Improving Reading Ability Through Cooperative Learning

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協同学習によるリーディング力の向上

ワインバーグ　ジョール

Abstract

　　　Cooperative learning reading exercises during English classes can help students improve their reading proficiency. By working together, students simultaneously help their classmates and themselves. Improvements can be made in their reading fluency, vocabulary recognition, grammar awareness, content understanding, and confidence in their reading ability. By helping each other, students also improve their relationships among their classmates, which brings the class closer together and positively impacts class rapport.

英語のクラスにおけるリーディング練習の協同学習は学生のリーディング力向上につなげることができる。学生同士が協働で取り組むことにより、クラスメートのみならず自分自身の能力向上を図ることができる。また、読みの流暢さ、語彙力、文法への意識、内容理解、リーディング全般への自信を高めることができる。互いに支え合うことで他の学生と親交が深まり、その結果、クラスがまとまり、良好なラポールを形成することができる。

Keywords：collaborative learning, cooperative learning, active learning, rapport

Introduction

　　　A reading program that incorporates in-class cooperative reading activities is an effective approach to learning English at the university level. Collaboration on reading activities during class can improve reading fluency,

boost vocabulary awareness, assist understanding of textual content, and tighten classroom rapport. Group activities are highly adaptable because they can be modified to focus on the needs of the members. By working cooperatively in class, a self-perpetuating virtuous cycle is initiated: students are motivated through the process of helping their classmates, which improves students' trust in each other, and encourages more participation in the activities. Reading activities undertaken in class are excellent ways to help students improve their reading fluency, comprehension, confidence, active and passive vocabulary, grammar awareness, class cohesion, and class rapport.

In-Class Cooperative Reading Activities

Cooperative in-class reading activities begin by dividing the students into small groups of around three or four students. In each reading group, the students work together on various activities such as choral reading, alternate reading, and cloze reading. The stronger readers in these small groups provide a model for the weaker readers to emulate, while the weaker readers' who misread words can be tutored by the stronger readers. There is evidence outlined by Briggs (2013) to support the idea that students helping each other–also known as academic peer tutoring–leads to positive learning outcomes. The following are a few of the many benefits of peer teaching: students receive more time for individualized learning; peer "teachers" reinforce their own learning by instructing others; students feel more comfortable and open when interacting with a peer; peer "teachers" and students share a similar discourse, allowing for greater understanding; team-building spirit is generated in the class; greater psychological well-being, social competence, communication skills and self-esteem; higher achievement and greater productivity in terms of learning outcomes.

There are two methods of grouping students by ability–heterogeneously or homogeneously–and both styles have advantages and disadvantages. Forming a group by heterogeneous ability allows the weaker readers the benefit of a stronger reader as a model when they read aloud. In such a reading group, slower readers benefit by following the text as it is read with good pacing and phrasing by a proficient partner (Hasbrouck, 2006). The

disadvantage of this type of group is that some tutored students may feel inferior to their better classmates, setting up an unequal relationship from the start. If students feel a sense of inadequacy, they may be less eager to work together, which would sabotage the cooperative spirit of the activity (Briggs, 2013). Conversely, when students work together in homogenous groups there is no competition or hierarchical feelings of inferiority among weaker members. Students feel freer to take academic risks without fear of embarrassment in front of higher achieving peers. However, not all homogenous groupings are of equal ability. Barrett (2017) studied how homogeneous versus heterogeneous group work affected learners' reading comprehension. Barrett points out that students in homogeneous low-achievement groups are less likely to engage in higher order questions and thinking than students in high-achievement groups. Also, students who study with similar-ability peers are not exposed to a variety of academic language or content knowledge. Barrett concludes that while high-achieving students gain advantages in homogeneous group work, such groupings are not beneficial for lower-level students.

　　　Oral reading activities have advantages over silent reading due to a process that is sometimes referred to as the production effect (Hendricks, 2018). Evidence of the benefits is found in a 2018 study by Forrin and MacLeod, which shows that reading out loud makes words easier to remember than reading them silently. The authors of this research experimented with a variety of reading methods to determine which style resulted in the best recollection of vocabulary words. The reading styles they compared were: reading out loud, listening to a recording of themself reading, listening to someone else reading, and reading silently. The results of the study found that "there was a gradient of memory across [these] four conditions" (p. 574), and that reading out loud was the best method for remembering vocabulary words. The researchers hypothesized that the process of transferring written words into speech is the most helpful method to "encode the information" into long-term memory (p. 574).

　　　Given the results of Forrin and Macleod's research, it is reasonable to consider whether students who read out loud would achieve equal results studying independently, compared to those studying cooperatively. In

comparing independent versus cooperative learning, Barkley, et al.(2005) found that cooperative activities were superior to either competitive or individual work on a variety of outcome measures. Their research showed that when the students worked together rather than by themselves, higher achievement, higher-level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions, and greater transference of what is learned from one situation to another occurred (p.17-18). Similarly, Marr, et al.(2007) discussed the benefits of alternate (or partner) reading. In this type of activity, pairs of students alternate between reading a text aloud, then taking the role of the listener. The listener's responsibility is to ask probing questions to check that the reader comprehends the text. The stronger partner should read first to benefit slower readers; this models the difficult words before the less-capable students try reading them aloud (Minero, 2019). Marr, et al.(2007) found that readers improved their fluency and received greater support with difficult words when they read out loud with a peer (p.52). All of these studies showed that cooperative oral reading activities produced better fluency and comprehension than independent silent reading activities.

The Goals of Oral Reading

The goals of oral reading activities (including choral, alternate, and cloze readings) are to improve students' prosody (expression and phrasing), accuracy, and rate. A checklist developed by Hudson, Lane and Pullen(2005) providing a detailed assessment of students' prosody reads as follows: 1) vocal emphasis is placed on appropriate words; 2) voice tone rises and falls at appropriate points in the text; 3) inflection reflects the punctuation in the text (e.g., voice tone rises near the end of a question); 4) appropriate vocal tone is used to represent characters' mental states in narrative texts with dialogue, such as excitement, sadness, fear, or confidence; 5) pauses are appropriately placed at punctuation and at phrase boundaries; 6) appropriate pauses are used with prepositional phrases; 7) appropriate pauses are used with subject–verb divisions; 8) conjunctions are recognized to pause appropriately at phrase boundaries(p.707). This checklist is useful to identify students' proficiency and areas in need of improvement, which is accomplishable through oral reading.

In-class cloze reading with partners can also help to improve listening comprehension (Hasbrouck, 2006). This activity is similar to choral reading, except that the designated reader does most of the oral reading while the other students in the group listen and read along silently. Once or twice every few sentences, the designated reader omits an important vocabulary or content word, and the other students' task is to read it orally. In addition to practicing listening, Gouty (2020) explains that this activity helps practice pronunciation and reduce distractions, which allow students to focus on the content and the targeted vocabulary words.

Additional benefits from in-class oral reading are in the improvement to students' vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Yu (2015) looked at whether university students studying English as a second language (ESL) at a Korean university improved after one semester in which they practiced reading out loud during classes. The author found that oral reading was beneficial for the students to enrich their vocabulary knowledge, improve pronunciation, and word stress awareness. It also helped to identify sentence structures and understand the texts (p. 22). While upper-level students improved in all five of these areas, lower-level students saw improvements in vocabulary, pronunciation and word stress awareness, but not in the areas of grammar or text comprehension (p. 20). These findings support the idea that oral reading in a university ESL class can benefit all levels of students. Lower-level students in particular could feel a sense of accomplishment from reading a text out loud, and this could trigger students' interest and self-confidence in studying English (p. 23).

Students can also work together in class to improve their vocabulary awareness using oral reading tasks. In the first part of such exercises, students scan a text and identify unfamiliar or less commonly seen words, and then write questions for their classmates using those target words. The second part of this activity involves the students quizzing each other using their self-generated questions. Questions that cannot be answered correctly are analyzed for accuracy and discussed among partners. This attention-focused activity is intended to create deeper-processing thinking to help embed the words in students' long-term memories, thereby cooperatively helping each other to learn vocabulary words.

Another deeper-processing cooperative reading activity is creating and exchanging content questions about the text. This activity requires students to think about the content from a different perspective. Instead of passively reading the text, they must understand its meaning well enough to convert the content into questions. Making questions is an activity that can be level-adjusted and used for any student and for most texts. According to Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (1956), more basic questions ask what happened in the reading, while more difficult questions involve understanding why something happened or encourage students to predict what will happen in the future. For example, lower-level students reading about seasons might write questions at the lowest taxonomic level (knowledge) with questions like "When is the first day of spring?" Higher-level students can think about a text at Bloom's highest level of processing (evaluation). An evaluative question about seasons might be "What would be the important variables for predicting seasons on a newly discovered planet?" If a student cannot answer a question posed by a classmate, the teammates work together to find the answer. This helps weaker students identify points of the text they may have misunderstood and highlights areas they may need to spend more time thinking about. The activity helps stronger students by reinforcing knowledge, building confidence, and promoting independence.

Creating Classroom Rapport

Cooperative learning activities such as oral reading can work as a catalyst to creating constructive classroom rapport between students (Gouty, 2020). The first step in establishing a virtuous learning cycle is helping students feel comfortable speaking together in class. Brown (2007) writes that it is important to create an atmosphere in class that "encourages students to try out language" (p. 72), which cooperative oral reading tasks inevitably accomplish. Oral reading activities are effective because they have a clear speaking objective, and successfully completing the task is achievable. When all students participate simultaneously, a safe environment in which to practice the language is made, and students do not feel they are standing out in the crowd. Voices heard from around the classroom stimulate a chain reaction of

participation as more students join the activity. When all the students become involved in the process, the feelings of cooperation pervade and a better relationship between classmates develops. Students succeeding and failing together builds connections of trust and comradeship and allow students to feel comfortable taking more risks with the material. A healthy class rapport is positively correlated with student achievement. Frisby and Martin's (2010) research showed that students' perceived rapport with their classmates was related to perceptions of class connectedness, and to affective and cognitive learning. These components feed a virtuous cycle of learning: students with greater levels of engagement in the class have higher levels of achievement in understanding what they are studying (Schnitzler et al. 2021), which brings higher levels of satisfaction and enthusiasm, and feeds back into more engagement with the material. This is how cooperative learning with oral reading in-class activities helps students improve their confidence and competence in a second language.

Conclusion

An effective approach to teaching reading at the university level includes in-class cooperative reading groups. By cooperating with each other through oral reading activities, students build fluency, confidence, vocabulary awareness, and content comprehension. Group activities can be adjusted according to the needs of the members. As more capable students tutor their less capable classmates, they are reinforcing their own fluency and knowledge. Less capable members benefit by receiving more personalized and sustained attention from their partners, and by seeing a role model. Additionally, by working together, students are encouraged to participate more during class activities. Through their active participation, and even through making mistakes together, students form closer bonds with each other, which further encourages participation. This virtuous cycle builds motivation to continue the learning process. Incorporating cooperative oral reading activities into class activities contributes to better learning outcomes and is an effective component of English education at the university level.

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