Using Reading Circles to Blend Independent Study with In-class Peer Interactions

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This study explored the use of Reading Circles with assigned graded readers that university students (*N* = 89) in an intermediate-level integrated skills course found to be of varying levels of interest. Following learner level appropriate reading completed outside of class, participants reported on their attitude toward the book discussion and Reading Circle role in terms of enjoyment, ease, nervousness, and usefulness for language study. Results showed no significant difference in these elements between the books found to be more interesting and the less interesting stories. These findings suggested that collaborative learning experiences such as Reading Circles can have value in bringing independent out-of-class reading of assigned graded readers into meaningful classroom activities with little import whether the books were rated as high or low interest titles.

This paper described a Reading Circle project introduced in four classes (*N* = 89) as the reading component of the integrated skills course for intermediate-level students (TOEFL ITP scores 430-525) in the intensive English program at a private university in Western Japan. Studies into Extensive Reading (ER) have shown that learner-level appropriate texts have been effective in providing comprehensible input for language development (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004; Waring, 2001) and in building confidence, motivation, and positive affect (Grabe, 1991; Nation, 1997). Advocates of pure forms of ER would suggest that the reading be completed for the sake of reading following on the axioms that "Reading is good for you" (Krashen, 2004, p. 37) and that only by reading can learners learn to read. Yet these ideas are very much predicated on the notion that time spent reading is only about reading input and that students only encounter or select what is of interest to them, even dropping graded readers that may prove uninteresting. In integrated courses, however, to manage time and lessen the cognitive and content load, input from this out-of-class reading (possibly across an assigned set of readers or even one class reader) can be seen as a valuable resource to stimulate in-class interaction and address opportunities for negotiated understanding.

Background

Reading Circles

Daniels and Steineke (2004) suggest that Literature Circles introduce the power of student-led book discussions, deepen student interactions, and build a respectful classroom community by nurturing friendship and collaboration. Reading Circles "help motivate students to acquire both the habits of reading extensively and of working autonomously . . . by providing . . . material that is both comprehensible and interesting to talk about, and a framework which makes having a real discussion in English an achievable goal for students" (Furr, 2007, p. 15). This approach is accomplished with a series of worksheets that can be adapted as pre-discussion tasks at the level of the learners where specific roles are allocated with the responsibility of drawing on content from the text and beyond to engage in a discussion, typically with collaborators in different roles who have read the same book (see, Furr, 2004 for a list of Reading Circle roles and a sample of worksheets).

Collaborative Learning

The roots of cooperative learning in general education have formed the topic of studies in social, developmental, cognitive, and humanist psychology for over 100 years. Theoretical perspectives on second language acquisition can also be linked with collaboration under the input, output, and

interaction hypotheses; sociocultural theory; individual differences; autonomy; and affect (see McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva Iddings, 2006, Chapter 2, for a discussion of each of these and references to relevant research). One important caveat is that not all group work is collaborative or cooperative. There is a difference between simply having student-student interaction in group work activities and enabling students to work cooperatively in groups toward a common goal. In a cooperative learning situation, such interaction is characterized as having *positive goal interdependence* (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) yet with *individual accountability* also required.

Interest Research

The final background element for this study draws from research into components of interest (see Hidi & Renninger, 2006 for a thorough account of the interest construct), in particular *situational interest* that addresses emotiveness. A concurrent study of the same participants had shown a varied range of pre-reading interest and a difference in the frequency of comments for pre-reading lack of interest in the six titles students were assigned for this project (see Eidswick, Rouault, & Praver, this volume). Research studies into cooperative learning (see McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva Iddings, 2006, for a review) and guides of practice for Literature Circles can readily be found. However, little empirical evidence has been collected specifically on Reading Circles conducted in a foreign language as a collaborative learning practice potentially able to address diverse levels of interest, or lack thereof, in out-of-class graded reading materials. It was the intention of this study to explore this area and to invite practitioners and researchers using ER to consider expanding on applications.

Method

The following questions were explored: (1) Among the Reading Circle roles, do students' attitudes identify a difference in the most/least enjoyable, most/least useful for English study, the easiest to use, and the one making them nervous? (2) What are students' attitudes toward the experience of Reading Circles using interesting versus uninteresting graded readers? As 20% of their grade, every 2 weeks over a 12-week period of one semester, students were required to read a graded reader randomly assigned from a set of six books pre-selected by the instructor/researchers. Drawing from a study of reader profiles from the same

target group (see Rouault, 2009) the slate of books was believed to represent a range of genres, preferences, levels of interest, and existing background knowledge at a learner appropriate level of vocabulary coverage of 95-98% (Nation, 2001). Every 2 weeks after reading a book and participating in the discussion, students completed a 6-point Likert scale on a survey of their attitude toward the enjoyment, ease, nervousness, and usefulness for language study of taking part in a particular Reading Circle role (Discussion Director/Word Wizard, Character Sketcher, Illustrator, or Connector) for that specific book.

Results and Discussion

In response to research question (1), participant attitudes showed no significant difference by Reading Circle role on the dimensions of ease, enjoyment, nervousness, and usefulness in studying English. By using two books considered to be high interest and two of low interest based on initial ratings of overall interest and frequency of lack of interest comments (see Eidswick, Rouault, & Praver, 2011) participant attitudes toward Reading Circles were evaluated using a repeated measures ANOVA and no significant difference was found. Significance in Box's test and Levene's test also pointed to a violation of the homogeneity and equal variance-covariance assumptions.

Adopting Reading Circle role sheets for in-class discussions of the graded reading completed outside of class was believed to blend autonomous self-study goals with accountability for collaborating with peers (see Praver, Rouault, & Eidswick, 2011, for findings on peer evaluation in Reading Circles). Given that no difference was found in the attitudes for Reading Circle discussions with interesting and uninteresting books, it would seem that collaboration with classmates in these interactive, post-reading tasks may trigger situational interest and be seen as a new, distinct task with a mutual goal, separate from the initial surface level interest in the graded reader or reading.

Conclusion

This study explored participants' attitudes toward collaborative discussions of out-of-class graded reading in Reading Circle roles. The results for these 2nd-year, intermediate-level, university EFL students showed no significant difference on the dimensions

of enjoyment, ease, nervousness, or usefulness in studying English for the four Reading Circle roles used and no significant difference on these dimensions between assigned graded readers that were originally seen as of higher or lower interest. This may suggest that, in addition to the research in favor of ER, collaboration in Reading Circles can address varying levels of learner/reader interest. Areas to be explored further include an investigation of interest and other factors under the conditions of assigned readers and those chosen by students as well as a further examination of which elements of participation in a Reading Circle may effect students' perception of it being a valuable experience.

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