

Using cooperative activities in teaching reading at a secondary school in Thai Nguyen city

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of cooperative learning activities on eighth-grade students' engagement, comprehension, and enjoyment in reading lessons at Trung Vương Lower Secondary School. Through a combination of classroom observations and student questionnaires, the research aims to determine how cooperative learning affects student interaction in a structured educational setting. Findings indicate that cooperative learning significantly increases student engagement and enjoyment. Most students reported enhanced comprehension and retention when participating in cooperative learning, highlighting its effectiveness in improving educational outcomes. The majority also expressed a strong preference for more cooperative activities, suggesting a positive reception to collaborative learning environments.

Key words: cooperative learning activities, cooperative activities, English learning activities, teaching reading.

1. Introduction

Reading is more than a single skill; it is a collection of skills and processes through which readers interact with written words and texts for information and enjoyment. Reading can be used to teach writing, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and other parts of the language. Some of the most important purposes of reading are to get a better understanding of the world and to improve one's knowledge.

Teaching reading is fundamental in educational curricula, as literacy forms the cornerstone of most academic pursuits and lifelong learning (Rayner et al., 2012). Effective reading instruction not only enhances students' ability to decode text but also significantly improves their analytical skills, critical thinking, and overall academic success.

However, engaging students effectively in reading activities, particularly at crucial developmental stages such as in eighth grade, presents distinct challenges. In response to these challenges, the potential of cooperative learning activities becomes particularly relevant. Cooperative learning, where students work in small groups to explore reading materials and help each other understand the content, has been shown to significantly enhance student engagement (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). This approach not only promotes active participation but also fosters a supportive learning environment where students can exchange

ideas and clarify their understanding through peer interaction (Kagan, 1994).

Under the benefits of cooperative learning and the ongoing challenges faced in reading lessons at Trung Vương Lower Secondary School, the teacher am motivated to undertake a study titled "Using cooperative activities in teaching reading for 8th graders in a school in Thai Nguyen".

2. Literature review

2.1. Teaching reading

Teaching reading is fundamentally about enabling learners to interpret and derive meaning from text, facilitating not just a functional ability but also a deeper cognitive and emotional engagement with written materials. This complex educational endeavor extends beyond the mere mechanics of reading to include comprehensive strategies aimed at developing fluency, comprehension, and critical analysis skills.

Initially, teaching reading focuses on foundational skills, crucial for early readers to become proficient. This includes phonemic awareness, where learners are taught to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken words, and phonics, which involves the correspondence between sounds and their spelling (National Reading Panel, 2000). "Teaching reading at this stage is about building the blocks of language and enabling students to decode text effortlessly," as emphasized by researchers who advocate for

systematic phonics instruction as a means to establish strong reading capabilities.

Advanced reading instruction also involves fostering critical thinking and analytical skills. This stage of reading development is about encouraging students to evaluate texts critically, recognize underlying themes, and understand diverse perspectives. Keene and Zimmermann (1997) highlight that “Teaching students to think critically about texts involves them questioning the author’s purpose, the accuracy of information, and the construction of arguments.” This level of engagement prepares students not only for academic success but also for informed participation in civic life.

Overall, teaching reading is a dynamic educational practice that evolves with advancements in pedagogical strategies and technological innovations. The goal is to develop not only proficient readers but also motivated and thoughtful individuals who appreciate and critically engage with texts across various mediums.

2.2. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is a typical teaching strategy used in the teaching and learning process. According to Richards and Rogers (2001), Cooperative Learning is a teaching strategy that maximizes the use of cooperative activities in the classroom involving couples and small groups of students. Furthermore, Olsen and Kagan defined Cooperative Learning in Richards and Rogers (2001) as “a group of systematic learning activities that rely on the exchange of information between students in groups where each student is given responsibility for his own learning and motivated to improve other people’s learning.”

Johnson argues that children with low achievement may fall behind kids with greater achievement in classroom learning if teachers emphasize on competition rather than collaboration, and favored pupils. In this setting, cooperative learning has the potential to increase the achievement of all students in learning activities. It also assists teachers in developing strong relationships with students and provides kids with the necessary experience for healthy social, psychological, and cognitive growth. However, it is beneficial to replace most classrooms and schools’ competitive structures with team-based high-performance structures.

In a nutshell, cooperative learning is an approach that increases student involvement, participation, and group activities. Cooperative learning can also help pupils form strong relationships.

2.3. Benefits of cooperative activities in teaching reading

The integration of cooperative activities into reading instruction offers a multitude of benefits that extend beyond traditional, individual learning approaches. Cooperative learning, characterized by students working together in small groups to achieve common learning objectives, has been shown to significantly enhance the reading experience and skill acquisition.

One of the primary advantages of cooperative learning is the increased engagement and motivation it fosters among students. When students work in groups, they are more likely to be actively involved in the task at hand. Johnson and Johnson (2009) assert that “the social nature of cooperative learning activities increases students’ motivation and enjoyment in learning tasks.” This heightened engagement is crucial in reading instruction, where motivation can significantly influence comprehension and retention.

Cooperative learning also aids in improving comprehension skills. According to Slavin (2010), students who engage in cooperative learning activities often demonstrate better understanding and higher achievement levels in reading. This is because these activities encourage students to discuss content, ask questions, and explain concepts to each other, which deepens their understanding. As Vygotsky (1978) famously noted, “Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition,” and this is

In summary, cooperative activities in teaching reading provide substantial benefits by enhancing student engagement, improving comprehension, fostering higher-order thinking, and promoting inclusion and equity. These activities transform the reading class from a passive learning environment to an active and dynamic one, where students are more likely to achieve academic success and develop a lifelong passion for reading.

3. Research method

The study used action research method. The objectives of the study are identifying students’ engagement, comprehension, and enjoyment in reading lessons. Therefore, the study involves a cyclical process of problem-solving, data collection, analysis, and reflection, with the ultimate goal of improving the situation or problem being investigated.

The participants of this study are eighth-grade students enrolled in the English language program

during the second term of the academic year 2023-2024. These students have been selected due to their current engagement in a critical phase of language acquisition and their familiarity with cooperative learning activities being implemented in their curriculum.

Observations were conducted weekly over an eight-week period, focusing on specific reading lessons presented in Units 1 and 3 of the “New English Textbook.” These units emphasized the themes of “Leisure Time” and “Teenagers,” respectively. The observation process was structured using a detailed checklist to systematically capture various aspects of student interactions, engagement levels, and overall classroom dynamics. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the integration and impact of cooperative learning activities on student engagement and reading comprehension.

4. Major findings and discussion

The analysis of classroom observations has revealed several major findings regarding the implementation of cooperative learning activities in reading lessons.

Firstly, there is a significant positive correlation between cooperative activities and student engagement. Students show higher levels of participation and motivation when involved in group-based tasks compared to traditional reading methods. This finding is consistent with the work of Johnson and Johnson (2009), who found that the social nature of cooperative learning increases students’ motivation and enjoyment in learning tasks. In our study, the observation data showed students were more active and involved during cooperative reading sessions, corroborating these earlier findings and highlighting the importance of interaction and collaboration in maintaining student engagement.

Secondly, the data indicates that cooperative learning significantly enhances students’ enjoyment and comfort during reading lessons, with the vast majority expressing a preference for cooperative over individual reading activities. This suggests that cooperative learning not only supports academic goals but also contributes to a positive emotional and psychological learning environment.

Thirdly, there is a strong perceived effectiveness of cooperative learning in improving reading skills and retention of reading material. A considerable majority of students believe that their reading abilities have improved and they remember reading content better due to cooperative learning methods. This finding echoes the results of Gillies (2016),

who found that cooperative learning can enhance critical thinking skills and comprehension. In our study, both the observational data and questionnaire responses indicated that students benefited from the peer support and discussion inherent in cooperative learning, which facilitated better understanding and memory of the reading material.

In summary, the major findings of this study support the existing body of research on the benefits of cooperative learning. The increased engagement, enjoyment, and perceived academic improvement observed in this study reinforce the value of integrating cooperative learning strategies into reading instruction. These findings suggest that cooperative learning can be a powerful tool in enhancing both the cognitive and affective aspects of learning, providing a comprehensive approach to student development in reading lessons.

Conclusions

The investigation into the use of cooperative learning in reading lessons at Trung Vuong Lower Secondary School has provided compelling evidence of its benefits. Cooperative learning not only fosters a more engaging and enjoyable educational environment but also enhances the learning outcomes for students in reading comprehension and retention. The positive feedback from students about their experiences and the noticeable improvements in their reading abilities validate the effectiveness of this educational approach.

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