Study on the Group Discussion-Based English Reading Teaching

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Abstract

As an effective way of cooperative learning, group discussion is frequently used in English language teaching. It gives students a good opportunity to express their own ideas and enhances their language proficiency. This paper tries to probe into the theoretical basis of group discussion and analysis the effective ways to organize group discussion in English reading classes with a view to giving some implications to English language teaching.

Key words: Group discussion; English reading teaching; Teaching strategies

INTRODUCTION

For years, teachers dominate in classroom teaching and the teaching process is merely the passing the knowledge from the teacher to the students. The students are passive recipients who take in whatever is taught by the teacher. As a way of cooperative learning, group discussion is a useful communicative practice in English classroom teaching. In a group discussion, the basic language skills can be trained. In recent years, more and more researchers and teachers try to apply group discussion into English reading teaching and have achieved some positive effect. But to study cooperatively in a group is not merely study together. How to organize an effective English reading class by using group discussion is a question that worthies further discussion. This paper tries to find the theoretically basis of group discussion and offers some helpful guidelines and strategies for English reading teachers.

1. GROUP DISCUSSION AND ITS THEORETICALLY BASIS

1.1 Group Discussion

Group discussion, also called group work, is a way of cooperative learning. It is a method of organizing the class and doing communicative activities in classroom. In group discussion, two to six students are working together for a single task or different parts of a larger task. If there are only two students in a group discussion, it is called pair work. Larger groups cannot provide students with more opportunities to speak (Wang, 2012). Different from the original system of classroom organization, the groups of students will become an individual "social system" in group discussion (Cray, 2003). Group discussion stimulates and propels learners to take responsibility for the learning task and is characterized as an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (Oakeshott, 1962). Besides, group discussion provides an alternative to traditional instructional structures and ensures active communication between students by creating occasions for increased use of the second language (Cohen, 1994; Jourdain, 1998).

1.2 Theoretical Basis

With reference to the theoretical basis of group discussion, some relevant theories are proposed in this paper. These

theories include the theory of cooperative learning, constructivism theory and the theory of Zone of Proximal Development.

1.2.1 Theory of Cooperative Leaning

Cooperative leaning is a way to organize classes. For its creativeness and effectiveness, cooperative learning has a positive effect on the cultivation of an active classroom atmosphere and the improvement of the student's learning effect. Thus it promotes the development of the students' sensibility. It is universally accepted that cooperative learning is an effective teaching theory and strategy and is regarded as the most important and successful teaching revolution in recent decades. In the US, cooperative learning and mastery learning is regarded as the most popular teaching strategy now (Wang, 2012). The following is a definition for cooperative learning.

> Cooperative learning is group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. (Olsen & Kagan, 1992)

Other main advocators, David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, consider cooperative learning as a basic teaching strategy that can be used in any grade and any discipline (David, 2001). In 2004, they further develop the definition of cooperative learning as a team learning that demands active interdependence, individual contribution, and interpersonal skills, face-to-face interaction and course analysis (David, 2004). Cooperative learning is also considered by some Canadian scholars as an effective teaching method that organizes students to learn and interact with each other to make learning more effective (Zheng, 2005). One of the Chinese scholars argues that cooperative learning is a strategy system of teaching that aims to promote the cooperation of students of heterogeneous groups to achieve the learning goal and take the overall score of groups as the basis for prizing (Wang, 2002).

1.2.2 Constructivism

Piaget is regarded as the pioneer of constructivism. According to him, knowledge is acquired through a natural process and a continuous mental construction. Piaget asserts "learning occurs by active construction of meaning, rather than by passive percipience" (1983). After him, many researchers discussed and enlarged the meaning of constructivism. Candy holds that knowledge cannot be taught but be constructed, because knowledge is something "built up by the learner" (Candy, 1991). George Kelly claims that when facing a new learning task, the learner has to assimilate new knowledge through the already acquired knowledge (1996). Constructivism is frequently applied in language teaching and learning. According to the view of the constructivism, knowledge is not passively received from the environment; instead, it is constructed by the learner. Learning is an active process and knowledge is constructed through repetitive and mutual interaction between the acquired knowledge and the new knowledge. Learning is not simply accumulation. The reflection of constructivism in teaching is that the teacher should respect the experience of students and should take the students' existing knowledge and experience as the new growing point to induce students to take in the new knowledge and experience. Besides, teaching is not the conveyance of knowledge, but the processing and transference of knowledge.

1.2.3 Theory of Zone of Proximal Development

The theory of "Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)" was firstly advocated by the Soviet Union psychologist Vygotsky in the beginning of the 20th century. He defined the "Zone of Proximal Development" as (1978):

> The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

According to Vygotsky's theory, ZPD refers to the zone or area of proximal development between the real level of development and the potential level of development (Vygotsky, 1978). This concept has a great influence in education. According to this concept, teaching activities should be designed according to students' ZPD. Both the actual developmental level and the potential development level should be considered. This will be helpful to shorten the gap between those two levels and turn the potential development level into actual level and continuously create new ZPD. ZPD is the gap between a learner's ability of solving problems when he is working independently and his ability when instructed or aided by a teacher or a mate who has stronger ability (Elena & Deborah, 1998). The teaching should aim to shorten this gap.

2. HOW TO ORGANIZE EFFECTIVE GROUP DISCUSSION IN ENGLISH READING CLASSES

2.1 Grouping

When group discussion is adopted in English reading classes, it is not advisable for the teacher to group the students randomly or group them only because they are sitting together. In contrast, a lot of indicators should be considered, for example, their language proficiency, interest, attitudes towards reading, gender and personality etc.. The teacher should know well about the students and make sure each group member has complementary advantages, at the same time, the level of each group should be almost the same and this may ensure a fair competition among them (Gu, 2010).

Concerning the number of the group members, generally two to six students should be included. A class should not have too many students. Too many group

members may reduce the opportunity for a specific group member to express his own idea and some students may stay in a "safe corner" and merely depend on other group members' work. Proper tasks can be assigned to each group member. For example, if a group has 4 members, one of them should be the time keeper, one of them as note taker, one should in charge of expressing and summarizing the ideas of the group members and another one should be responsible for preventing group members from distracting or deviating from the main topic. The role of each group member may switch from one and another so that the each member's corresponding abilities can be trained. To make sure everyone has the chance to practice, a supervisor may be appointed to keep track of the group member who speaks less in the discussion process. Then this member should be appointed to summarize the questions in the discussion and make a presentation to others, which gives him another chance to express in English and help build his self-confidence. The teacher, at the same time, should encourage him by using appraising words (Wang, 2011).

A proper grouping may ensure every student's active participation in the discussion and no one will be neglected. In this way, it may realize the efficient communication between members and thus increase the effectiveness of discussion.

2.2 Seat Arrangement

To better facilitate the communication and discussion between group members, proper arrangement of seats is also important. An organized, stimulating and comfortable classroom seat arrangement may greatly affect students' attitudes of learning. As the organizer, the teacher should arrange a practical physical layout and supply diverse materials and supplies and make sure students have a sense of belonging and ownership (Lin, 2006). The group members should sit face to face around their desk and this is condiment for them to discuss and share the learning material. In most cases, the teacher ask the students who are sitting in front to turn back to discuss with his group mates. This is not advisable for those who turn their backs to the teacher have to turn back when the teacher is guiding the class. In fact, every group member should be in the view of teacher so that the teacher may observe the performance of the students during the whole process of his discussion and take necessary measures to adjust the discussion. It makes the teacher's explanation easier and enables the teacher to have eye contact with the students all the time. To avoid this, the students may sit facing the side of the classroom, with two of them face to face. The seats arrangement should be finished before class begins and this ensures an ordered class (Gu, 2010).

2.3 Appropriate Task Design

Classroom group discussion includes three tasks, namely, planning, supervising, and listening to the report (Brown,

1994). The first step for a successful group work depends on an appropriate task. The success of group work depends on the selection of an interesting and stimulating task whose performance is well within the ability of the group (Brown, 1994). According to the Theory of Zone of Proximal Development, the task should not be too easy or too difficult. A successful task may improve the ability of the students and at the same time made them feel kind of rewarding or have the sense of achievement. Heated discussion classroom learning atmosphere is an essential factor for a successful classroom organization (Wang & Zeng, 1999). A good classroom-teaching atmosphere is helpful for the cultivation of the initiative of learning and motivation of the learning interest. The teacher should first cultivate an democratic, equal, harmonious classroom atmosphere and ensure every student has the confidence and is willing to express his own idea, at the same time, ready to listen to others (Zheng, 2011).

2.4 Selection of Reading Material

The reading materials for the group discussion-based English reading class should be graded according to the level of students. The reading materials or the textbooks should not be too difficult to understand; otherwise the students may lose interest and become de-motivated. The reading material should not be too easy or too difficult. An effective way to measure the effectiveness is: if the reader can enjoy reading the text, or do not take reading as an exercise, then it can be assumed that the reading material conforms to their level. The reading material can be prepared beforehand or ready-made from books, or can be authentic or tailor-made for the students. If pre-prepared materials are adopted, the teacher may use text from magazines, internet on the hot topics which students may be interested in, such as entertainment, the World Cup, campus life, science fictions etc.. This will help foster a positive attitude towards reading. At the beginning, the reading material should not be too hard and this helps the students to build their confidence and courage in the further tasks.

2.5 The Role of the Teacher

In group discussion, the role of the teacher cannot be neglected. Without the teacher's guidance, the most effective activities may be useless. Instead of waiting on the platform or doing his own job, the teacher should be the organizer and coordinator of a group discussion class. Although the students are supposed to be the main participates of the classroom activities, the teacher should be fully prepared, for it is the teacher who indicates and stimulate the whole learning process by his background knowledge (Liu & Dai, 2003).

Group discussion poses higher requirement for the teachers for they should cope with the unpredicted situations in classroom. The teacher should continuously keep an eye on the development of the task and supervise

each group member to make sure everyone is actively involved in the discussion. The focus of the teacher should be put on how to design the whole process, analysis the students, set the goal, select the task, assess and grade the students and make sure the teaching process is progressing according to the expected schedule. During the whole process, the teacher's dominating regulation should be highlighted (Peng, 2005). The teacher should use praising languages and remarks to encourage students. Since the class is organized in English and some students may have difficulty in understanding what the teacher said, the teacher could stop periodically and allow the group members to communicate and make sure everyone can understand what the teacher said.

The teacher should not spend too much time on one group because this will discourage the other groups. Besides, small gifts can be used as prize to motivate the group that has the best performance. Notice that when one of the groups is presenting their view in class, the teacher should intentionally adjust his position and stand in the farthest group. In this way, the address or will unconsciously raise his voice and this enables everyone in the classroom can hear him. Teachers' failure to perform properly the duties may lead to the poor teaching effect.

3. GROUP DISCUSSION-BASED TEACHING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH READING CLASSES

3.1 Identifying Topic Sentence

Topic sentence helps students grasp the theme of the whole paragraph. Having the ability of identifying the topic sentences quickly may help students understand and comprehend the main idea of the paragraph. In group discussion, the teacher can design some meaningful activities to train students to help them develop the relevant ability. The following is an example.

First, the group members are asked to write down headings for each paragraph in a given text. If time is limited, the teacher can give a "secret" note with the number of the paragraph on it to each group and they should write the topic sentence of that designated paragraph. After they finish, the teacher will write down the topic sentence on the blackboard or type it on the screen. Notice that, when each group is reporting the topic sentence, they are not allowed to say the paragraph number. When all the topic sentences are written down, the teacher may ask other groups to match the headings to the paragraphs. The teacher can also organize the extended activity, such as asking students to compare their headings with the pre-prepared list of headings written by teacher. This activity is effective for the students to develop their ability to read for general understanding, that is, their understanding of the topic of a paragraph.

They can also practice identifying topic sentences and summarizing information. If time limit is set, the students' ability of scanning and skimming will also be trained.

3.2 Scanning and Skimming

Skimming refers to the process of reading only main ideas within a passage to get an overall impression of the content of a reading selection. Scanning is a reading technique to be used to find specific information quickly. Scanning and skimming are important reading techniques and reading strategies in the reading classes. The most effective way to practice scanning and skimming is to set a time limit for the students to read. The reading material can be pre-prepared or selected from the textbook. The reading task can be designed to find the titles, heading, topic sentences, etc. of the text of the paragraph. When time is up, the group members should close the text and tell their partner what is about. This is efficient to increase the reading speed and practice the ability of quickly getting the gist of the text. Sometimes, this activity can be simplified. The teacher can write three possible summaries for the paragraph before class. Except for the right summary, the other two may be good distractors, which relates to the text. In this way, students could read carefully to avoid picking the wrong ones. Putting the finger on the line of the text and move at the expected speed is another useful technique. They should try to keep up with the finger to speed the reading.

3.3 Predicting

Researches on psycholinguistics indicate that reading is an active prediction and confirmation process. In the whole reading process, readers continuously restructure meaning and look for the most direct way to capture the meaning. At the same time, they use proper strategies to reduce the uncertainties and select the necessary hints and make use of the essentials and language abilities (Goodman, 1995).

Predicting is an important reading technique to help readers grasp the main idea of the text. In English reading class, the teacher may design some predicting and guessing tasks. For example, before reading, the teacher may show the title of a text and ask each group to predict the main idea of the text. The idea of each group will be written down on the blackboard. Then the teacher may set a time limit and ask students skim and scan the text. A competition can also be organized for each group to vote the most proper idea and little prices may be given to the best group.

CONCLUSION

During the teaching process, the leading role of the teacher and the main role of students should be combined and the students' subjective initiative should be fully made use of. To organize effective group discussion activity, the teacher should change his role to the organizer or coordinator of

classroom and take full consideration of the method of grouping, the seat arrangement, the selection of reading materials etc.. Group discussion makes it possible for the group members to train their listening, speaking, reading and translating skills in English language learning. It also helps build the confidence and sense of participation in classroom.

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