

PHƯƠNG PHÁP DẠY HỌC HỢP TÁC TRONG VIỆC GIẢNG DẠY KỸ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU CHO SINH VIÊN

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Đọc hiểu luôn được coi là một trong những kỹ năng quan trọng nhất trong việc dạy và học tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam trong những năm vừa qua. Tuy nhiên, ở một số trường đại học sinh viên ngoại ngữ nói chung thường cảm thấy chán nản và không hứng thú học trong các giờ đọc hiểu. Việc nâng cao chất lượng và đổi mới cách tiếp cận trong dạy kỹ năng đọc hiểu cũng luôn là một trong những mối quan tâm của các giáo viên tại các trường đại học hiện nay. Bài viết này tập trung phân tích một số khó khăn của sinh viên trong việc đọc hiểu tiếng Anh và đề xuất một số phương pháp dạy học hợp tác rèn luyện kỹ năng đọc hiểu cho sinh viên. Hi vọng bài viết sẽ góp phần giúp cho những bài dạy đọc hiểu trở nên hấp dẫn và hiệu quả hơn, tăng cường hứng thú học kỹ năng đọc hiểu nói riêng và việc đọc sách nói chung.

Từ khóa: dạy học hợp tác, giảng dạy kỹ năng đọc hiểu, đọc hiểu.

Reading comprehension has always been considered one of the most important skills in teaching and learning English in Vietnam in recent years. However, EFL students tend to feel bored and lack learning motivation in reading lessons. Thus, improving the quality of teaching reading comprehension in tertiary education has become an increasingly considerable matter of concern. This paper identifies some of the students' difficulties in English reading comprehension and suggests some cooperative activities in teaching reading comprehension. It is hoped that this paper would make a positive contribution to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning reading as well as to increasing students' learning motivation and reading engagement.

Key words: Cooperative learning, CL, reading comprehension.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUE IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

I. Introduction

English has become popular in Vietnam since December 1986, as Hoang (2009) mentioned that “in the context of economic renovation and the open door policy, English becomes the first (and

nearly the only) foreign language to be taught in Vietnam”. English competence is regarded as “a passport” to find a good job not only in the field of language training but also in business sectors. Hanoi University (HANU) has been a leading institution in the field of foreign language teaching and training in Vietnam for many years. English Department, in

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particular, is the largest department at HANU and also one of the most reliable places for undertaking an English language training program in Vietnam. Students at English Department are highly active and enthusiastic in learning English; however, they generally lack enthusiasm in reading lessons due to being asked to read long passages from textbooks and then answering questions that follow in an assigned time. Reading lessons are normally taught in a fairly quiet atmosphere; sometimes it appears incredibly easy to catch a student's sigh. They are often in no mood for reading lessons. This paper portrays some hardships in learning Reading comprehension among EFL learners, benefits of using Co-operative learning activities (CL) in teaching English in general and in reading comprehension in particular as well as suggests a variety of CL activities that can be used in teaching Reading in order to strengthen students' reading comprehension skills and increase their learning motivation.

II. Difficulties in learning reading comprehension among EFL learners.

A significant amount of research has been conducted to investigate the potential challenges faced by EFL learners in learning to read English. First and foremost, lack of vocabulary is one of the major difficulties that cause readers trouble while reading. A large number of new words may appear to students, which causes them to fail to understand parts of the reading materials. In an in-depth analysis on reading comprehension

challenges faced by EFL students, the shortage of lexical knowledge is regarded as a main factor leading to readers' struggle in reading comprehension at all ages (Justice, 2002). In line with the finding of this study, Espin and Deno (1995) stated that "vocabulary knowledge can be used to explain the reading deficits in content area of students who do not experience general reading deficits". The role of vocabulary has been highlighted as a "critical factor in building proficiency in reading" (Bravo, Hiebert, & Pearson, 2007, p. 140), indicating that if students do not have enough vocabulary, they may find it hard to comprehend the gist of their reading texts.

Comprehension problems often occur when readers lack background knowledge. Deutsch (2005) stated that ESL/ EFL learners' text comprehending is often affected by prior knowledge related to culture and real world experience. Even when the surface meaning of the material is understandable, students still find it difficult to comprehend the whole meaning (Underwood, 1989, p. 20). A research to explore the effects of prior-knowledge and text coherence conducted by Mc Namara and Kintsch (1996) came to a conclusion that background knowledge had a great impact on the improvement of students' understanding of the reading texts.

In addition, certain learning attitudes may pose a negative impact on students' reading comprehension. For example, readers are frequently affected by their interests in what they read (Gill, 2008).

This is also a common challenge that is generally experienced in many institutions in Vietnam. Students often hold positive attitudes towards reading materials which are of their interests. If the reading topics are about the world of science or mathematics, they will get bored and easily lose their concentration. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should select meaningful and interesting reading materials in order to attract students' interests in the lesson and help them read effectively (Kitao & Kitao, 1997).

In order to help students improve their English reading comprehension, in their research, Mengduo and Xiaoling (2010) agreed that cooperative learning proves to be beneficial for promoting students' engagement and motivation as well as help learners to accomplish reading tasks in EFL classroom. Recently, co-operative learning (CL) has been widely applied as a new pedagogical procedure in different subjects and institutions (eg., Herrmann, 2013; Tsai, 2004; Tuan, 2010). A number of studies (e.g., Gupta & Ahuja, 2014; Suh, 2009; Tsai, 2004) were conducted to examine how effective CL is in reading subject. These studies' results demonstrated that CL helps to arouse students' learning motivation, promote reading comprehension skills, strengthen interaction between students and encourage their participation. In his notable research, Zou (2011) also stated that the implementation of CL offers greater benefits in reading classes than any other dominant traditional teaching methods do, as it can raise students'

learning motivation and improve their reading achievements.

III. Co-operative Learning

In recent years CL has received a growing interest from many educators and language experts worldwide. Educators have provided definitions of CL in different contexts, with initial interest being in the 1990s. These definitions show a clear and explicit overview of CL. According to Slavin (1995, p.2), CL is generally understood as "an instructional program in which students work in small groups to help one another master academic content". In other words, it is a pedagogical procedure, in which students cooperate and interact with each other in different groups in order to perform a task given by teachers. Each member in a group takes responsibility for not only learning but also supporting other members to learn and complete the tasks. Sharing the same opinion, Artz and Newman (1990, p. 448) defined CL as "small group of learners working together as a team to solve a problem, complete a task, or accomplish a common goal". It is clear that the objective of CL is to ask students to work in groups together in order to gain knowledge and reach their learning targets. However, these two definitions have not clearly indicated what students are required to do during CL activities. A more specific definition of CL was given by (Johnson et al., 1991), who portrayed that CL is not an activity in which only one student is responsible for doing all the work and the rest of students do nothing but still receive the fruits of

work. (Johnson et al., 1991) emphasized that in CL activities, students have to work collaboratively to complete the task, employ various techniques to acquire knowledge until all group members achieve learning goals successfully.

1. Effects of CL on EFL students' reading comprehension skills

A number of studies were conducted to explore the impacts of CL on the reading comprehension achievement of EFL students (eg., Gupta & Ahuja, 2014; Suh, 2009; Tsai, 2004). Previously, most classes in these research were taught in the traditional teaching method, in which grammatical points such as sentence structure or vocabulary were strongly emphasized while teaching reading rather than the plot of reading text or the author's perspectives. Teachers sometimes required students to do some short pre-reading activities for example playing word games, predicting content based on the story structure in order to activate students' prior knowledge before reading. However, this was not always the case (Masuhara, 2003). Therefore, CL has been proposed as an innovative teaching procedure to help students learn reading more effectively. The results of these studies have clearly shown the positive effects of using CL on improving EFL students' reading comprehension skills compared with conventional teaching

procedures. In these cases, CL provides students with opportunities to enhance reading comprehension achievement, changes learners' attitudes towards reading and encourages team spirit among other members in the class. However, the benefits of CL in reading comprehension achievement have been disproved in a certain study (Zoghi, Mustapha, & Maasum, 2010). This study's results revealed that students fail to make significant improvements in reading comprehension skills when learning reading by using CL compared with traditional teaching methods. Obviously, CL is not always compatible with teaching reading comprehension to all students. Therefore, the use of CL technique in teaching reading should be considered carefully on the basis of teaching contexts, syllabus and curriculum, students' proficiency as well as teaching materials.

2. CL activities used in teaching reading

CL includes various activities that promote students' interaction to enhance their learning progress. Different CL activities have been developed and used in different contexts and for different purposes. A wide range of CL methods, their history, developers and possible ESL/ EFL primary application will be listed below (see Zuo, 2011):

Researcher Developer	Date	Method	ESL/ EFL Primary Applications
Johnson & Johnson	Mid 1970s	Learning Together	Reading, Writing, Speaking, Culture
De Vries & Edward	Early 1970s	Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT)	Language Rules and Mechanics
Sharan & Sharan	Mid 1970s	Group Investigation (GI)	Writing, Culture
Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, Stephan & Snapp; Slavin	Late 1970s	Jigsaw Procedure	Reading, Literature
Slavin	Late 1970s	Student Teams-Achievements Divisions (STAD)	Language Rules and Mechanics
Cohen	Early 1980s	Complex Instruction (CI)	Social Skills, Culture, Reading, Writing, Language Rules and Mechanics
Kagan	Mid 1980s	Cooperative learning Structures	Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing
Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish	Mid 1980s	Curriculum Packages: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC)	Reading, Writing, Spelling, Vocabulary, Literature

However, according to Zuo (2011), of all the many procedures which have been developed by many teachers and researchers all over the world, the most widely exploited methods used specifically in reading classes will be presented below:

Learning together

Complex Instruction (CI)

Cooperative learning structures

Curriculum Packages: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition

Jigsaw Procedure

Learning Together (LT) technique was developed by David Johnson and Roger Johnson in mid 1970s. In this activity, students will be divided into four or five groups. Then, they will cooperate with

each other to work on assignment sheets. Finally, the groups will submit a single sheet and receive rewards based on the whole group's performances and achievements. This teambuilding method aims at highlighting the value of group goals, ideas and materials shared among members in groups, and group reward.

Complex Instruction (CI) method was developed from over 20 years of research by Elizabeth Cohen and her colleagues. This technique is especially used to teach reading to mixed classes to equalize academic competences between students among group work. In a mixed class, it is easily noticeable that when it comes to group work, students with poor academic proficiency often do not actively participate. According to Cohen and Lotan (1997), the reason is that they think they

have no valuable contributions to the group and as a result, their participation is often ignored. Therefore, CI is applied to encourage students to eagerly take part in group work. There are two methods which have been frequently used in CI. The first method is employing multiple ability curriculum to require a group to perform a given group task. To illustrate, multiple ability curriculum is often designed based on the use of a wide range of cognitive abilities. The second method is called assigning competence, in which “a non-participating child starts to make an effort to participate because the multiple ability task taps a strength of theirs”, the teacher will assign competence to that child (Cohen & Lotan, 1997). To clarify, the teacher will notice what the child did and indicate to the group the effectiveness of their participation for completing group tasks.

Cooperative learning structure was initially designed by Kagan in mid 1980s. There are various activities that can be integrated in the Reading lessons promoted by Kagan; however, Rally Read is the famous one. This activity is an effective structure for building reading fluency and enhancing reading comprehension skills. First, the teacher assigns the reading text which is suitable to students' level. Students will work collaboratively with other partners in pairs. Next, students will be informed how often they need to switch readers. Partners can switch every sentence or every paragraph depending on students' ability level. Partner A reads his specified reading task first. When finishing, he asks his partner a question to check his comprehension such

as What did he do?, Where did the dog go?. Then partner B answers. If the answer is incorrect, Partner A offers help and shows Partner B relevant information mentioned in the reading passage so the partner can find the correct answer. This activity is also preferable to independent reading because students will have an opportunity to practice their fluency skills and pronunciation as well. RallyRead also helps to build listening skills because students are required to listen actively for comprehension in order to correctly respond to their partners.

Curriculum Packages: Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) was developed by Slavin in 1986. First, students are divided into pairs working in different reading groups. Students then work in pairs and teach each other meaningful reading skills by using reciprocal learning technique. They will cooperate and help each other to build basic skills-building activities for example oral reading, contextual guessing, asking questions, summarizing, etc. The teacher will monitor and work with each group during the activity (Durukan, 2010, p.2). Slavin (1995, p. 105-106) stated that the most important principle of CIRC is that students will work more effectively at a period of time. They work with each other and follow reading-group instruction to meet the objectives in building reading comprehension, vocabulary and decoding. Thanks to this activity, students are encouraged to work cooperatively and effectively by the use of a cooperative reward structure, in which they may gain certificates or rewards based on the performance of all group members.

Finally, the jigsaw activity was initially designed and introduced in Austin, Texas by Aronson in 2000. It is a model of CL, in which students are provided with an opportunity to work and interact with each other in different groups. Each student takes an important role for the successful completion of the final products. First of all, students are assigned into groups of four or five, which are called “home groups” (Aronson, 2000). Then materials are divided into each section and one section will be given to each student. Students are responsible for mastering their own segment successfully. Next, students who take responsibility for the same section will work together in “expert groups” (Aronson, 2000) in order to discuss and gain a deeper understanding of each section. Finally, students are asked to return to their home team and teach their original teammates about what they have mastered. Additionally, quizzes are asked by teachers to help students improve their knowledge and practice what they have learnt so far. The jigsaw procedure not only helps students increase their reading comprehension skills but also creates positive learning environment and encourages students’ interaction in reading classes.

To summarize, different elements need to be considered when applying CL activities in classes for example the objectives of the lesson, learners’ level of proficiency, skills, learning materials, and so on in order to meet learning requirements and achievements.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has supported the idea of employing various

CL activities in teaching Reading for EFL students with the aim to improve students’ reading comprehension and encourage their learning motivation in the Vietnamese context in general and in Hanoi University context in particular. However, it is important to note that teachers should spend some time searching for other activities and reading materials that could be integrated to support the use of CL, as well as designing suitable lesson plans and timing to help students make the most use of learning reading with this innovation. Teachers should also offer students some guidance to help them become familiarized with learning not only reading but also other skills along with the assistance of CL.

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