

Collaborative Early EFL Reading among Distributed Learners: A Simulation Pilot Study

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Abstract

In this paper, we designed a wireless peer-assisted leaning system for early EFL reading to enhance online collaborative EFL reading and provide distributed EFL learners with an opportunity to teach and learn with each other. Compare with the control group, the result shows that wireless EFL reading is emerging as a flexible and portable solution to the pedagogical challenges exist in conventional EFL reading teaching instruction.

1. Introduction

Students' reading abilities play an important role in their academic achievement. Numerous researches argue that provide children with an intense intervention program can effectively prevent children from encountering reading difficulties [1, 2]. Both collaborative learning and scaffolding are widely used strategies to increase intensity and benefit English reading instruction and reading achievement of EFL learners.

Collaborative learning (CL) is a learning approach in which students teach and learn with each other [3] and all work together to accomplish a common goal [4]. In this study, CL was implemented as peer-assisted learning, in which one student teaches another. Research evidence gave positive comment about efficiency of peer-assisted learning strategies [5]. However, just heterogeneously placing students in a group and assigning them a common goal does not guarantee that students will involve in effective CL or peer-assisted learning activities.

Furthermore, even students with high reading abilities are able to provide their peers with learning supports, there are some weaknesses (such as postponed supports, invisible helper, and absent feedback) need to be overcome [6]. Actually, because of the pedagogical challenges (such as students' diversity reading abilities, the social-economic gap between town and country, class size, time constraints, and available resources), CL is not as easily implemented in Asia's EFL settings as in that of the Western countries [7]. Obviously, both the EFL teachers and learners need adequate supports to overcome the above challenges and to promote the effect of EFL reading teaching and learning. We designed a mobile dynamic peer-assisted learning (MDPAL) system to implement CL and peer-assisted learning strategies in a wireless environment. In this study, we conducted a pilot study to evaluate the effect of MDPAL in collaborative EFL reading activities.

The description of MDPAL is depicted in Section 2. The evaluation and results of the pilot study are shown in Section 3. Finally, the conclusion is drawn in Section 4.

2. MDPAL

MDPAL consists of two modules: phonological skills training module and peer assessment module. The phonological skills training module focuses on the learning of phonics rules and common sight words. It provides students with real-time learning support and feedback. The peer assessment module asks students to read a written text. Whenever they have problems in oral reading the text, they are able to find online supports by

making an online phone call via Skype software (a peer-to-peer service software).

3. The Evaluation of MDPAL

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 52 third-grade students in 2 classes from an elementary school of Taipei, Taiwan. Each class was randomly assigned into the experiment group and the control group. At the beginning, the participants were heterogeneously grouped in reading groups based on their English achievement in the second grade.

3.2. Procedure

We observed children with collaborative EFL reading for five 4-class activities. Our approach was to watch the videotapes repeatedly, with the focus on the students' behaviors (learning-related and learning-unrelated).

In the experiment group, each student was given a TabletPC with a touch stick and a micro-earphone set. In each 4-class activities, they first did and passed the phonological skills training activities with the support of MDPAL. Next they continued with text reading. Whenever they had problems in oral reading, they could receive help from either their group mates or the online helpers via making an online phone call. Then they read the text to two online helpers. Students who passed the peer-assessment would become an online helpers.

Contrast to the experiment group, the students of the control group first learned the identical materials (sight words and phonetic words) as the experimental class did through direct instruction and whole class tests given by the EFL teacher. Then they were asked to collaboratively read a printed text with their peers. Finally, they were asked to read the text to two peers (peer-assessment).

3.3. Results

The EFL reading behaviors were categorized as learning-related and learning-unrelated behaviors. In addition, the learning-related behaviors include three kinds of reading behaviors: individual, inter-group, and intra-group behaviors. We decoded the frequency of each category of behaviors and computed the percentages of the frequency of each observed behavior categories. The results are shown on Table 1.

Group reading behaviors	Class	
	Experiment (%)	Control (%)
Learning-related		
Individual	24.5	23.0
Inter-group	27.1	8.4
Intra-group	34.8	28.9

Learning-unrelated	13.5	39.7
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Table 1. EFL reading behaviors.

Table 1 shows that students were more concentrated on EFL reading activities (lower learning-unrelated behavior frequency) with the supports of MDPAL. It also shows that MDPAL benefit students' collaborative reading behaviors (both inter- and intra-group), especially the inter-group behaviors.

4. Conclusion

The evaluation of MDPAL helped us understand young EFL learners' collaborative reading behaviors in a wireless environment. The results showed that the use of mobile devices in collaborative EFL reading activities opens a new world of possibilities. With the support of MDPAL, students were able to concentrate on learning activities. In addition, they were able to do more effective individual learning activities with the support of mobile devices even when they were waiting for learning supports. Also, MDPAL effectively promoted the opportunities of social interactions and peer-assisted learning. Students liked learning with online peers. However, the study was only a simulation that all the online learning was implemented in an EFL class. The further understanding about the effect of MDPAL and EFL learners' online collaborative behaviors needs more practical evidence obtained from a real distributed EFL learning community.

5. Reference

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