

On the Implementation of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model in English Reading Teaching

Jinxin Wen*

China West Normal University, Nanchong, 637000, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

Reading teaching is highly valued among the five major skills teaching, but traditional reading teaching still has some problems. At the same time, General Senior High School Curriculum Standards have put forward higher requirements for high school English reading teaching, requiring "high school English curriculum should emphasize the further development of students' comprehensive language proficiency, and focus on improving their ability to obtain information, process information, analyze problems, and solve problems in English; with special emphasis on improving students' ability to think and express themselves in English." Since the new curriculum reform advocates a student-centered teaching model, focusing on cultivating students' thinking abilities and optimizing their thinking qualities, the “Literature Circles” model has gradually become popular in middle school English classroom teaching. This model focuses on reading as the core, and through independent research and collaborative exploration, enables students to more effectively integrate their English language abilities. While improving English knowledge and skills, students' critical thinking abilities have also been trained and strengthened. The cultivation of critical thinking not only enhances students' ability to analyze and solve problems, but also provides an important foundation for students to distinguish right from wrong, correct erroneous knowledge, and innovate. Therefore, this article summarizes the current problems in English reading teaching, the concept, theoretical basis, advantages, development trends, and implementation processes and suggestions of “Literature Circles” teaching model, in order to bring new inspiration and ideas to English reading teaching.

Keywords

Literature Circles; English Reading Teaching; Application.

1. Introduction

The vigorous promotion of national curriculum reform and the demand for improving the quality of English education have made domestic English educators recognize the importance of improving students' reading quality, cultivating their English language sense through language and contextual experiences, and enhancing their pragmatic and thinking abilities. Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards emphasizes that language is both a tool for communication and thinking. "Learning a foreign language can promote mental development and help students understand the diversity of the world" (Ministry of Education, 2022). English literature teaching is an indispensable aspect of reading education in China. Its differences from Chinese culture can maximize the stimulation of students' divergent thinking ability and improve their English reading level. Introducing English literary works is beneficial for students to deepen their cultural literacy, enhance their literary realm, broaden their reading horizons, and enhance their thinking abilities during the reading process (Xiong, 2015).

Reading is an important way to seek knowledge. Strengthening the teaching of reading and actively exploring effective teaching methods are widely concerned by various countries. The active practice of “Literature Circles” teaching model has brought great changes to reading teaching. It adapts to the social needs of developing citizens' reading ability, focuses on reading, and effectively integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing through independent learning and cooperative exploration, helping students discover themselves and improve their confidence in reading, ultimately forming a comprehensive ability and quality that benefits them for life. As an infinitely generative reading teaching method, “Literature Circles” has been successfully adopted by schools and groups at all levels in many countries, and has also provided reference for reading teaching in China. The “Literature Circles” teaching model is based on the theory of cooperative learning, with students independently selecting reading materials, teachers providing reading guidance, organizing discussions, and showcasing communication in reading learning group activities (Daniels, 2001). Its value lies in students improving their reading skills, analytical and problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking abilities through independent reading practice, ultimately leading to a comprehensive improvement in their overall quality (Lv, 2013).

2. Current Problems in English Reading Teaching in China

Firstly, traditional English reading courses place greater emphasis on imparting knowledge of text structure, vocabulary, and grammar. Neglecting the overall and blank characteristics of the work text. There are also very few activities that organize student discussions and in-depth exploration of the spiritual and educational significance in works. In addition, teachers often control the classroom in a one-on-one manner in order to pursue the requirement of teaching progress and grade consistency. As a result, students do not have time for deep thinking and opportunities for mutual communication.

Secondly, traditional English reading classrooms also limit students' thinking. The scope of student thinking lies within the questions raised by the teacher. Various thinking abilities naturally cannot be widely cultivated. This also causes student readers to lose interest and curiosity in reading literary works due to the outdated and boring format of English reading classes. Over time, bad reading habits and attitudes have formed, and the desire to independently study literary works has been lost.

Thirdly, the traditional reading teaching model is not conducive to the cultivation of students' reading literacy. The importance of reading teaching is self-evident, but in the traditional reading teaching model, teachers still occupy a dominant position, with “teachers speaking and students listening” as the main approach. Students can only read articles according to the teacher's explanation without grasping the overall situation. The current reading teaching has a fragmented phenomenon, which can easily lead to excessive dependence on teachers and greatly affect students' individual understanding of reading materials, Cracking down on their enthusiasm for English reading is not conducive to the cultivation of students' reading literacy (Wang, 2021).

“Literature Circles” is an advocated model different from traditional teaching model. It can solve the problems above to some extent. Therefore, this paper will pay more attention to “Literature Circles” in the following part.

3. “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

In order to better understand “Literature Circles”, it is necessary to investigate its definition, theoretical foundation, advantages and development trend.

3.1. Definition of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

“Literature Circles”, also known as the reading circle, was first observed by Professor Kathy Short as a spontaneous interaction between students. The discussion and exchange of reading materials generated a strong reading pleasure, and the teaching concept of constructing reading groups was proposed. It caused a sensation in the United States in the 1980s. The concept was officially proposed by American scholar Harvey Daniels in the book *Literature Circles Voice and Choice in the Student centered Classroom*. Harvey Daniels proposed that the literature circle is a temporary reading group. Students who choose the same reading material form a reading group; group members read independently according to the prescribed reading process; discuss and exchange within the group after completing within the specified time; the completion of reading materials represents the end of this literature circle, and students will form a new literature circle based on the new reading materials. Harvey Daniels (2002) believes that a truly mature “Literature Circle” includes 11 basic elements: 1. Students choose their own reading materials; 2. Form a temporary group based on the selected books; 3. Different groups read different books; 4. Regular group meetings to discuss reading situations; 5. Students assist in reading and discussion by taking notes; 6. The discussion topic comes from students; 7. The group meeting proposes open-ended questions aimed at engaging in an open and natural dialogue on books; 8. Teachers are facilitators, not group members or lecturers; 9. Evaluation is conducted through teacher observation and student self-assessment; 10. The entire classroom is filled with joy; After reading a book, readers share it with their classmates, forming a new “Literature Circle” around new reading materials.

3.2. Theoretical Foundation of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

Constructivism suggests that reading, as an individual cognitive behavior, should be a process of interaction between students and reading materials (Matthews, 2003). The “top-down” reading mode has changed the fragmented and cramming teaching dilemma, encouraging language learners to use their existing knowledge reserves to comprehensively understand the text and obtain a more complete meaning (Goodman, 1986). “Under the influence of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, the development and maturity of whole language teaching ideas laid the theoretical foundation for the birth of Literature Circles reading teaching model” (Yao, 2009). The “Literature Circles” is a student-centered reading model that organically combines self-directed learning and cooperative learning, especially suitable for teaching higher grades. It usually takes 4 to 6 people as a unit, and carries out reading and discussion in a purposeful and role-based manner. Its basic operating steps are: reading, thinking, connecting, and communicating. Due to its respect for student personality, interpretation, and diverse forms of activities, it is widely popular in the United States (Furr, 2007).

3.3. Advantages of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

Firstly, “Literature Circles” is a natural integration of self-directed learning and collaborative exploration. Regular literature circle activities are a dynamic learning process, reflecting the concepts of self-directed learning and collaborative exploration in every step of grouping, selecting reading materials, preparing for self reading, entering discussions, and gathering and exhibiting achievements. Students have the right to independently choose group members to form cooperative groups; students have the right to independently choose reading materials; students have the right to independently choose their roles; self discussion and full participation of all staff.

Secondly, “Literature Circles” is a natural integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills training. “Literature Circles” is a method of reading teaching, but its significance far exceeds the level of reading. It adopts various forms such as reading, discussion, homework paper design, and brief commentary to achieve the natural integration of reading, writing,

listening, and speaking. Firstly, there is training in reading. The student union carefully reads the materials to be discussed, extensively browses relevant materials, conducts in-depth research on the key and difficult parts, and trains students to read and recite beautiful and moving paragraphs. Next is training in writing. In the practice of “Literature Circles”, there are three stages involved in writing training: designing and filling out homework papers for discussion, preparing discussion outlines; gather and present the discussion results; recommend books in the form of brief book reviews. The third is listening and speaking training. Although everyone has prepared a discussion outline in the form of homework before starting the discussion, the dynamic characteristics of “Literature Circles” determine that everyone involved is in a state of being stimulated and inspired. When listening and expressing, they must always adjust their thoughts and speech content. So “Literature Circles” is also a high-level listening and speaking training (Liu, 2006).

Thirdly, “Literature Circles” can enhance students’ reading confidence and enhance their reading literacy. “Literature Circles” teaching mode is text centered, emphasizing students’ self-directed learning and peer interaction, enhancing their reading interest and confidence, and improving their reading literacy. It has transformed students’ attitudes towards English reading, making them more proactive in reading (Hillier, 2001). It also has a promoting effect on both high-level and low-level learners, helping to cultivate students’ reading autonomy (Shelton-Strong, 2012). Compared to traditional reading teaching, “Literature Circles” teaching model is more effective in improving students’ reading comprehension ability (Irawati, 2016). Fourthly, “Literature Circles” can enhance students’ learning abilities and promote deep learning. General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020)" (2020) clearly states: The high school stage is an important period for the development of students’ learning abilities. Teachers should take cultivating students’ learning abilities as an important teaching goal, create favorable conditions for students to develop their learning abilities in the teaching process, help students learn how to make self selection, evaluation, and monitoring in the process of English learning, and cultivate students’ abilities of independent learning, cooperative learning, and exploratory learning. “Literature Circles” teaching model provides students with a new way of learning English reading. Teachers respect students’ autonomy in learning, free expression of language, and unique understanding of reading texts, emphasizing the development of teamwork, peer interaction, and exploration abilities (Wang, 2021).

3.4. Development Trend of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

The integration of online and offline “Literature Circles” Teaching Model is the future development trend (Wang, 2021). General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020)" (2020) requires teachers to strive to create an information-based teaching environment and deepen the integration of information technology and English curriculum. Zhang Yantong and Zhang Yan (2018) believe that the essence and connotation of "Internet plus Education" is not only the platform and application of the Internet in education, but also not only the pure virtual education and online education, but also the innovation and transformation of integration and common use of physical education and virtual education. The development of modern information technology has brought tremendous changes to teaching and learning methods. The online “Literature Circles” English reading teaching model breaks the limitations of time and space by building an online learning platform, carrying out group cooperation and interaction, and improving English learning efficiency. Online “Literature Circles” reading teaching fully utilizes the rich online resources, on the one hand, encourages and guides students to read classic books, improve their aesthetic and appreciation abilities, encourage online discussions, cultivate lifelong reading habits, and broaden their English learning channels. Empirical studies abroad have shown that conducting online “Literature

Circles” teaching models can improve students' reading motivation and promote the improvement of their reading comprehension abilities (Olmstead, 2001). Of course, online teaching, like traditional teaching, has both advantages and disadvantages. The two can complement each other, and the future development trend will inevitably be a teaching model that combines online and offline, virtual and reality. Moreover, "Internet plus" provides rich and colorful teaching resources for online teaching, builds an open and intelligent teaching environment, and facilitates teachers to carry out hybrid teaching combining virtual and real, online and live broadcast (Wang & Yu, 2017).

4. Implementation of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

As an advocated method, “Literature Circles” actually brings positive influence on English instruction. Thus, many people pay more attention to how to apply it effectively in practice. This paper will point out some specific steps and suggestions for the application of “Literature Circles”.

4.1. Specific Steps for Implementing of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

“Literature Circles” reading mode can effectively cultivate students to improve their reading skills through independent reading, enhance their ability to analyze and solve problems, and ultimately comprehensively improve their comprehensive literacy. Shen Hongdan (2012) presented a concise and clear practical operation process for “Literature Circles” reading activities:

Firstly, there should be a sufficient number of literary works available for students to read, at least six of which should be based on their themes and content that can attract students' independent reading interest. When selecting books, there are three steps: teacher selection, teacher-student selection, and student independent selection. Firstly, the teacher selects the reading works. At the beginning of each “Literature Circles” activity, the teacher selects and recommends several suitable works around a certain theme, introduces the characteristics, pages, and difficulty of the works, and makes comments on each work; secondly, the whole class reads together. After students have gained an understanding of the works, they take some time to browse through them. The teacher will suggest that students read one or two pages of the works to gain a preliminary understanding of the characters and styles in the works, and then discuss and evaluate them together; finally, when the conditions are ripe, students can independently choose the three most interesting and desired works from the list of books provided by the teacher, and write down the first, second, and third choices in sequence on the voting form provided by the teacher in advance.

Secondly, there should be appropriate grouping. It is best to form a discussion group of four to five students, as having too many or too few members is not conducive to the effectiveness of group discussions. When grouping, while fully considering student choices, try to pay attention to the heterogeneity of group members in terms of literary level, reading skills, psychological development level, gender, and personality, and maintain diversity in the types of group members in each group.

Thirdly, teachers should prepare a detailed role list for students before class, including the roles and specific tasks for students to choose from, and be sure to indicate the teacher's expectations of the responsibilities assigned to students in this activity on the role list. The roles include: discussion host (or organizer), reviewer, associative person, illustrator, vocabulary interpreter, cultural interpreter, and so on. Teachers can add or delete roles based on the actual teaching situation and choose the role that is suitable for this activity. During group activities, each student takes on a role in their respective group and completes tasks according to the requirements of the role sheet.

Fourthly, after the teacher determines the start and end times of this “Literature Circles” activity, each group of students will discuss and decide on their own reading schedule for the group. Three to five group activities per week, each lasting 30-45 minutes. Group activities include two parts: reading together and discussing together. Co reading refers to the group members being able to read selected paragraphs of a work together during limited time, usually 10-15 minutes, in addition to reading on their own outside of class. Students take notes while reading and write down any issues they discover for future discussion. After reading together, start the group discussion.

Fifthly, there should be a teacher schedule, including the teaching schedule for the entire semester, the cycle of each “Literature Circles” activity, as well as the number and specific time of teachers participating in each group activity during each “Literature Circles” activity. It is best for teachers to schedule 10-15 minutes in each round of “Literature Circles” activities to allow students to learn some necessary reading skills.

Sixth, during each activity, detailed activity records should be made. Not only should the chapters read and the main content discussed during the activity be recorded, but also in which areas everyone has the most debate, which problems have not been solved, which issues to pay attention to in the next discussion, which chapters to read together in the next time, and so on. Seventh, students should form feedback reports. After reading, discussing, and commenting, students often prefer to express their reflection on the work in different ways. At this point, students can be given one week to prepare and complete their unique feedback design. Not only that, feedback also includes students' evaluations of the activity, such as whether their participation in the literature circle activity was active, whether the discussion was sufficient, whether valuable viewpoints were put forward, whether the group activity was effective, and how to improve the next activity, etc.

This set of processes ultimately promotes the development of learners' reading skills, enhances their ability to analyze, summarize, and solve problems, and cultivates their self-learning ability and teamwork spirit.

4.2. Suggestions for Implementing of “Literature Circles” Teaching Model

Firstly, abandon fragmented reading. The cultivation of any habit and the improvement of one's abilities require gradual progress. In the early stages of promoting “Literature Circles”, students may have the idea of giving up halfway due to their own English proficiency constraints or passive reading patterns. Teachers can guide students to start with simple reading materials and slow down the pace appropriately, but different reading strategies must be implemented to encourage students to read complete books from beginning to end, so as to have a comprehensive understanding of the work and increase confidence in independent reading (Lin, 2020).

Secondly, value personal reading. Lin Shipei (2020) believes that although “Literature Circles” emphasizes collaborative learning, collective perspectives cannot replace individual perspectives. Abandoning individual reading is like following the old path of passive indoctrination, while “Literature Circles” should pursue a state of brainstorming and a hundred schools of thought. Therefore, teachers must ensure that students have enough time and reading volume to read independently and fully.

Thirdly, clarify the role of teachers. The responsibility of teachers in “Literature Circles” is to provide guidance rather than leadership, and to support rather than constrain. Therefore, teachers should not set standard answers to the questions that students are exploring, but should respect and encourage their individual interpretations. In addition, when students encounter reading difficulties or disagreements during discussions, teachers should promptly help students analyze the reasons and guide them to seek solutions. Teachers act as assistants to introduce “Literature Circles” model to students, assist them in selecting appropriate reading

materials, teach them reading strategies, and collect reading materials. At the beginning of the discussion, the teacher serves as a participant to discuss the reading materials with the students, and then observes and records the evaluation of the students. In the process of jointly managing “Literature Circles” between teachers and students, the target language environment promotes the development of English reading for students. (Ye & Li, 2018).

Fourthly, discussion is the key to the success of “Literature Circles”. Without discussion, readers will not be able to share and discuss their insights on specific themes or events in the book. The main purpose of “Literature Circles” in foreign language teaching is to develop students' second language abilities. In “Literature Circles”, learners have numerous opportunities for oral communication, which can make second language learners pay attention to the structural forms of English story texts, attempt to speak new languages, test learners' assumptions about English language structure, and reflect on the structural characteristics of the English language they express. (Swain, 1985).

Fifthly, if teachers want to understand the impact of “Literature Circles” on students, they must strive to understand and record the personal needs of each student in the classroom, and observe their reading growth (Daniels, 2002). While reading strategies are important, students need to participate in dialogue about literature as part of the reader community. The overly structured understanding strategy teaching distorts the complexity of literature discussions. In interviews with discussion group leaders, summarists, vocabulary masters, and chart makers in “Literature Circles” (Short & Pierce, 1990), Wilfong (2009) found the importance of different roles being divided into different roles. “Literature Circles” brings students together not only to share their thoughts on reading texts, but also to teach others knowledge in their respective fields while taking on different roles. The researchers also demonstrated the benefits of listening to others' opinions on reading, as well as the fun of using role tables to ask and answer questions and explore texts.

Sixth, details determine success or failure, and some detailed operational strategies can often bring unexpected results. Shen Hongdan (2012) proposed some operational strategies to make “Literature Circles” more efficient. Firstly, brainstorming; When conducting “Literature Circles” activities for the first time, students can be provided with some ideas on how to conduct literary discussions. The approach is to prepare a brief brainstorming exercise after students have read several chapters of the work. Next is the demonstration of the goldfish tank style; in order to better understand how “Literature Circles” activities are carried out, students also need to observe or receive demonstrations. Before and after the first “Literature Circles” activity, teachers can select five or six students who have shown outstanding performance in daily discussions, organize a “Literature Circles” style group discussion, and give a demonstration in front of the entire class. After demonstration, write down the key steps of the discussion process and paste them on the bulletin board for reference, so that students can clearly identify it as a successful group discussion activity. Additionally, you can use sticky notes; used to post a paragraph of the work that students want to share in a discussion, like a small flag, at a certain point in the work. When students read, they can write short comments or questions on sticky notes to remind themselves of what content to share with everyone.

5. Conclusion

“Literature Circles” is a student-centered teaching model. It emphasizes the initiative of students in the process of language learning and knowledge exploration. By placing students at the center of the classroom, it inspires them to become discoverers with great potential, thereby acquiring knowledge and abilities. In addition, the reading mode of “Literature Circles” also meets the requirements of the “new curriculum standards” in English teaching. “Literature Circles” has begun to receive more attention, and many researchers have pointed out their

views on it and conducted some empirical research. This study outlines the current problems in reading teaching and the concept, theoretical foundation, advantages, and development trends of "Literature Circles". In addition, specific steps and suggestions for implementing "Literature Circles" were also mentioned. In China, more and more people are realizing the role of "Literature Circles" and trying to apply it to practical classrooms. However, to achieve the expected results, it is still necessary to clarify the role of "Literature Circles" in English teaching in China and truly find its connection with English teaching at all levels in China. More exploration is still needed in the practice of English reading teaching, and how to promote the effective implementation of the literature circle is still a question worth considering.

References

- [1] Daniels, H.: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (Stenhouse Publishers, America 2002).
- [2] Furr, M.: *Stories for Reading Circles* (Oxford University Press, China 2007).
- [3] Goodman, K. S.: *What's Whole in Whole Language?* (Heinemann, Britain 1986).
- [4] Hillier, M. A.: *Implementation of Literature Circles in a Rural High School English Class: One Teacher's Journey of Changing Student Attitudes towards Reading* (University of Southern California State University, America 2001).
- [5] Irawati, D.: *Effectiveness of Literature Circles on Students' Reading Comprehension*, IJOLTL, Vol. 1 (2016) No.3, p.179-192.
- [6] Lin Shiwei: *Research on Teaching High School English Extracurricular Reading Based on the Literary Circle Model*, *English Teaching & Research Notes*, (2020) No.4, p.36-42.
- [7] Liu Miao and Jin Yanfeng: *The Literary Circle - The Transformation of Reading Teaching Methods*, *Language Planning*, (2006) No.8, p.45-47.
- [8] Lv Xuhong: *The Comparison and Analysis of "Literature Circles" Mode and Traditional Approach of English Reading Teaching*, *Journal of Jimei University (Education Science Edition)*, Vol. 3 (2013).
- [9] Matthews, W. J.: *Constructivism in the classroom: Epistemology, history, and empirical evidence*, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 30 (2003) No.3, p.123-125.
- [10] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China: *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* (Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, China 2022).
- [11] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China: *National English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017 edition, 2020 revision)* (Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, China 2020).
- [12] Olmstead, C. M.: *Improving Reading Comprehension Using Online Literature Circles: A University elementary School Collaborative Project* (California State University, America 2001).
- [13] Sehn Hongdan: *The Literary Circle Teaching Method in American Language Teaching*, *Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method*, Vol. 32 (2012) No.8, p.124-127.
- [14] Shelton-Strong, S. J.: *Literature Circles in EFL*, *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 66 (2012) No.2, p.214-223.
- [15] Short, K. G. and Pierce, K. M.: *Talking about books: literature discussion groups in K-8 classrooms* (Heinemann, Britain 1990).
- [16] Swain M.: *Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development*, *Input in second language acquisition*, (1985).
- [17] Wang Dongping, Pang Guanli and Feng Jing: *The Discussions on the "Literature Circles" Online English Reading Teaching Model*, *Teaching Material and Method*, (2021) No.3, p.90-96.
- [18] Wang linyi and Ding Qiaoe: *Research on "Internet plus" Online and Offline Teaching Mode*, *Teaching and nurturing* (Higher Education Forum), (2017) No.10, p.80-81.
- [19] Wilfong, L.G.: *Textmasters: Bringing Literature Circles to Textbook Reading Across the Curriculum*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 53 (2009), p.164-171.

- [20] Xiong Jie: On the Role of Foreign Literature in Domestic Reading Education, Fujian Quality Management, (2015) No.09, p.138.
- [21] Yao Jiarui: Literature Circles as an Approach of Reading Instruction (MS., Zhejiang Normal University, China 2010).
- [22] Ye Chunli and Li Shanshan: An Analysis of the Teacher's Role in the "Literary Circle" Mode of Middle School English Reading, Educational Practice and Research, (2018) No.7, p.4.
- [23] Zhang Yantong and Zhang Yan: The Essence and Connotation of "Internet+Education", Journal of National Academy of Education Administration, (2018) No.1, p.62-68.