



## Using Reading Circles to Connect Readers with Text: Extensive Reading

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**Abstract:** Extensive reading course is a critical part of cultivating English majors' language learning ability. Its teaching quality directly impacts students' improvement of linguistic knowledge and linguistic skills. The problems faced by educators in extensive reading course include single teaching method and the shortage of appeal. Combined with autonomous learning theory, this paper aims to explore the practical meaning of introducing and practicing Reading Circles in extensive reading course and analyze its benefits to cultivate students' autonomous reading ability and critical thinking ability. By applying this teaching mode, it hopes to connect students with text and thus create a classroom environment in which students can interact with the text. It is expected to change the situation of teacher-oriented class and improve students' core competence of reasoning, analysis and judgement.

**Keywords:** Reading Circles , extensive reading, autonomous learning

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### Introduction

Extensive reading is an essential course for English majors to master language. The overall object of elementary stage for English majors is to cultivate students' comprehensive language application ability. Reading is the process of information input of writing language and it is the basis of information output. Compared with intensive reading, extensive reading emphasizes information acquisition and it is the fundamental principle of language learning. Under current circumstances, there is no significant difference between the extensive reading and intensive reading teaching mode. Students can not interact with the text actively and be proactive and exploratory in the learning process. The current status badly needs a different kind of transformation to change the traditional situation of teachers-oriented class and improve English majors' core competence of reasoning, analysis and judgment.

Using Reading Circles to connect students with text is a feasible teaching method to improve the effects of extensive reading course. Each group member must make preparation for the part they are responsible for and this process involves students' active construction. Combined with autonomous learning theory, this paper aims to explore the practical meaning of introducing and practicing Reading Circles as a dynamic learning process in extensive reading course. It is expected to provide some meaningful references to reading course and other courses that aim to foster students' initiative in the future and help college students establish a reasonable and language knowledge-centered overall knowledge structure or system. The establishment of a more reasonable knowledge structure or system will also improve students' critical thinking and analytical ability which is of prime importance in talent cultivation process.

### Literature Review

#### 1. Introduction to Reading Circles

Reading Circles is also known as Literature Circles. It is an active reading teaching mode emerged in the United States. The American scholar Harvey Daniels fully and explicitly clarified the definition and practice of Literature Circles in his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. This step guides the creative teaching mode to move on to reading practice. The texts used in the Reading Circles at the very beginning are mostly literary works, so Reading Circles are known as Literature Circles in the early days. Harvey Daniels described in his book that students can



choose and read the chapter they like independently. Temporary reading groups would make a mutual decision of their reading schedule <sup>[1]</sup>. The activity is guided by students in the group, and collaboration is one of the key aspects. Since this reading teaching mode is based on reading groups and each member in the group has particular role and responsibilities, they should complete their individual tasks and finish the outline of discussed topics. After finishing reading, group members would discuss according to the outline of discussed topics and share their thoughts as well as feelings on each part. An important point is that different roles should rotate among group members. The whole process highlights the characteristics of the combination of autonomous learning and cooperative learning.

### **2. Studies on Reading Circles at home and abroad**

Studies on the Reading Circles are more profound abroad. Many foreign scholars have made a detailed study on this teaching method since it was proposed by Harvey Daniels. In 1995, Bonnie Campbell Hill and Nancy J. Johnson et al. elaborated the application of Literature Circles in reading teaching from the perspective of education and teaching in *Literature Circles and Response*. Bonnie Campbell Hill et al. clarified the structure, discussion work, preparation for meetings and evaluation of Literature Circles systematically <sup>[2]</sup>. The practical application of this interactive teaching mode had attracted more and more people's attention later. W Clarke and Jennifer Holwadel closely examined the context of the new classroom and came up with some solutions to improve Literature Circles for their students. The authors identified some issues that worked against book groups (such as student and structural barriers) and suggested some possible changes (minilessons, watching videos, choosing good books, coaching students) to assist others who also need help figuring out what is wrong with their Literature Circle discussions and what to do to improve them <sup>[3]</sup>. The research helps provide positive discussion strategies and create safe and supportive communities around books and teachers that can promote student relationships outside of the classroom. Most of the early studies start from the theoretical level, while current research mainly discusses the practical value from the level of teaching practice. Elena M. Venegas emphasized the social and emotional function of Reading Circles in *"We Listened to Each Other": Socioemotional Growth in Literature Circles* in 2019. The findings suggest that literature circles foster not only literacy but also socioemotional learning <sup>[4]</sup>. All these studies show that the introduction of Reading Circles has had a major impact on reading innovation.

Currently, domestic research on Reading Circles is relatively limited to introduction stage and practical implementation is not common. Most studies are related to English reading teaching in middle and high schools. Li Qing explored the concrete steps of this teaching method, including reading, thinking, connecting, sharing, and evaluation process. The results show its value of broadening students' horizon, activating students' thinking ability and enhancing comprehensive ability <sup>[5]</sup>. Luo Shaoxi and Zhang Yumei use Reading Circles as a feasible method to explore the cultivation of core competence of English discipline. Reading Circles can help realize transition from reading ability to other skills and focus on the learning process itself to the maximum <sup>[6]</sup>. All these studies provide meaningful suggestions for the application of Reading Circles in teaching. However, there are few studies on the application of this method in extensive reading course in college. For this area, Reading Circles can be considered as a less practical and relatively new method, although it has been studied abroad for many years. Relevant research is urgently needed to establish systematic implementation and evaluation structure in extensive reading course. The aim of this paper is to explore the implementation of Reading Circles in extensive reading course and intends to start further discussion on this subject.

### **3. Reading Circles and autonomous learning**

According to Harvey Daniels, the application of Literature Circles constitutes a reader-based reading strategy and it encourages "dense reading" and "extended reading" <sup>[7]</sup>. The application of Reading Circles can remedy the weaknesses in reading teaching currently and solve many problems in traditional reading course. The open reading activities blend individual feelings and diversities. It respects students' free expression and original views, focuses on their emotional, aesthetic, creative, cooperative and independent ability. This kind of activity places emphasis on different feelings from different readers for the same works. Through reading, discussing, debating, sharing and communicating in Reading Circles, it can boost students' self-confidence, cultivate reading interest and reading habits, and thus help students form a good comprehensive quality and thinking quality. A good atmosphere for cooperative learning can be created through role play and active dialogue. Therefore autonomous learning ability and critical thinking ability can be developed via reading and readers can explore the greater diversities in literature.

These advantages reflect the objectives required in cultivating application-oriented talents. Reading Circles can promote the important topic in teaching practice as to achieve the diversification, pluralism and individuation of reading teaching. To cultivate life-long readers is one of the most important objectives in educating and the relationship between Reading Circles and autonomous learning reminds us one of the effective implementation approaches to achieve the educational purpose.

### **Application of Reading Circles to reading course**

Reading Circles have been widely used in foreign teaching situation for a long time. At present, domestic research is limited to middle and high school English teaching and the research is in the introductory stage with very little practice. The author noticed that there are very few studies in college English majors as for the benefits of Reading Circles in cultivating

application-oriented talents. As a matter of fact, Reading Circles have a wide range and it is applied in different ways in middle school, high school and university. In view of the characteristics of English majors in elementary stage, the design of activities in extensive reading course should be more challenging and the reading system in and out of class should form a unified whole. The following part will clarify the role change of students and teachers compared with traditional teaching setting and specific implementation details of Reading Circles.

### ***1.Role change of students and teachers***

Students are the center of Reading Circles and they are not only the “receiver of knowledge”, but also the “producer of knowledge”. During the reading process, students discuss and share information, feeling and experience with partners as well as teachers using various resources. They are fully immersed in different reading and writing projects, and the teacher would not teach reading and writing skills systematically. Students are allowed to discover and explore facts and ideas for themselves. As long as teachers create a colorful and active world of literature, students would identify individual word since language learning is a process to move from a whole to its parts. During the discussion process, group members would inspire and encourage each other, and students start taking on certain responsibilities. Thus students have the initiative in their hands to learn, explore and analyze. In Reading Circles, students act as the facilitator, planner, implementer and evaluator. The traditional role of students has been changed and plenty of opportunities are offered to improve their autonomous learning and critical thinking ability.

In Reading Circles, the role of teachers also has changed. Teachers have changed from the dominator of the classroom to the facilitator of learning process. Teachers should be clear about each student’s ability and potential and understand individual differences to create a purposeful, meaningful and a supportive language learning environment. Teachers are wearing three hats during the process - researchers, learners and educators. In Reading Circles, students are given the greatest degree of freedom, but it does not mean absolute freedom. Teachers should do a lot of preparation in the early stage to make plans, set a time limit for each step and consider any problems that may arise in the implementation process. Reading Circles involve the process of knowledge reconstruction for teachers to improve teaching methods in the future. Thus the role of teachers is not to transmit knowledge to students, but to work with students to build new knowledge.

### ***2.Selecting reading materials***

The originator of Reading Circles values a “real option”. When students are given the choice of selecting the materials, they take responsibility for self-planning. In traditional teaching setting, students’ right to choose is ignored or neglected. According to scholar Monson, learning is an active process and the best motivation for students to learn is to stimulate students’ interest in the materials<sup>[8]</sup>. By applying Reading Circles in extensive reading course, students can choose materials in the textbook of great interest or they can choose news report from foreign periodicals. Overall, it is possible to combine classic works from famous writers and current events. Types or forms of literature should be various and abundant. In the material selecting process, teachers can provide rational instruction to help students choose good works that are beneficial to build the knowledge structure of this subject.

### ***3.Group and role assignment***

The teams in Reading Circles are not grouped based on students’ comprehensive and analysis ability. It is done randomly according to the size of the class and it’s best to enroll 5-6 members per group. The group members should sit together to complete group tasks and they could adjust their position flexibly to watch demonstrations. This arrangement allows the group members to express their own opinions and feelings. Since the knowledge background, personal skills and personality characteristics of group members differ from one another, the diversity within each group makes the group itself a potential learning resource. There are six types of roles in the Reading Circles activity, including Discussion leader, Summarizer, Cultural collector, Connector, Word master and Passage person. The roles, tasks and number of members can be modified according to teaching objectives, the type of text and students’ experience in teaching practice. Traditional teaching for English majors has been attaching importance on language skills and neglects the cultivation of critical thinking. Cultivating critical thinkers is an important way to train innovative talents. For Reading Circles in extensive reading course, the new role “critical thinker” is added to meet the new requirements for English teaching in colleges and universities. Critical thinker is responsible for raising creative questions and stating problems from multiple perspectives. The basic principle is as follows: Explain the background of the problem -> find relevant literature to express views -> find relevant literature to answer -> draw possible conclusions.

Recently, ideological and political education is an important part in strengthening moral education and cultivating people. Extensive reading course is an important course that incorporates ideological and political elements. The modified part is to add an “ideological and political elements searcher” in role assignment. The tasks of ideological and political elements searcher can be integrated with “Connector”. This group member is responsible for collecting and searching ideological and political elements from the text and relating it to real life situations. English majors are mature language learners and it is possible to stimulate their self-learning abilities. The adjusted roles and task assignment see below Table 1 (new roles are shown in ***bold italics*** below).

Table 1. Adjusted roles and task assignments

<b>Role</b>	<b>Tasks</b>
<b>Discussion leader</b>	Provide questions to be discussed in the text. Be responsible for the discussion within the group. Report the discussion results to the whole class.
<b>Word master</b>	Pick out key words, expressions, difficult words in the text and make comments.
<b>Cultural collector/ <i>critical thinker</i></b>	Explore cultural elements included in the text and make comparison with local ones. Raise creative questions and state problems from multiple perspectives. (new role) Invite partner to make comments.
<b>Connector / <i>Ideological and political elements searcher</i></b>	Identify the phenomena related to life from the text. Collect and search ideological and political elements from the text. (new role)
<b>Passage person</b>	Pick out good, difficult and important sentences and paragraphs in the text and make comments.
<b>Summarizer</b>	Summarize the general meaning and worth noticing points of the text.

In the process of implementation, teachers need to adjust the task role, teaching process, teacher role according to different types or forms of the text.

#### **4.Operational step**

For the specific teaching process, teachers can adopt the following procedure: Independent reading->Thinking (complete their own role tasks) -> Discussing, sharing and complementing (within the group) -> Classroom interaction (teacher's guidance -> inter-group sharing -> multiple evaluations) -> Reflections.

It should be noted that the time for each step must be controlled to ensure the activity can be conducted orderly and efficiently. The steps "Independent reading" and "Thinking" can be done after class. Intra-group discussion can be carried out according to the teaching arrangement. If time permits, it can be conducted in class, or it can be arranged in students' extracurricular time. Classroom interaction must be done in class. The discussion process should have certain rules. Otherwise the discussion may turn into an argument and a chaotic scene of more than one group member speak would appear. The rules can be made together by students and teachers after discussion. There is a difference between a Reading Circle and a regular discussion group. Reading Circles are generally more structured, but at the same time, they allow for a degree of flexibility. The scholar Furr pointed out that it would be nervous to express during discussion. Participants would take time to think their points to avoid making a show of themselves<sup>[9]</sup>. But silence is not allowed in Reading Circles and teachers should also act as an observer to give appropriate prompt. In addition, the author advises that teachers should act as a task organizer and they can not let the activity go unchecked.

In addition to specific role assignments, teachers may also assign work to all members of the group. An example of this may be journaling, in which each student reflects individually through writing on the assigned reading. Writing a journal is also a part of students' self-reflection. Bringing the journal to the literature circle and sharing some of the record may provide other topics for discussion. Teachers would also record meaningful information in students' journals and prepare improvement report for future reference.

For the evaluation mechanism, it includes self-evaluation, within group evaluation, inter-group evaluation and teacher's group evaluation. See table 2 below for specific details for each evaluation.

Table 2. Multiple evaluation mechanism

<b>Evaluation type</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Self-evaluation</b>	Self-evaluation of learning process, learning results and level of self-regulation
<b>Within group evaluation</b>	Within group evaluation according to the degree of participation, cooperation consciousness and goal achievement of the members
<b>Inter-group evaluation</b>	Mutual evaluation between groups for overall collaboration and performance

<b>Teacher's group evaluation</b>	Teacher's group evaluation for overall construction and mastery of knowledge and skills
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Process evaluation is very important for English majors' overall performance and record must be made timely to test the effectiveness of Reading Circle activities. Let students know the strengths and weaknesses after each activity and remind them to adopt good points and avoid shortcomings. What needs to be emphasized is that students' ability differs largely, and their performance also differs in thousands of ways. The purpose of evaluation is not to divide students into different categories, but to stimulate students' interest in participation, improve their learning habit, enrich experience and inspire their personality and talent. It is not fair to put a label on certain student just on one performance. The evaluation in Reading Circles is a continuous process and the results are used to help students find out their shining points and provide references for the instructional improvement in the future. What needs to be strengthened, what should be discarded and which part need to be modified in the future are worthy of reflection.

Another point worth noting is that the role for each group member must be rotated and teachers should ensure that each student has the opportunity to experience a different role.

Process evaluation requires careful design and constant revision so as to form a systematic and scientific assessment system. It takes a lot of practice, discussion and careful consideration. It is a long way to go, but the results are worth the effort.

### Discussion

Although Reading Circles have been discussed in different educational phase, its discussion is limited to the introduction stage. Few teachers actually apply it to teaching practice. And there is scarce domestic research on the application of Reading Circles in college. For extensive reading course, the elements in Reading Circles must be adjusted according to the actual situation, including operational steps, role types and evaluation mechanism. The effectiveness of Reading Circles would not appear immediately and corresponding activities must be carried out for a whole semester.

Compared with traditional teaching mode, the application of Reading Circles in extensive reading course can ensure that each student is involved. Students complete tasks according to the role assignments and thus improve autonomous learning ability in the early reading process. On the other hand, students can discover their strengths by trying out different roles, and identify their own interest in the process of exploration. The whole process can facilitate team collaboration and coordination. After independent reading in the early stage, members would communicate and share within the group. Due to the individual differences, the communication process would emit different sparks thus enrich the demonstration and performance of the group. At the same time, the group members encourage and help each other, and cultivate the spirit of teamwork during the conversation.

However, there are certain limitations that need to be noted. Since group members were randomly assigned, some students would show psychological laziness. The result is that top students can complete tasks excellently, while lower-level students slack off in the whole process. Secondly, during the within group discussion stage, the atmosphere of cooperation is only pretence. It seems that they are involved in activities, while actually they are talking about something else<sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, there are many difficulties in the way of implementing. Teachers should act as an observer to identify all these problems and solve them. The role of teachers has been changed in Reading Circles. But that does not mean that teachers do not come into play totally. Actually, teachers need to make a lot of preparation in the early stage and teaching loads have increased accordingly. The application of Reading Circles is not only a challenge for students, but also a test for teachers.

### Conclusion

The application of Reading Circles in extensive reading course is a creative perspective for teaching reading, while its significance goes well beyond reading level. Its application is a breakthrough in foreign language teaching. Currently, the teaching mode of extensive reading course is still traditional teacher-oriented classroom. There is little difference between extensive reading and intensive reading. Reading Circles can well solve the situation that students read item by item from the text. Its application corresponds to the training objective required by English teaching key competence. Students can improve their autonomous learning ability and cooperation competence during the group discussion. Reading Circles can provide more opportunities for students to explore, question and think deeply. This will in turn promote the development of students' critical thinking ability, which is one of the key requirements of educational reform. It is a rewarding attempt to connect readers with text.

Since related research on the application of Reading Circles in college foreign language teaching is limited, more research needs to be done in this area to construct a complete teaching system. Meanwhile, educators should identify additional

reading teaching modes that are complementary to Reading Circles to produce greater efficiency. Only by combining various teaching methods can educators explore and improve constantly in the process of educational reform.

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