

An Empirical Study on English Reading Teaching Assisted by English Assessment Tool

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Abstract:

The English assessment tool is occasionally used in English reading teaching. With the help of experiment, questionnaires and interviews, this study is aimed to examine whether English assessment tool can improve students' reading competence. It was shown that this teaching mode was unable to improve students' reading competence, but it was beneficial to change their reading habits as well as behaviours and increase their reading interest. Meanwhile, the assessment report and the introduction to reading techniques in class were good for helping students know and manage reading methods. Therefore, in reading teaching, an English reading platform with reports of reading competence assessment should be chosen on the basis of students' needs and reading foundation. At the same time, teachers should give guidance to students to form good reading habits, strengthening the instructions of reading techniques and the cultivation of reading cognition so as to improve students' reading competence.

Keywords:

English Assessment Tool, English Reading Teaching, Students' Reading Competence

1. Introduction

Under the background of information age, educational technology is gradually integrated with English teaching, currently providing it with many new methods. Especially in reading teaching, teachers will choose or design reading platforms or assessment tools to attract students and make them pay attention to English reading. Therefore, many researchers have fixed their eyes on this heated topic. Li and Rong [1] discussed the feasibility of cultivating students' reading ability through platforms supporting online teaching from a theoretical perspective. They believed that this was a new idea for the reform of college English reading teaching. Some researchers focused on the construction and design of the reading platform and put forward their ideas, hoping to give strong technical support to English reading teaching and

improve its effects by the construction of the platforms (Zheng and Liu [2]; Zhang [3]; Li et al. [4]).

The combination of reading platform and reading teaching has aroused many researchers' interest. Fang [5] integrated developmental evaluation with the reading teaching based on the Blackboard network platform and concluded that an effective way of assessment was the "goal-oriented" and "reflective" web-based developmental evaluation, and the key to facilitating the development of reading ability lied in learners' self-monitoring and reflective learning under the effective guidance of teachers. Zheng [6] designed reading teaching on the basis of Moodle and applied it to practical teaching. Through online observation and questionnaire feedback from domestic and foreign counterparts, relevant teaching enlightenment was obtained. Jia et al. [7] designed a flipped classroom model for medical English reading by means of wechat public platform and micro-community and put it into practice. They found that the application of wechat platform could train students' self-learning, writing, scientific research exploration and critical thinking abilities, but this model was restricted to students and teachers.

To sum up, previous researches focused more on the construction of reading platform. Although some researchers explored the practice of the integration of reading platform and reading teaching, the subjects chosen were mostly undergraduates, and the research results might not be applicable to higher vocational colleges. Moreover, as time goes by, the traditional English reading teaching and assessment system have been unable to meet the needs of English education in the information age [8], and English assessment tools have also gradually been adopted in reading teaching. Whether it can play an assisting role in English reading teaching has become a question to be answered by teachers in higher vocational colleges. That's why an empirical research is imminent. Thus, this study hoped to examine whether English assessment tool could improve the English reading competence of vocational college students with the help of experiments, surveys, etc., so as to optimize the current English reading teaching mode. Meanwhile, the data obtained could also provide references for front-line English teachers.

2. Experimental Design

2.1. Experimental Purpose

The purpose of this experiment was to explore the influence of English reading teaching mode assisted by English assessment tool on students' English reading competence, which meant using empirical data to prove whether English reading teaching assisted by English assessment tool was beneficial to improve the reading competence of English majors in higher vocational colleges.

2.2. Methods

A single-group experiment was conducted in this study. Teachers intervened in reading teaching over a period of time, and used pre-test and post-test to examine whether the intervention had impacts on students from English majors. During the study, every two weeks teachers would give feedbacks in class about data in the platform, such as length of reading time, average reading speed, favorite books, etc. In the meantime, relevant reading skills would be taught as well. During this period, the teaching materials used were articles in the textbook. With the methods above, it was

hoped that students could make progress in reading quantity and reading skills, and improve their reading ability.

2.3. Subjects

The subjects were 74 freshmen majoring in Business English from two classes in a higher vocational college. Due to various admissions, there was a big difference in English level among students themselves, and most of them were weak at English reading. As a result, to improve their English reading competence was an urgent task in first-year English reading teaching in order that solid foundation could be laid for future study.

2.4. Time

The experiment lasted 3 months from the beginning of March to the end of May.

2.5. Materials

(1) Articles in the textbook were selected as the learning resources in class. 13 articles in Cultural Reading (Part 2) were chosen as the content taught in class, covering different aspects of Western culture, such as ideology, education, customs, food, architecture, entertainment, and so on, which was aimed to broaden students' cultural horizon and boost their accumulation of cross-cultural communication knowledge.

(2) The books in the reading platform, Unistudy, were used as extracurricular reading materials. Unistudy provided 10 free English books as reading materials for students, mainly involving novels, psychology, Chinese ideology and culture, travel notes, proses, philosophy, etc. Reading on the platform, students could look up new words and post book reviews in English, exchanging their ideas with others.

3. Experimental Procedure

There were three main steps in the experiment, including before, after and during the experiment. Before the experiment, the reading platform, pre-test items and relevant equipments were well-prepared. During the experiment, students were urged to use Unistudy for extracurricular reading, and targeted reading skills were taught in class with every-two-week feedbacks on the data collected. After the experiment, the post-test was conducted to know the changes in students' reading competence, and questionnaires as well as interviews were designed to investigate students' attitudes towards the application of reading platform in reading teaching.

3.1. Before the experiment

(1) 10 reading books were selected in the reading platform.

(2) Pre-test

In order to know students' English reading level before using the platform, they were organized to complete the pre-test. After the pre-test, the platform generated a detailed diagnostic report, which helped students check their current reading level, strengths and weaknesses in reading skills as well as suggestions for improvement.

3.2. During the experiment

(1) Students were required to select at least 4 books from the platform to read before the deadline. While reading, students could write book reviews and reading notes.

(2) Every two weeks in class, teachers would give feedbacks on the data from the reading platform, including the overall situation of the class and individual situation, which were related to length of reading time, average reading speed, favorite books etc. Students could make comparisons through the feedbacks so as to adjust their reading.

(3) According to the class' diagnostic reading report gained in the pre-test, teachers would teach and strengthen reading skills students were weak at on the basis of articles in the textbook in order to give students guidance in reading skills.

3.3. After the Experiment

(1) Post-test

In order to know the changes students had in English reading ability after using the reading platform, they were asked to finish the post-test given in the reading platform. The difficulty of the two tests was similar, and the item types were the same, but the number of items in the post-test was fewer compared with the pre-test. At the end of the post-test, the platform also generated a diagnostic report that students could use to make comparisons.

(2) Questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed to the subjects to investigate their views on the reading teaching mode after the introduction to the reading platform, their attitudes towards it and whether their reading habits as well as behaviors have changed.

(3) Interviews

In this study, 10 students were randomly selected from 74 students to take part in in-depth interviews in order to know their attitudes towards the teaching mode and changes in reading habits after using the platform.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

4.1. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test

The pre-test was completed before the experiment, and the post-test was carried out after the experiment. The results of the pre-test and post-test were shown in Table 1. In the pre-test, among these 74 students, the highest score was 76 while the lowest score was 12. Its mean score was 43.08, and the standard deviation (SD) was 12.57. In the post-test, the highest score was 82, while the lowest score was 14. Its mean score was 40.73, and the standard deviation was 11.96.

Table 1. Results of Pre-test and Post-test.

	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-test	74	43.08	12.57	12.00	76.00
Post-test	74	40.73	11.96	14.00	82.00

As shown in Figure 1, mean scores and standard deviations showed a slight decrease, while the lowest and highest scores increased slightly. It was shown that the English reading teaching mode assisted by English assessment tool had little influence on the subjects in this experiment, and only a few students had made progress.

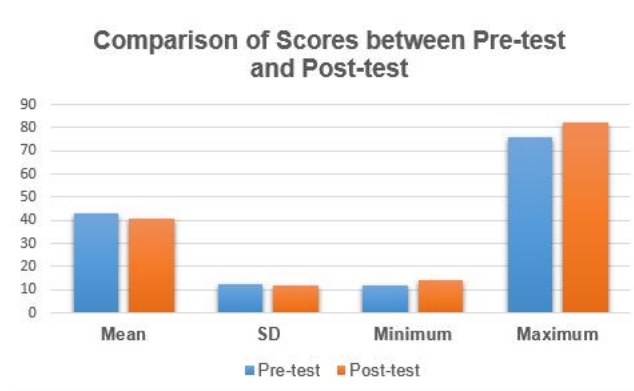


Figure1. Comparison of Scores between Pre-test and Post-test.

As can be seen from Table 2, students' reading scores, mean scores and standard deviations in both tests presented normal distribution. According to the results of K-S test, their reading scores differed significantly at the level of 0.05 in the pre-test and post-test. It was shown that there were significant differences among students in both tests, which indicated that students' reading scores were differentiated. Some students had stronger reading competence, whereas others had weaker reading ability. This might be a key point that teachers should pay attention to in the future reading course.

Table 2. One-sample T-test Results of Pre-test and Post-test

	N	Absolute Value	Positive	Negative	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.(2-tailed)
Pre-test	74	.106	.090	-.106	.911	.378
Post-test	74	.102	.084	-.102	.880	.421

The paired-sample T-test was used to analyze students' scores in both pre-test and post-test. The results were shown in Table 3. There was no significant difference between the two reading scores, $p=0.247>0.05$. Also, there was no correlation between the two scores, and the correlation coefficient was 0.001 ($r=0.001$).

		Coupled Difference						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	SE	Correlation Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval				
						Lower Limit	Upper Limit			
Pair 1	Pre-test – Post-test	2.35135	17.33903	2.01562	.001	-1.66578	6.36848	1.167	73	.247

4.2. Questionnaires Analysis

Questionnaires were given to students after the post-test. A total of 74 questionnaires were distributed and 74 valid sheets were collected. By means of SPSSAAU, Cronbach α and the KMO value of the questionnaires were analyzed, which were 0.955 and 0.873 respectively, so the questionnaires had high reliability and validity. Therefore, here were the results of the analysis:

(1) Changes in students' reading habits. Only 16.22 percent of students regularly read after class before using the platform. 90.54% of them said that after using the platform, they spent more time in reading than before. It took 63.51% of the students about 10 to 30 minutes to read on the platform. As for the frequency of reading on the platform in a week, 44.59% chose "2 to 4 times", and 33.78% chose "not so sure, depending on time and mood". It could be seen that with the aid of English assessment tool, students' reading habits had changed. Most students increased the time and frequency of reading and became more motivated in reading.

(2) Students' reading behaviors. Using the reading platform, students had a variety of reading behaviors. 72.98% would take reading notes, and 85.14% would look up words. What's more, 46.09% of the students would make comments or write book reviews and 35.13% would finish reading exercises relevant to the books. Moreover, 51.35% would give likes to others' comments or book reviews. It was indicated that students were more inclined to have input activities such as looking up words and taking notes when reading, and only some students would prefer output activities like writing book reviews, whereas few students would take the initiative to finish reading exercises.

(3) The acceptance of the reading platform. The majority of students deemed that the platform helped them to "get in touch with different types of articles", "enlarge their vocabulary", "improve their language skills", "broaden their horizons and enrich their knowledge in all aspects". As for the diagnostic reports, plenty of students considered that the reports were helpful for improving their reading, such as "making them know their level of English reading competence" (83.78%), "clarifying the categories of English reading micro-skills" (81.08%), "helping them realize their strengths and weaknesses of micro-skills in English reading" (81.08%), "sorting out the types of articles (79.73%) and items (81.08%) they were good at", and "providing useful suggestions on improving their English reading competence" (85.14%). However, only 68.91% of the students would practice reading based on the advice from the diagnostic report. Thus, students accepted the reading platform and believed that it helped to improve their English reading ability to some extent.

4.3. Interviews Analysis

After the questionnaires were distributed, 10 students were selected to participate in in-depth interviews by chance to investigate their attitudes towards the teaching mode and changes in reading habits after using Unistudy.

(1) Changes in reading habits. 10 students all thought that their reading habits had changed after introducing the platform. In the past, they seldom did extracurricular reading in English, but after using it, they read books more frequently after class and spent more time in reading. In addition, they reported that they had formed the habit of looking up words in the process of reading and would like to continue to read English books after this semester. Accordingly, the reading platform could facilitate changing students' reading habits and improving their initiative in English reading.

(2) Students' acceptance of the reading platform. All students deemed that the reading resources in the platform were abundant, involving different types of articles. The bilingual function in the platform helped them understand English articles better. Meanwhile, the function of looking up words also facilitated them to manage the unfamiliar words in time and enlarged their vocabulary. In addition, it was beneficial to finish the exercises at the end of the reading materials because the exercises could

consolidate the reading skills they had learnt and test their understanding. What's more, students were satisfied with the diagnostic reports generated by the platform. They could know their current English reading level, and the strengths as well as weaknesses of reading micro-skills via the two diagnostic reports, which provided corresponding suggestions for improvement as well. However, only half of them practiced reading according to the suggestions, while the other half would refer to the suggestions when reading but still practiced reading in their own way.

(3) Students' views on teaching mode with the help of the reading platform. Concerning every-two-week feedbacks on the data, half of the students said that they would be influenced by other classmates and spent more time reading after class, hoping to keep up with others. However, half of them said that reading was their own business, and they did not care about others' reading data. They would read at their own pace. As for teaching reading skills in class, all students considered it helpful. Nevertheless, only a few students could apply the skills in the daily reading practice and improve their reading comprehension ability. And some students reported that although they had made use of the skills learnt in class, the scores were not satisfactory possibly due to the short training time. The rest of the students would rather use their own methods than new skills.

(4) Changes in reading achievements between the two tests. Only 2 students achieved much higher scores compared with the pre-test, while most students stated that there was no significant changes in their scores, and 2 students reported that their scores had decreased. As to the reasons for the improvement in reading achievements, two students said that it was because their vocabulary had been enlarged and they were capable of understanding the articles in the post-test after using the platform. Therefore, they could have a better understanding of the texts and the author's attitude. When asked about the reasons for the unchanged or even declining grades, the students gave some feedbacks, like "it was difficult to understand the articles because of too many new words", "it was too long and I had no patience to read", etc.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Research Results

Through the analysis of the data above, the following research results could be obtained:

(1) English reading teaching assisted by English assessment tool failed to improve students' reading competence. According to the comparison of students' scores, standard deviations, highest scores and lowest scores, it was concluded that there was little changes in students' reading achievements after the experiment, and only some students' scores increased. It could be proved that most students' English reading competence had not been improved, which indicated that the English reading teaching mode assisted by English assessment tool had not effectively improved students' English reading ability.

(2) English assessment tool could help to change students' reading habits and behaviors and enhance their interest in reading. After the usage of the platform, students had increased their length of reading time and frequency, and were able to actively read books after class. What's more, the various types of reading materials in the platform enabled students to widen their reading scopes, enlarging their vocabulary and improving their interest in English reading.

(3) The diagnostic reports and the introduction of skills in class were helpful for students to know and master English reading methods, and meanwhile their awareness of reading skills were cultivated.

5.2. Discussion

The experiment showed that the English reading teaching assisted by English assessment tool failed to achieve the expected effects in improving students' English reading competence. In the light of questionnaires and interviews, the results might be related to the following three aspects: first, the students failed to apply the reading skills taught in class and suggestions from the diagnostic reports to the continuous reading practice. Although students had learnt the reading skills they were weak at from the diagnostic reports and acquired corresponding reading skills in class, most of them only stayed at the cognitive level and were not able to put it into practice in their daily life. They still used the previous reading methods. This might lead to the situation where reading competence could not be improved significantly in the post-test. Xu [9] mentioned that only by mastering correct and effective reading methods and skills as well as discarding bad reading habits, could students improve their reading ability and efficiency. Second, students' lack of vocabulary became obstacles in reading comprehension. Yang [10] believed that the number of vocabulary could have great impacts on readers' understanding and reading speed. Although they were English major students, compared with those in universities, the English level of higher vocational college students was relatively low. Therefore, most students had less vocabulary. Although students had read for a whole semester, the accumulation of their vocabulary had not reached a high level, which resulted in their incompetence of understanding articles and serious loss in scores in the post-test. Third, students did not have strong motivation for reading. It could be known from the interviews that students were impatient to read the articles in the post-test. This was likely to affect their performance. Consequently, the scores in the post-test decreased instead of increasing. Wang [11] emphasized that there was a positive correlation between reading motivation and reading ability, and low reading motivation would cause low reading effects.

The English assessment tool played a positive role in changing the students' reading behavior and habits, though it failed to effectively improve their English reading competence in the experiment. Lots of students had a positive attitude towards it, especially the function of looking up words as well as the bilingual function and its plentiful reading materials, so they were more willing to use the platform for extracurricular English reading. At the same time, the diagnostic reports and reading skills taught in class assisted in cultivating students' awareness of reading skills and improving their reading ability to some extent. And this might become the future direction English reading teaching could work for. Based on the research results put forward by Jiang [12], it was beneficial to improve students' reading ability by introducing reading skills, together with methods, and providing students with opportunities for reading practice. Chen [13] mentioned that teachers should consciously cultivate students' skills to understand texts so that students could learn how to read.

6. Conclusions

This study was mainly aimed to examine English reading teaching assisted by English assessment tool via experiments to verify whether it could have impacts on students' English reading competence. The conclusions were as follows:

(1) English reading teaching assisted by English assessment tool failed to improve students' reading competence. When it comes to choosing reading platform for teaching reading, it is necessary to pay attention to students' needs and English foundation. The appropriate reading materials should be selected carefully with purposes so that students' reading motivation can be gradually cultivated and their vocabulary barriers can be removed. As time goes by, their English reading competence can be improved.

(2) English assessment tool contributed to changing students' bad reading habits and behaviors. Teachers can actively give guidance for students to read after class. It can not only cultivate students' good reading habits, but also arouse their interest in reading, so that they will be more willing to read from their hearts.

(3) In daily teaching, it is better for teachers to choose a platform providing diagnostic reports on reading competence. In addition, reading skills should be taught in class to help students know their own English reading levels and cultivate reading awareness.

Test items adopted in the pre-test and post-test were all from the assessment tool itself, and the item types as well as quantity of items were designed by the platform, so there were limitations of both tests in test selection to some extent. Besides, some students scored much higher after this experiment. Due to the limited time, in-depth tracking and exploration could not be carried out. These might be the topics for further study in order to understand the reasons why they would have the rapid improvement in their English reading competence.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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