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# Using Reading Circles to Stimulate Students' Enthusiasm for English Learning in English Reading Teaching

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## Abstract

As a student-centered collaborative learning approach, reading circles have been widely adopted in language learning. This paper explores the functions and implementation strategies of applying reading circles to motivate middle school students in English reading classes. Through role assignment, collaborative discussion and diversified reading materials, reading circles can strengthen students' sense of participation and learning interest, as well as improve their linguistic competence and critical thinking skills. This paper analyzes how to effectively employ reading circles in middle school English teaching so as to facilitate reflection and improvement in teaching practice.

## Keywords

Reading Circles; Learning Enthusiasm; Collaborative Learning; Role Assignment; English Reading Teaching

## 1. Introduction

Traditional English teaching methods are teacher-centered, featuring mechanical language input and drills with little interaction or fun. As a result, many students develop fear of English learning or lose interest in it. Especially within an exam-oriented education system, students tend to focus merely on accumulating linguistic knowledge while ignoring the cultivation of practical language use and communicative competence, which leads to prevalent cramming-style teaching and learning. Middle school English reading instruction generally suffers from the following drawbacks.

First, reading materials cover narrow themes with poorly controlled difficulty levels. Most schools rely heavily on textbooks for reading classes, resulting in limited text genres. Literature and history texts take up the majority, while topics closely related to students' daily lives such as emerging technology and workplace scenarios are scarce. Students easily feel intimidated by unfamiliar themes, which damages their

reading interest and comprehension. In addition, reading materials are not tailored to students' proficiency levels. The same text fits learners with different foundations unequally. Students with weak foundations struggle to grasp the main idea amid abundant new words and complex sentence structures, whereas advanced students gain no substantial improvement from overly simple passages.

Second, teachers overemphasize exam-oriented reading skills such as quickly locating answers and guessing word meanings from context, yet neglect exploring texts' underlying implications and cultural backgrounds. Though students can finish reading exercises, they fail to truly comprehend the passages, and their reading thinking and comprehensive reading ability see no real progress.

Third, personalized guidance is lacking, with insufficient attention paid to individual differences among students. Learners vary widely in English foundations, reading habits and learning capacities. Uniform teaching approaches adopted by teachers fail to cater to their individualized learning needs.

Given the numerous prevailing problems in middle school English education, stimulating students' internal motivation for English learning has become a key research focus in education. As a student-centered teaching approach, Reading Circles offer a potential solution to the above challenges. Centered on group cooperation and role assignment, Reading Circles prioritize interaction, critical thinking and autonomous learning. Within this framework, students can experience authentic language application in a relaxed learning atmosphere, build a stronger sense of participation and belonging, and thereby effectively boost their learning motivation.

## 2. Theoretical Basis of Reading Circles

### 2.1. Definition of Reading Circles

Reading Circles are a reading teaching mode based on group cooperation and role division, which originated from educational practice in the United States in the 1980s. Its core concept is to cultivate students' reading comprehension ability, critical thinking and language expression competence through student-led group interaction. In Reading Circle activities, students are divided into groups of four to six members. Each group conducts cooperative discussions around a book or an article, and every member undertakes a specific role task, such as questioner, vocabulary researcher, recorder and summarizer. This mechanism ensures that each student has a clear way of participation and exclusive learning task.

Taking the text Like Father Like Son from the compulsory English textbook Volume 1 published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press as an example, teachers can assign and set the following roles for each group.

**Table 1.** Division of Roles and Tasks.

| Roles | Task Allocation |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Discussion Leader | Read the passage carefully and design 3 to 5 questions to guide group discussions on the theme, characters and plot development, such as "Why did the son imitate his father's actions?" and "What changes did the father notice in the son?". |
| Word Master | Pick out at least five new or difficult words and phrases from the text. Look them up in the dictionary, mark their parts of speech, definitions and usages, and prepare to explain them in group discussions. Examples include mimic, stroll and inherit. |
| Summarizer | Take notes of key information while reading, including main characters, time and setting of events, and major plotlines. Be ready to retell the whole story concisely. For instance: "The story is about a young boy who always follows his father's steps. One day, they went to the park together and..." |
| Literary Analyst | Select one or two paragraphs that you find the most impressive, representative of the theme or hardest to understand. Analyze their structure, rhetorical devices and the author's writing purpose, such as paragraphs with detailed descriptions of the father and son's facial expressions and movements that reflect their tacit understanding. |
| Cultural Explorer | If the text involves Western family culture or values, look up relevant materials or draw on prior knowledge to share with group members for better comprehension, for example, the way fathers and sons get along and express feelings in Western families. |

After applying Reading Circles to reading instruction, we can clearly identify the distinctive features of English reading classes. First, the class is student-centered. With assigned roles and group collaboration in class, teaching power is truly returned to students, highlighting their active participation and autonomous learning. Second, clear role assignments tap into students' multiple capabilities through diverse tasks. When allocating roles and tasks with full consideration of students' hobbies and personalities, teachers can teach students in accordance with their aptitude and realize the goal of differentiated instruction to a certain extent. Third, the model emphasizes interaction and sharing. Students are encouraged to exchange opinions in the target language during discussions and engage in multi-level language practice. In this process, students can not only communicate ideas with peers but also immerse themselves in a favorable language environment, which cultivates their collaborative and communicative skills.

## 2.2. Theoretical Foundations

Reading Circles are primarily grounded in constructivist learning theory.

Constructivism holds that knowledge is not simply transmitted through input, but constructed through social interaction and practice (Vygotsky, 1978). With role-based tasks and group discussions, Reading Circles enable students to develop in-depth textual understanding through collaboration, breaking away from the traditional passive knowledge-receiving model. Knowledge acquired through such exploration and repeated reflection can be more easily internalized and retained.

Collaborative learning theory proposes that teamwork can stimulate students' learning motivation and improve their ability to absorb and apply knowledge (Johnson et al., 1991). Cooperation within Reading Circles not only enhances learners' linguistic proficiency but also fosters their sense of teamwork and communication skills.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) argues that abundant comprehensible input is the core of language acquisition. Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985) further

complements this view by pointing out that productive language practice is equally essential. Reading Circles integrate rich linguistic input from reading passages with oral output generated in group discussions, forming a complete loop for students' language acquisition.

## 3. Advantages of Reading Circles in Boosting Students' Learning Enthusiasm

### 3.1. Strengthen Students' Sense of Participation and Responsibility

The role allocation system of Reading Circles assigns clear tasks to every student. Each group member can select their preferred role in advance based on their own strengths and group demands, negotiate with teammates, and finalize task division afterwards. For instance, the Discussion Leader designs core questions to drive in-depth group discussion, while the Word Master takes charge of explaining new words and key phrases in the text. Such clear division of responsibilities prevents the "free-rider" problem common in traditional group work, making every student feel indispensable to the group.

Furthermore, Reading Circle activities offer students a stage to express themselves. When students finish their role assignments and gain recognition from peers, they acquire a strong sense of achievement and belonging. This greatly raises their learning interest and motivation, contributing to a virtuous learning cycle.

### 3.2. Provide Personalized Learning Experiences

Traditional teaching modes rarely take individual differences among students into consideration. In contrast, Reading Circles create opportunities for personalized learning through diversified reading materials and role division. For example, students with strong reading competence can choose more challenging texts, while learners with weak language foundations may start with simpler reading passages. Meanwhile, the role rotation mechanism helps students develop comprehensive abilities, including critical thinking, oral expression and information organization.

### 3.3. Build an Authentic Language Application Environment

Group discussions and opinion sharing in Reading Circles simulate real-life communicative scenarios. Within such a setting, students are required to express their comprehension and respond to peers' questions in English, linking language learning to practical communication. The interactivity and authenticity of such linguistic practice greatly improve students' listening and speaking skills and address the phenomenon of "mute English" prevailing in traditional English teaching.

### 3.4. Foster Critical Thinking and Collaborative Competence

Reading Circle activities require students to raise questions, analyze plots, summarize main ideas and make critical evaluations of texts while reading. For instance, students may discuss whether the protagonist's behaviors are reasonable or analyze the cultural backgrounds behind the passage. These tasks cultivate learners' critical thinking and logical reasoning abilities. In addition, group cooperation cultivates students' teamwork awareness and problem-solving skills, which aligns with the requirements of cultivating students' core literacy proposed in the new curriculum reform.

## 4. Implementation Strategies of Reading Circles

### 4.1. Carefully Select Reading Materials

Selecting appropriate reading materials is the key to the success of Reading Circles. Teachers ought to choose substantial reading materials matched with students' English proficiency and interests. Short illustrated stories are suitable for lower-grade students, while senior students can tackle classic literary works or news reports. If there are preset learning tasks, teachers may appropriately add or cut supplementary materials according to the whole class or each group's situation. As Chen Wencun (2023) puts it, "Teachers need to teach with textbook, instead of teaching the textbook." For example, the text Like Father Like Son from Volume One of the senior high school compulsory English textbook published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press contains obvious cultural conflicts. To offer scaffolding for lead-in activities, teachers can supplement reading passages concerning cultural awareness.

### 4.2. Rational Allocation of Roles

Teachers should clarify the role settings in Reading Circles and arrange regular role rotation to ensure every student develops a full range of abilities. Typical roles are as follows: Discussion Leader, who raises key questions to guide group discussion; Word Master, who explains new words in the text and offers relevant example sentences; Recorder, who takes down major ideas and viewpoints generated in group talks; Summarizer, who generalizes the main content of the reading passage. To assign groups and internal roles reasonably, teachers should actively observe students in daily teaching and form a general understanding of their personalities.

### 4.3. Offer Guidance and Feedback

At the initial stage of Reading Circle practice, teachers shall provide detailed operational guidance, such as how to raise effective questions and organize group discussions. Besides, teachers are supposed to deliver feedback on students' performance after activities and encourage continuous improvement. Under such circumstances, evaluation forms covering self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment play a vital role.

### 4.4. Encourage Creative Expression

Reading Circles are not confined to discussions; diverse extended activities can be integrated, including role-playing, short essay writing and mind-map drawing, to stimulate students' creativity and learning motivation. Furthermore, teachers should not restrict the forms of target language used by students during discussions, but focus more on the content of their expressions (Wang Qiang, 2024).

## 5. Problems and Preset Solutions in the Implementation of Reading Circles

### 5.1. Uneven Student Participation

In Reading Circle activities, participation levels often vary among students. While some students actively engage in group tasks, others remain less involved. This phenomenon mainly results from individual differences in personality, learning ability, and personal interest in assigned roles. Teachers should fully consider students' individual differences when grouping learners to ensure that each group achieves balanced complementarity in terms of ability and personality. Before activities, teachers need to emphasize the significance of every role and encourage students to actively attempt different tasks. For students with low participation, teachers should provide targeted attention and encouragement, guide them to join group discussions, and help them overcome learning difficulties.

### 5.2. Off-topic Group Discussions

During group cooperation, discussions may occasionally deviate from the core theme, leading to low efficiency and failure to achieve expected learning objectives. This problem is usually caused by inappropriate material selection, insufficient pre-class preparation and instructional scaffolding, or students' limited language proficiency. The Discussion Leader should take charge of regulating group communication, clarify the discussion theme before the activity, and remind group members timely once digression occurs. When monitoring group work, teachers should offer immediate guidance once off-topic talking is found, helping students refocus on the learning task.

### 5.3. Difficulties in Time Management

Reading Circle teaching contains multiple procedure links, each requiring sufficient classroom time. Poor time management may delay the overall teaching progress and affect teaching effectiveness. Teachers need to design detailed time arrangements for each session and clarify time requirements for students in advance. During classroom activities, teachers should supervise the overall progress, remind students to allocate time reasonably, and conduct continuous teaching reflection after class. Faced with unexpected situations, teachers should adopt flexible on-site adjustment strategies. For example, fixed time limits can be set for individual

reading. In group discussion and class presentation sessions, the discussing and reporting time of each group should be strictly controlled. When time is insufficient, teachers can appropriately adjust activity arrangements or simplify partial procedures to ensure the complete implementation of Reading Circle tasks within the scheduled class time.

## 6. Conclusion

As an innovative English teaching approach, Reading Circles can effectively stimulate students' enthusiasm for English learning and improve their comprehensive English literacy through unique role division, cooperative learning and independent inquiry modes. In middle school English teaching, teachers should fully recognize the advantages and educational value of Reading Circles and apply this teaching model reasonably in accordance with practical teaching situations.

Meanwhile, teachers need to pay close attention to potential problems in the implementation process and adopt effective coping strategies to ensure the smooth development of Reading Circle activities, thereby creating a more positive, interesting and efficient English learning environment for students. With the continuous advancement of educational reform, Reading Circles are expected to play a greater role in middle school English teaching and contribute to cultivating English talents with innovative spirit and practical abilities.

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