A study on the enhancement of college students' autonomous reading ability based on the online English reading circles

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Abstract: As the American educator Harvey Daniels first enhanced the concept of reading circles in his book *Literary Circle* in 1997, many researchers at home and abroad have tried to put this concept into practice. At the same time, with the increasing importance of autonomous reading in English teaching, reading circles has become a great method to improve autonomous reading for practitioners. Moreover, with the rapid development of information technology, online learning has become an important way for college students to learn. As a result, the research occupies a brand new learning mode-- online English reading circles. To further verify whether online English reading circles mode can improve college students' autonomous reading ability, this research takes some students of Grade 21-23 English majors at Nanjing Normal University Zhongbei College as research objects. Through analyzing participants' interviews, monthly journal and questionnaire, it is evident that their autonomous reading abilities have improved significantly. Besides, this paper discusses four major implementation steps of the forum for online English reading circles which includes material assignment, model demonstration, roles allocation and online discussion to analyze the aspects that influencing students' change. This research helps us to discover the validity of metacognition strategies which is a prerequisite for researching on autonomous reading ability, and the possibility for the participants to learn how to use the relevant strategies in regular reading and thus improve their autonomous reading ability. The paper explores the new model and strategy of online English learning for college student form reading circle's perspective, which has a certain innovative significance.

Key words: online; English reading circles; college students; autonomous reading ability

1 Background and significance

The concept of reading circles, also known as the literary circle, was first proposed by American educator Harvey Daniels in his 1994 book *Literary Circle*: *Voice and Choice in the Student-centered Classroom* [1]. In reading circles, participants complete their individual tasks according to different divisions of tasks, followed by group discussions and the sharing of their understandings of the reading materials from various perspectives. This approach aims to enhance comprehension and learning outcomes. Autonomous reading has become increasingly important in English teaching. It refers to a learning approach where the learner has clear learning objectives and demonstrates conscious awareness and responsiveness to the content and process of their studies. Guided by autonomous consciousness, learners are able to fully utilize external reading environments and resources, monitor, evaluate, reflect on, and adjust their reading processes. They

also adopt scientific reading strategies to accurately understand the reading materials [5].

Holec, in his book *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, defines foreign language learners as individuals who are capable of "independently managing their own learning" [3]. He emphasizes that autonomous learning involves setting goals, planning learning paths, choosing strategies and methods independently, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. Reading plays a crucial role as an information input in autonomous learning. Today, reading circles have been widely used in reading teaching in many countries and regions. Researchers at home and abroad conduct reading circles in teaching practice to improve students' autonomous reading ability, but the existing studies mainly focus on secondary school students, and rarely involve college students. Many experts and scholars have conducted in-depth research on improving autonomous reading ability. For example, Tang Yen-Ting stated in her article *Strategies for Cultivating High School Students' English Independent Reading Ability* that in English teaching at high schools, teachers should use correct guidance methods to encourage students to actively grasp English learning and improve their English learning skills, thus achieving the goal of students' autonomous development [6]. Li Li in her article *Innovative Measures for Cultivating Middle School Students' English Autonomous Reading Abil*ity *in the New Era* stated that middle school English teachers must recognize that the key to improving students' English comprehensive literacy is to harness their own initiative and cultivate their sense of active reading [4].

With the rapid development of information technology, online learning has become an important way for college students to learn. On the basis of theoretical analysis and practical research, this paper introduces a learning mode -- online English reading circles, which aims to provide a possible way to improve self-reading ability. In view of this, this paper takes some students of Grade 21-23 English majors (including English, Business English and translation majors) at Nanjing Normal University Zhongbei College as research objects, aiming to verify whether online English reading circles mode can improve college students' autonomous reading ability.

2 Research process

2.1 Research questions

In this study, taking Flavell's metacognitive strategies (1979) as a theoretical support [2], we specifically explored the impact of online English reading circles on college students' autonomous reading ability, both holistically and from three dimensions: planning strategy, monitoring strategy and regulating strategy. This aim is to verify whether college students' autonomous reading ability will be affected by online English reading circles.

2.2 Procedure of the experimental implementation

2.2.1 Overview of the implementation of the online reading circles mode

Based on the existing traditional reading circles mode, the research group selected online meeting applications as the platform for online English reading circles. The following are the major implementation steps:

Step one, material assignment. Members of the reading circles are provided with reading materials which mostly come from popular foreign journals and are selected according to individual levels and needs.

Step two, model demonstration. Core members of the reading circles will conduct a reading demonstration on the online platform to give an introduction to the tasks of each role and the process in detail.

Step 3, roles allocation. At this stage, core members act as the "leader", providing some open-ended questions to guide learners' thinking during the reading. Participants can choose from "word master", "culture collector", "summarizer", "connector", "passage person", and then read and analyze the texts according to the character's tasks. And it won't be like that they can't choose the same character just because someone else chose it.

Step 4, online discussion. Each time after they analyzing the text, participants can present it on the online platform,

freely participate in group discussions in English, and the core numbers will give feedback based on the participants' presentations.
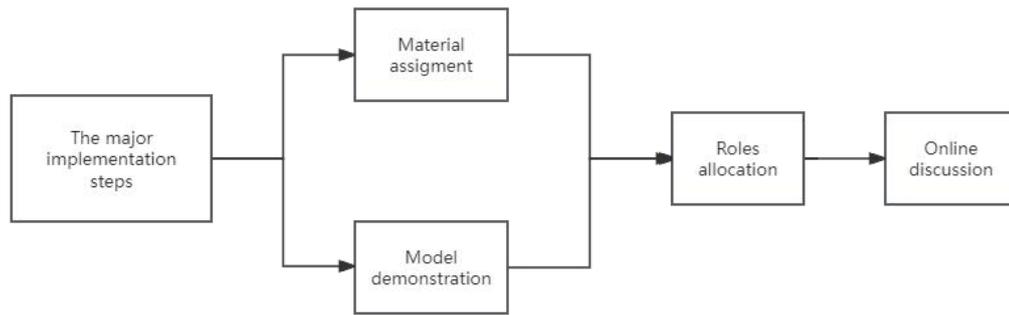

Figure 1. The major implementation steps

2.3 Research methodology

2.3.1 Interview

This study used one-on-one interviews to gain insights into the development of students' learning experiences, methods, and self-directed learning ability. The study conducted one-on-one interviews focusing on motivation, methods, time management, difficulties and challenges of autonomous reading, as well as the sense of achievement and feedback after participating in the online reading circles. After the interviews, the study will address the deficiencies and help develop more targeted learning support to assist participants in better improving their reading ability.

2.3.2 Monthly journal

The monthly journal can be a file to record personal growth. After a month of participating in reading circles, participants summarize their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in monthly journal, which helps to organize their thinking and facilitate better understanding and reflection. The journal, as a means of recording self-learning, enables research participants to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and find the directions for improvement.

2.3.3 Questionnaire

With the international scale of metacognition as a reference and the Likert scale as a basis, the research group made a questionnaire with 5 specific questions on self-planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation abilities. We randomly selected 40 people with the same level of English and other various factors, of whom 20 were members who participated in the online English reading circles. They were divided into two groups and filled out the questionnaires separately.

2.4 Data and analysis

This research was based on a semester-long English online reading circle to verify its effect on college students' autonomous reading ability.

After the conclusion of the activity, we randomly selected 40 undergraduates to conduct a questionnaire survey. These undergraduates possess the same level of understanding and comprehension, and their study time is also identical. The 40 undergraduates were divided into two groups. Group A, the experimental class (participants) (N=20), and Group B, the control class (non-participants) (N=20). These two groups were compared in three aspects (self-planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation) and analyzed using statistical software "SPSS" and an Independent Sample t-test.

According to Table 1, the experimental class has an average score of 63.81(SD=3.40) while the control class has an average score of 44.25(SD=2.97). The result of Independent Sample t-test shows that there is a significant difference in self-directed reading ability between the two groups ($P<0.05$). This also indicates that participating in the online reading circles improves undergraduates' autonomous reading ability.

Table 1. Meta-cognitive

VAR00001	N	Mean	Sid. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Std.Error Difference
VAR00002 A	20	63.8095	3.40028	0.74200	0.99934
B	20	44.2500	2.97135	0.66442	0.99600

Table 2 is the measurement result of the self-plan dimension of experimental group and control group. Table 3 is the measurement result of the self-monitor dimension of experimental group and control group. Table 4 is the measurement result of the self-plan dimension of experimental group and control group.

According to Table 2, it is clear that the self-plan level in experimental class (M=21.62, SD=1.22) is conspicuously higher than control class (M=12.95, SD=1,00). The significant difference of the results is further demonstrated with t=24.53 and p=0.000. So we can analyse that participating in online reading circle has a positive impact on self-plan. This activity helps to improve undergraduates' self-plan ability.

Table 2. Self-plan

	Experimental class （n=20）		Control class （n=20）		Mean Variance	t	p
Classroom	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation			
Engagement	21.619	1.224403	12.950	0.99868	8.66905	24.529	0.000

According to Table 3, in self-monitor, undergraduates in experimental group scores 20.62 (SD=1.28), but undergraduates in control class score 16.85 (SD=1.09). It shows that the self-monitor ability of the undergraduates in experimental group is significantly improved. Independent Sample t-test (t=10, p=0.000) also proves the result. It can be concluded that participating in online English reading circle activities has a good performance in improving undergraduates' self-control and self-monitor ability.

Table 3. Self-monitor

	Experimental class （n=20）		Control class （n=20）		Mean variance	t	p
Classroom	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation			
Engagement	20.6190	1.28360	16.8500	1.08942	3.76905	10.112	0.000

According to Table 4, we can observe that undergraduates in experimental group scores 21.62 points (SD=1.43), higher than those in control group, whose score is 14.45 points (SD=1.99). In Independent Sample t-test, t=13 and p=0.000, which shows the noteworthy difference between experimental group and control group in self-evaluate. Therefore, online reading circle activities can significantly improve the self-evaluate ability of students in experimental group.

Table 4. Self-evaluate

Classroom	Experimental class （n=20）		Control class （n=20）		Mean Variance	t	p
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation			
Engagement	21.6190	1.43095	14.4500	1.98614	7.16905	13.310	0.000

As a result, Independent Sample t-test's analysis shows that, after participating in online reading circle activities, the experimental group has significant improvement in metacognitive strategy level and autonomous reading ability. Specifically, the undergraduates not only enhanced their awareness of plan, but also developed a good habit of self-monitor and self-evaluate. They are able to organize their study more rationally, monitor the learning process effectively, detect and solve difficulties timely, and learn to evaluate their learning outcomes objectively. This comprehensive improvement from awareness to competence has enabled them to gradually become more independent, autonomous and efficient. It can be said without exaggeration that online English reading circle activities play a positive role, hence they will promote undergraduates' metacognitive strategy level and autonomous learning ability.

2.5 Analysis and discussion

The reasons for the above experimental results in this study mainly lie in the following: firstly, the metacognitive strategies in this experiment provide a precondition for the effective conduct of the experiment. Secondly, the metacognitive strategy training and the reading materials are well integrated, which provides the possibility for the participants to learn how to use the relevant strategies in regular reading and thus improves their autonomous reading ability. Moreover, the online English reading circles have the following four characteristics that traditional reading circles lack:

(1) Autonomy of reading

Compared with the traditional offline English reading circles, the dominant person in online English reading circles shifts from the teacher to the participant, and the practicability is broader, thereby promoting the autonomy of college students' English reading. The intensive learning atmosphere of online reading circles increases participation and initiative in learning. Participants are encouraged to write monthly journals to visualize their learning progress, which also facilitates their reflection and adjustment. In the monthly journal of a freshman majoring in translation, she mentioned that in the first month of her study, she realized that her study was not well planned. After that, she consciously adjusted her study methods, thus finding a suitable way of reading planning for herself. This is a strong evidence that after participating in the online reading circles, the student's abilities in self-planning, self-monitoring and self-assessment improved significantly, greatly enhancing her autonomous reading ability.

(2) Flexibility in reading

When specifying learning objectives, it is important to ensure that they are specific, measurable, and align with the needs and background of the learners. At the same time, the goals should be flexible and can be adjusted and modified based on feedback and circumstances during the reading process. One participant wrote in her monthly journal, "To have a deeper and more diverse understanding of the text, to be able to appreciate the charm of the language, the logic of the text. To a word ... be able to know its different lexical meanings in different contexts ... and how each prefix and suffix change the lexical nature and meaning of the word... understanding a culture improves my intercultural communication skills."

This is a good example of how online reading circles give each character the maximum flexibility to demonstrate what their character are.

(3) Targeting of reading resources

The online reading circles provide group members with support and resources, such as exam materials, etc. In regular interviews, a sophomore said, "I hope there will be more interesting and practical reading materials, and it will be better if there are more texts matching the themes of CET-4 and 6 to enhance my daily intensive reading." In response to students' various needs, this study collects texts with different themes to stimulate their reading interests.

(4) Continuity of improvement and enhancement

Regular assessment and reflection on the online English reading circle activities were conducted to collect participants' feedback and suggestions. During the interview, a student responded that he was preparing for the CET-6 and found that his listening skills were weak. In response to this, the research team followed the students' suggestions and chose more articles with audio to better enhance the participants' learning experience and learning effectiveness.

3 Conclusion

Based on the confirmation and reinforcement of previous experimental conclusions, this study presents a new approach for learners to acquire knowledge: by fully utilizing the advantages of the Internet and new media, learners can overcome the constraints of time and space and break free from traditional learning methods. Specifically, online reading circle activities are effective in evaluating and enhancing learners' metacognition and autonomous reading ability. Furthermore, the innovative practice of online reading circles not only deviates from traditional teacher-led classroom models but also embodies modern applied English learning concepts. It endows students with greater autonomy in their learning process, enriches the forms of reading evaluation, expands the evaluation subject, and effectively fosters students' core literacy.

The results indicate that integrating online English reading circle activities into daily learning not only enhance learners' reading skills and broaden their knowledge base but also incorporate metacognitive strategy elements to further improve autonomous reading ability. The implementation of this model offers a novel learning experience for foreign language learners while enhancing their efficiency and interest in learning.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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