

A Study on Developing Learner Autonomy Through the Reading Circle Method

Ligang Han¹

¹ English Department, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

Correspondence: Ligang Han, English Department, North China Electric Power University, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China.

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Abstract

Many countries in the world have regarded the cultivation of learner autonomy as one of the important goals of language teaching. During the past fifty years, researchers and scholars have explored the connotations of learner autonomy, and carried out some empirical researches in different contexts. There are more and more researches on learner autonomy in language teaching and learning, the research scope and content are constantly broadened and deepened, and the research methods are more diversified. Based on the review of the reading circle method and the discussion of a working definition for learner autonomy, the present study explored the application of the reading circle method in facilitating the cultivation of learner autonomy in the English for Academic Purposes course at a comprehensive university in China. The results showed that the reading circle could help to improve learner's attitude and interest in English language learning. It also indicated that learner's learning capabilities and strategies were improved. This study adopts a novel approach to foster the development of learner autonomy, and sheds light on the empirical research practice.

Keywords: learner autonomy, reading circle, foreign language education

1. Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy was introduced into language teaching and learning in the late 1960s through the adult movement in Europe and North America (Benson, 2004). From then on, many countries in the world have regarded the cultivation of learner autonomy as one of the important goals of language teaching. According to Little (1991), the development of learner autonomy is gradually recognized as the ideal goal of language education, and is the main manifestation of effective language teaching and learning.

Many scholars and researchers generally agree that the study of learner autonomy in language teaching dates back to the mid-1970s. Many empirical studies have been conducted ever since to explore the efficacy of fostering learner autonomy in different educational contexts. However, few researches have investigated the effect of applying the reading circle method to the cultivation of learner autonomy.

In the present study, based on a brief review of the reading circle method and the researches on learner autonomy and autonomous learning in China's educational context, the focus is upon the effect of the application of the reading circle method to promoting learner autonomy in the *English for Academic Purposes* course at a comprehensive university in China.

2. Research Background

2.1 Reading Circle Method

Reading circle is very popular in libraries, educational institutions in the United States, Canada, and some other countries. The reading circle is a student-led, group-based reading, sharing and discussion activity (Shelton-Strong, 2012). In most cases, the content of reading is literary works or works of story genre. Therefore, reading circles are sometimes called "literature circles".

The idea of reading circles, also called literature circles, was first put forward by a renowned Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. It means small, heterogeneous, peer-led discussion groups in which all the members discuss the identical text that has been chosen and read (Daniels, 2002).

Specifically, as a reading task, learners are usually divided into different groups, and each group member plays a different role. Commonly used reading circle roles include “discussion leader, summarizer, cultural collector, connector, word master, and passage person” (Daniels, 2002; Furr, 2003; Shelton-Strong, 2012). It can be seen from the name of the role that each member pays attention to different aspects of the text based on the overall understanding, including language (word masters and paragraph analysts), cultural elements (cultural collectors), summary of what has been read (summarizers), analysis and evaluation of the text based on their own experiences (life connectors).

The Bookworms Club's Reading Circle Task Manual provides a task list for each role, which specifically describes each role and its task requirements. The responsibilities of each role of the group are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The main roles and task responsibilities of the Reading Circle

Roles	Task Responsibilities
1. Discussion Leader	Based on the text, put forward questions for group discussion, and be responsible for organizing members to discuss
2. Summarizer	Summarize the main idea of the text and the important points worth noting in the article
3. Connector	Connect the content in the text that is similar to one's own life experience, and invite peers to share it
4. Culture Collector	Explore the cultural elements in the text and compare them with the local culture, invite peers to comment
5. Word Master	Appreciate and select good words, keywords, and difficult words in the text, explain the reasons and make an evaluation
6. Passage Person	Appreciate and select well-written sentences, good paragraphs or important paragraphs in the text, explain the reasons and make evaluations

2.2 A Working Definition of Learner Autonomy

Since the introduction of the concept of learner autonomy into the field of foreign language teaching through the publication of Henri Holec's book *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* in 1981, language learner autonomy has become a buzzword and hot topic in the field of foreign language education research. According to Holec (1981: 3), learner autonomy is defined as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning”. Therefore, an autonomous language learner is someone who is able to learn independently.

Most scholars agree with Holec's (1981) "ability" theory, but some scholars use it to refer to the situation in which learners conduct self-directed learning outside the traditional classroom. In fact, self-directed learning differs from learner autonomy in that it only emphasizes the learner's attitude towards learning, that is, the learner is responsible for one's own learning, but not necessarily undertakes all the tasks related to learning independently (Dickinson, 1987).

Based on the different discussions on the definitions and connotations on learning autonomy, Han (2013: 19) proposes a working definition and defines learner autonomy as “the constructive process in which language learner develops one's learning capability and strategies within the supportive and conducive environment or context, during which learner's attitude, interest and motivation are enhanced”.

2.3 The Significance of Cultivating Learner Autonomy in China's Educational Context

Since the concept of learner autonomy originated abroad, research in this area has not entered a prosperous stage until 2000 in China. Published articles about learner autonomy are mainly theoretical introductions and on how to foster learner autonomy in China's educational context (e.g., Gao, 2005; He, 2003; Hua, 2001; Li & Guo, 2015; Tan, 2001; Wang, 2002; Wei, 2002; Xu & Zhu, 2013; Yin, 2014).

In China, researchers often use “autonomous learning” and “autonomous learning ability” to refer to the concept of learner autonomy. Despite the different names, Chinese researchers and scholars generally believe that learner autonomy is the ability or learning behavior of learners to direct their learning independently, and the connotation is consistent with Holec's definition (Qu, 2017). In fact, Benson (2005, 2011) points out that there are differences in the conceptual connotation of learner autonomy and autonomous learning.

In the teaching reform of college English curriculum in China, emphasis has always been placed on cultivating college students' autonomous learning ability. In 2020, the new *College English Teaching Guide* was issued, which points out that the teaching objective of college English is “to cultivate students' English application ability, enhance cross-cultural communication awareness and communicative ability, and at the same time develop autonomous learning ability and improve comprehensive cultural literacy...”. Furthermore, the use of teaching methods should “pay attention to the cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability, guide and help them develop learning strategies...”. It is clear that the curriculum reform of college English teaching still requires foreign language teachers to focus on promoting the development of students' foreign language autonomous learning ability, both in terms of teaching objectives and teaching methods.

2.4 The English for Academic Purposes Course at a Comprehensive University in China

The *English for Academic Purposes* course is set as one compulsory course to freshmen who mostly major in science and engineering. At the introduction of the course, the teacher explained the concept of reading circle and how it works. In the present study, the reading circle involves a group reading activity and tasks that students, in a small group, read the same text while each member in the group plays a different role in the group's overall comprehension of the reading material.

Firstly, the students were divided into small groups with four to five members. Group members were assigned to the respective roles as *Word Master*, *Discussion Leader*, *Summarizer and Illustrator*, *Connector*.

Secondly, the teacher elaborated on the roles and tasks of each member of the group. For the *Word Master*, he/she needs to look for key words and expressions in the reading article, explain the meaning, usage, collocations (if possible) of the new words and expressions. For the *Discussion Leader*, he/she raises some critical thinking questions based on the reading to check other members' understanding of and beyond the text. For the *Summarizer and Illustrator*, he/she is responsible to create a visual aid in the form of a concept map or mind-map illustrating the central ideas and supporting details, and explain how the main ideas of the article are structured and organized. For the *Connector*, he/she discusses with the other members about in what ways the article may relate to outside sources, records group discussion and make a PowerPoint to report and share with the whole class.

Next, the teacher assigned the tasks and the reading article for each group. The tasks are as follows:

- 1) Skim the text and identify the key words, objective, and writing methods;
- 2) Summarize the main idea of each paragraph/section using one sentence only, and make a mind-map based on the analysis of the organization of the article;
- 3) Write a brief summary of about 120 words to summarize the main idea of the text;
- 4) Raise two to three critical thinking questions concerning the text/theme, and provide possible answers to the questions after the discussion with the rest of the class;
- 5) Provide some outside sources relating to the theme of the text.

Eventually, the group will report the study of the article in the class. Upon the completion of the group report, the teacher and other students will raise questions and make comments on the content and form of the group's report and performance.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Questions

To inquire the influence and application of the reading circle method on the development of learner autonomy, the following research questions are proposed.

- 1) Does the application of reading circle influence the cultivation of learner autonomy?
- 2) In what way(s) does the reading circle facilitate the cultivation of learner autonomy?
- 3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the application of reading circle in the cultivation of learner autonomy?

3.2 Participants

The research was carried out among 116 freshman undergraduates from three classes who mostly majored in science and engineering. The three classes were taught by the same teacher. The teaching materials were the same, and the teaching periods were identical as well. At the end of the course, students were required to fill out an online questionnaire.

3.3 Survey Instrument

On the basis of the working definition of learner autonomy proposed by Han (2013), the researcher designed a questionnaire to explore the application of the reading circle method in promoting the cultivation of learner autonomy.

The questionnaire consists of 20 closed items. The closed items were designed to explore the changes of students' learning attitude and interest (5 items), students' learning capacity and strategies (9 items), and students' use of learning environment and resources (5 items). The five-point Likert scale was applied to weigh each closed item in the questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = unsure; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

In addition to the 20 closed items on the questionnaire, two open questions were designed to discover students' suggestions and comments on group reading circle activities.

After the questionnaires were collected, the data were analyzed by using SPSS 25.0. The inter-rater reliability of the 20 closed items was analyzed, and the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.953, indicating that the questionnaire had good reliability.

From the factor analysis of KMO and Bartlett's test as is shown in Table 2, the KMO was 0.904, and the significance level was 0.000 ($P < 0.05$), indicating that the questionnaire also had good validity.

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.904
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1198.232
	df	190
	Sig.	.000

4. Results

At the end of the course, a survey was conducted in the three classes. A total of 116 students completed the online questionnaire, and the responses were all valid. Among the 116 students who completed the online questionnaire, 58 (50%) were male and 58 (50%) were female.

The responses to the 20 closed items about the effect of the reading circle method on the cultivation of learner autonomy are as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Responses about the influence of reading circle on the development of learner autonomy

Closed Items	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Unsure %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
1. I have participated in the group reading circle activity before.	25	6.03	19.83	4.31	44.83
2. Our team could complete group activities in different roles.	8.62	7.76	14.66	21.55	47.41
3. By participating in group activities, I increased my ability to communicate with others.	7.76	4.31	18.97	28.45	40.52
4. I actively cooperated with other group members to complete tasks.	7.76	1.72	12.93	28.45	49.14
5. I used English to communicate with group members and complete tasks after class.	13.79	26.72	22.41	19.83	17.24
6. By participating in group activities, I improved my ability of making PPT.	5.17	6.9	19.83	32.76	35.34
7. Group report and presentations helped me to improve my ability of making presentations in class.	6.03	7.76	16.38	31.03	38.79

8. I improved the ability to use academic words by participating in group activities.	4.31	8.62	25	31.03	31.03
9. By participating in group activities, I learned how to analyze the structure of a new article.	7.76	4.31	18.1	33.62	36.21
10. By participating in group activities, I increased the ability to draw mind maps.	4.31	11.21	21.55	37.07	25.86
11. By participating in group activities, I increased the ability of skimming and scanning.	7.76	4.31	10.34	41.38	36.21
12. By participating in group activities, I increased the ability to write an article summary.	5.17	9.48	10.34	38.79	36.21
13. Some team members did not actively participate in the discussion and prepare the materials for report.	26.72	19.83	17.24	17.24	18.97
14. By participating in group activities, I improved my critical thinking ability.	6.03	4.31	16.38	38.79	34.48
15. In the future, I will be able to critically read a new article like a group activity.	4.31	6.9	22.41	41.38	25
16. My interest in English learning has been increased by participating in group activities.	2.86	11.43	32.86	31.43	21.43
17. After finishing the group report in class, I reflected on the effect.	1.43	8.57	35.71	30	24.29
18. I like doing group activities.	4.29	7.14	40	20	28.57
19. I learned a lot from the group presentations of other students.	2.86	7.14	32.86	35.71	21.43
20. Doing group activities helps to improve my autonomous learning ability.	2.86	4.29	28.57	31.43	32.86

5. Analysis and Discussion

The overall objective of the present study is to explore how the application of reading circle affects the cultivation of learner autonomy. Descriptive statistics was used to address the three research questions.

5.1 The Influences of Reading Circle on the Cultivation of Learner Autonomy

The first two research questions are to explore whether the application of the reading circle can influence the cultivation of learner autonomy, and in what way(s) it can facilitate the cultivation of learner autonomy.

Firstly, from the data analysis, students' learning attitude and interest have been enhanced through the participation of the reading circle. According to the analysis, most of the students (77.59%) actively cooperated with other group members to complete the tasks of the reading circle. Besides, more than half of the students (52.86%) held that their interest in English language learning has been increased by participating in group reading circle activities. In addition, many students (64.29%) agreed that doing group reading circle activities helped to promote their autonomous learning ability. In brief, students' learning attitude and interest have been promoted through doing the reading circle tasks.

Secondly, students' learning capability and learning strategies have been improved and developed through the participation of the reading circle. For instance, 69.82 percent of students reported that their ability of making

presentations in class has been improved; 62.06 percent of students believed that their ability to use academic words has been improved by participating in reading circle activities. Besides, 69.83 percent of students agreed that they have learned how to analyze the structure of a new article, and many students (63.93%) believed that their ability to draw mind maps has been increased. As to reading strategies, most of the students (77.59%) believed that their ability of skimming and scanning has increased. It is noted that 75 percent of students reported that their ability to write an article summary has also been increased through the reading circle activities. In short, participation in the reading circle has helped students to improve their learning capability in many aspects.

Thirdly, students' cooperation, communication and reflection ability have also been improved through the participation of the reading circle activities. Most of the students (68.96%) could discuss and complete the group tasks in different roles of the reading circle. And many students (68.97%) reported that their communication ability has been increased. Furthermore, more than half (54.29%) of the students would reflect on the effect of group report after completing it.

Finally, students' ability of presentation making and critical thinking have been promoted through the participation of the reading circle activities. For example, 68.1% of students reported that their ability of making PowerPoint and delivering presentations has been improved; 73.27% percent of students believed that their critical thinking ability has been improved as well.

5.2 The Strengths and Weaknesses of Applying Reading Circle in the Cultivation of Learner Autonomy

For research question 3, it is designed to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the application of the reading circle in the cultivation of learner autonomy.

From the above discussion in 5.1, the strengths of the application of the reading circle are as follows: First, the application of reading circle contributes to the increase of students' learning attitude and interest; Second, the application of reading circle facilitates the improvement of students' learning capability and learning strategies; Third, the application of the reading circle can promote the development of students' cooperation, communication, reflection ability and critical thinking; Fourth, the application of the reading circle will increase students' language awareness to read academic articles. As is illustrated in Table 3, most of the students (66.38%) reported that they can critically read an article as in a group reading circle in the future.

However, some points should not be neglected in the application of the reading circle. In the first place, some students (40.51%) did not use English to communicate with group members and complete tasks after class, whereas only 37.07 percent of students reported to use English to communicate. This is probably because English is a foreign language in China, and some learners have not formed the habit of using English to communicate outside the classroom learning context. In the second place, some students (36.21%) believed that there were team members who did not actively participate in the discussion and prepare the materials for report. Effective measures should be taken to encourage and get all the members involved in fulfilling their respective roles and tasks in the reading circle.

As Benson & Voller (1997) put it, learner autonomy is by no means learning without teacher participation, and teachers play a vital role in promoting learners' self-actualization and providing them with assistance on a regular basis. Likewise, as is pointed out by some researchers (e.g., Arnold, 2000; Benson, 2011; Voller, 1997), language teachers should play the roles as "counselor" and "facilitator" in developing learner autonomy. Language teachers should understand the needs of learners and thus respond to the ongoing needs of each individual learner. Moreover, language teachers should act as "scaffolding". When students need help in the process of autonomous language learning, teachers should provide necessary support.

In addition, Arnold (2000) and Aoki (2000) point out that influencing factors of language learners such as mood, interest, attitude and anxiety can affect their learning behavior and outcome. Therefore, as "counselor", "facilitator" and "scaffolding", language teachers should be conscious of the negative factors that may hinder language learning, and help learners to reduce and alleviate these negative effects in a timely manner.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the present study, the reading circle method is applied to explore the effect on developing learner autonomy. It is concluded that the reading circle approach is proved effective in promoting the cultivation of learner autonomy, which is mainly embodied in helping learners to increase their interest and motivation, facilitating learners to improve their learning capability and strategies.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made. First, language teachers need to create more supportive and conducive learning environment outside of the classroom. As there lacks natural communication context, language teachers can organize some activities such as English corners, English speech

contests, English debate to encourage and arouse learners' interest in using English to communicate outside the classroom.

Second, language teachers need to have the knowledge of what learner autonomy is, what roles teachers should play, and how teachers play these roles well to meet the needs of each individual learner. Only if language teachers have relevant knowledge, awareness, and comprehensive understanding of the above issues, can language teachers effectively promote the cultivation of learner autonomy.

Third, language teachers need to guide and supervise learners in completing the reading circle tasks, so that language teachers can offer assistance and support when learners have questions or problems. This can help to ensure the efficacy of the application of the reading circle in the teaching practice.

In brief, this research sheds light on developing learner autonomy through the reading circle method.

For teacher education and training programs, a series of courses, teacher training programs and teaching practicums should be designed and organized to promote the cultivation and development of language teachers' knowledge, awareness to facilitate the development of learner autonomy with more innovative approaches, novel methods and practices.

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