

Reading Circle, or Literature Circle, is often used under circumstances when the teachers hope to effectively arouse students' initiative and their further in-depth understanding of texts. It is traditionally set in face-to-face reading class cooperation, but in recent years, teachers have been figuring out online ones as well.

For a traditional offline class, reading circles are usually comprised of 4-6 students, in which students are often asked to study and discuss texts of their own choosing from the perspective of their differently set roles [2]. Demonstrations can be found in the article by Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom, and in the experiment launched by Brown, B. A. [3,4]. The former paper talks about the necessary discussion and decision-making process in literature circles, regarding this method as an effective way to empower the reader by providing them with specific roles for reading texts and sharing their personal ideas with other learners in their circles. Besides, Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom also reckon that reading circles can help when there are struggling readers in a larger class by taking all the students as participants and encouraging them to learn through interaction [3]. Brown's experiment proves the ability of literature circles to tailor reading materials for students, allowing them to choose texts that fit their interests and needs [4].

In the past few years, however, technological development has fueled the online way of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, which presses Literature Circle for evolution. Teachers have to consider that today's students may take new learning interests. Day and Kroon planned and organized three rounds of online literature circles to see if they were suitable for middle school students, and it turned out that those 12-year-olds were motivated by creating their own class web pages and using technological resources to keep their online discussion productive – they "eagerly read their books and marked pages with sticky notes", and commented that discussing books virtually in literature circles were "fun" [5].

2.2.2. Jigsaw Reading

The Jigsaw strategy was first proposed by American educator Aronson in the 1970s to provide opportunities for students from different ethnic backgrounds to learn cooperatively in a harmonious

environment [6]. In 1995, Slavin adapted this strategy and labeled it as Jigsaw II. This method is most appropriate for teaching materials in a narrative form [7].

The Jigsaw reading strategy allows students to read on the basis of mutual dependency. The first step is to form "home" groups and each member of a home group should concentrate on one chapter or a specific section of the reading material. A discussion then should be carried out in the "expert group" that is formed by students who have the same tasks. Students go back to their home group to put together a full understanding of the article after mastering the material. These steps are suggested to be repeated to check their comprehension, so as to complete the restoration of the whole article.

The literature includes a few empirical reports on the effect of the Jigsaw method as an effective cooperative learning strategy in reading lessons. Meng concludes that both weak and strong students can benefit in terms of their reading skills [8]. Research that was conducted in China maintained that the instructional application of Jigsaw reading could change students' attitudes toward reading English texts and improve their motivation [9]. Similar results have been yielded by experimenting on Iranian EFL learners from 16 to 18 years old who are evaluated as pre-intermediate students. The employment of the Jigsaw approach in instruction and learning can be concluded to "produce positive results" due to its immersive qualities [10].

2.2.3. Picture Tour

Picture Tour can be applied in cooperative Learning in reading classes. Encoding and decoding speech are needed in reading, but reading is not just a psycholinguistic guessing game [11]. In reading class, guided reading, individual reading, cooperative learning, and some other teaching methods should be used flexibly to satisfy students' needs. Picture Tour is a kind of balanced approach, which helps students learn to read and also read to learn. Warming-up, text concept, picture tour, read-aloud & silent reading, summary & comments, phonics, and post-reading tasks are required to be used in turns during the process of Picture Tour [12,13]. The ultimate goal of teaching reading is to enhance their language competence, cultural consciousness, thinking quality, and learning ability, so that students can read individually and freely. The contributions of Picture Tour have wide applicability. For example, Picture Tour can be applied first, then Jigsaw Reading or Reading Circle can be used for cooperative learning mainly in the same class. It's a practical approach to improving students' reading literacy [13].

3. Importance and Findings of Cooperative Learning

3.1. Importance

There has been more previous evidence for cooperative learning from the research status at home and abroad.

Collaboration is a philosophy for both personal learning style and lifestyle. Multiple advantages have been described for cooperative learning [14]. More than fifty benefits of cooperative learning were listed by Johnsons and Pantiz [15,14]. As was demonstrated in their works, we may focus on psychological benefits and social benefits first. In terms of psychology, one of the most important benefits is the reduction of anxiety. CL can lead the students to come into a low-threatening environment and get unexpected support from other students [16]. What's more, it helps to cultivate students' high self-esteem. During the interaction of CL, they get used to the standard for getting along with other group members, and they can better understand the differences from each other [17]. When it comes to social perspective, the group's interaction is a contributing factor to cooperative learning [18]. If the quality of the group's interactions and group cohesion are high enough, the effects of cooperative learning will become increasingly strong. Moreover, a stronger social support system

has been created [19]. Out of class, students will continue to be in communication with other group members to extend their activities, improving their support and help [20].

The academic benefits of cooperative learning have received considerable research efforts. When people talk about learning, memorization strategies can't be ignored. An important question concerning the use of memorization strategies is deeply connected to the examinations. For example, it was discovered by Marton, Watkins, and Tang that China-Hong Kong students' memorization is strongly related to teachers' strategies in the classroom [21]. To get better grades, students choose some surface ways and materials to deal with the examinations. When the scope of the exam becomes wider, the content and the parts for memorizing could be changed. The most significant parts are selected by students to memorize. Besides, Chinese learners may have been able to develop constructive strategies to gain an increasingly better and deeper understanding if they are provided with constructive learning environments, as indicated by research [22]. There is no doubt that cooperative learning provides such a constructive learning environment. In this situation, students learn from each other and teach each other, which also leads them to autonomous learning and brings them excellent interaction [23]. As a result, it pushes students to get involved in deep learning and provides them with opportunities to inspire their intrinsic motivation [24]. For reading classes, it has been established that Chinese students' intrinsic motivation has a positive correlation with their reading comprehension [25].

3.2. Findings

From the research by Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom, results can be found that by taking part in literature circles, the students who used to have difficulties reading alone showed their special abilities in a group, which then allowed them to be better engaged in class discussion and grow more confident as a reader and discussant of literature [3]. Attaching more importance to positive interdependence, group processing, and the other three essential elements, cooperative learning activities encourage students' participation and promote their self-determination during face-to-face interaction. "Four heads are better than one," one student said. Besides, CL activities like the reading circle create interactions not only among students but between students and their teachers as well. Brown's study also found that although the results were mixed, literature circles still indicate promising implications [4]. Yet other teaching strategies may have to be considered to use alongside CL activities so that students can gain enough knowledge they need to be better in reading abilities. Online literature circles, however, provide another upcoming possibility for CL activities except for taking other teaching strategies into account, as is shown in Day and Kroon's research [5]. Herrera and Kidwell also affirmed that "technology, multiculturalism, and 21st-century skills are essential skills in today's learning environments" [2].

Empirical research on Jigsaw Reading and Picture Tour shares the flexibility of cooperative learning during its development. Those studies used vivid ways of implementing cooperative learning. Both the Jigsaw technique and the process of Picture Tour can help with putting the five basic elements of cooperative learning into effect. However, the empirical research discovered the limitations in them as well. Meng noted that limited by time and energy, only the stage result can be seen in the study, and many practical problems might appear in further study [8]. Namaziandost, Gilakjani, and Hidayatullah pointed out four main limitations in their study [10]. It turned out that cooperative learning studies may be limited in the size, gender, race, and age of the participating students. Thus, the findings in a single study cannot be generalized to various kinds of learners in English reading classes.

4.   Conclusion

To conclude, cooperative learning offers a promising avenue to reshape English reading classrooms into a platform where students actively participate, are positively interdependent, and can have enhanced educational outcomes. Yet continuous research and practice are needed to refine cooperative learning activities, thereby unlocking the full potential of cooperative learning in the field of English education. Future research could also explore how technology can further enhance cooperative learning experiences, especially given the shift toward online learning in the current educational landscape.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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