

PAPER

A Quasi-Experimental Study on Hybrid Teaching for College English Reading Using the ISmart Platform

Wen Jia¹  , Xu Wenying¹, Zhao Yaling¹, Luo Chunyan²

¹Schools of Foreign Languages, Yibin University, Yibin, China

²International Office, Yibin University, Yibin, China

2017103006@yibinu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

This study explored how hybrid college English reading teaching based on iSmart platform can improve students' English reading proficiency. This study adopts a mixed research method. A quasi-teaching teaching experiment was carried out in an experimental class with 48 students and a control class with 49 students. The quantitative data of students' reading achievements were collected. Five students from the experimental class and three English teachers were interviewed. The research results showed that using hybrid English reading teaching based on iSmart platform can significantly improve students' English reading achievement. After the quasi-teaching experiment, students could reveal some advantages of learning from iSmart platform, such as the convenience of using the resource, the abundance of the available resource, the suitability of the available resource, and the effectiveness of English reading learning. Besides, students can also express their willingness to continue using the platform. Teachers all agreed that conducting hybrid college English reading teaching based on iSmart platform has a powerful effect on students learning process, like increasing students' learning participation, improving learning enthusiasm, rationalize the study load and so on. However, different teachers hold different views towards their willingness to continuing using the platform. Practical implications of the results were discussed.

KEYWORDS

hybrid teaching practice, college English reading, iSmart platform, quasi-teaching experiment

1 INTRODUCTION

College foreign language courses belong to the field of general education. It is a compulsory course that should be set up for every university in China, which also needs to be selected to learn for every non-English major student [1]. College foreign languages course includes College English, College Japanese, College French and College Spanish and other foreign language learning programs [2]. However, the majority of college students choose English as their foreign language to learn, so college English is a course with a wide range of learners [3].

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Despite the large number of students learning English in university, there are fewer advanced English learners, and students' English proficiency needs to be further improved [4] [5]. Chinese college students have no advantage in English language, which makes them lack preponderance in the cross-cultural communication of globalization [6]. The process of globalization puts forward high requirements on students' English proficiency. Coping with the challenges and opportunities brought by globalization, students' English proficiency should be further improved, which brings forward high requests for classroom teaching, which is the main battlefield of cultivating college students' English proficiency systematically.

Therefore, it has become a concern of teachers to further improve students' English proficiency through the efficiency of classroom teaching. For a long time, Chinese scholars and college English teachers have been trying various ways to improve the efficiency of classroom teaching and arm students with high standard of English proficiency to cope with the challenges brought by globalization [7] [8] [9].

The outbreak of the COVID-19 has brought an unprecedented impact on classroom teaching in universities, and many teachers have chosen to teach courses online in order to ensure the normal operation of teaching [10] [11] [12] [13] [14] [15]. Online teaching has become the best way to overcome the difficulties of face-to-face teaching hindered by the epidemic, and effectively ensure the smooth completion of the course teaching progress. With the development and popularization of Internet technology, online teaching technology is relatively mature, and its stability and ease of use provide the guarantee and premise for quickly becoming the mainstream teaching method during the epidemic [16] [17].

During the epidemic, the main way of teaching in Chinese universities is online teaching [18] [19]. Although the way of online teaching poses certain challenges to the teaching preparation of teachers, it is undeniable that the richness of resources brought by online teaching and the diversity of teaching forms provide references for teachers to further improve teaching efficiency [20] [21]. After the epidemic, teaching returned to the normal face-to-face classroom teaching, but the unique practical advantages of online teaching did not disappear with the end of the epidemic. Exploring how to integrate the advantages of online teaching into classroom teaching has become a frontier for scholars and front-line teachers to explore [22] [23] [24]. The combination of online and offline teaching methods has become one of the important ways to rationally use modern teaching technology and optimize classroom teaching [25].

Considering the adaptability of online platforms and teaching content, this study adopts iSmart platform as the online platform of hybrid teaching and tries to carry out the corresponding hybrid teaching practice of college English reading based on this platform.

The iSmart platform is useful English language learning software published by Higher Education Press. It is an exclusive SPOC course platform for foreign languages teaching and an intelligent learning platform for foreign language based on teaching materials. iSmart is made of the first letters of five words. The letter 'I' refers to the word integrated, which means this platform integrates multiple language skills assessment technology, multiple interactive languages practice tool, and a variety of language teaching application in and out of class. The letter 'S' means Shared. iSmart platform supports cross-school SPOC course co-construction and sharing. 'M' refers to Mobile, which means students can use their iSmart platform on the mobile phone. 'A' refers to Adaptive. This platform is based on a data model, which allows students use it independently and also allows students to train their own individual language skills independently. 'R' refers Resources-rich, which means this platform has an open content library of personalized multimedia language teaching resources.

'T' refers to transforming. This platform is committed to promote the development of foreign language teaching towards the direction of digitalization [26]. This study aims to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: Can hybrid teaching based on iSmart platform improve students' English reading proficiency?

RQ2: What are the students' attitudes towards using iSmart platform to conduct hybrid teaching in English reading class?

RQ3: What are the teachers' attitudes towards using iSmart platform to conduct hybrid teaching in English reading class?

The results of this study will further verify the effectiveness of improving students' English reading teaching proficiency by conducting hybrid college English reading teaching based on iSmart platform. The attitudes and usage willingness from both students' and teachers' perspective will also be analyzed to further discuss the feasibility and necessity of college English reading hybrid teaching based on iSmart platform.

This study is of great practical significance to two categories of people. First, for English teachers engaged in college English teaching, this study provides a practical reference for them to try to use the local teaching platform to improve the efficiency of classroom teaching. At the same time, it also provides early practice cases for teachers who want to try to use the iSmart teaching platform. In addition, by using the online teaching platform to practice blended teaching to improve students' learning efficiency, it provides a path reference for college English teachers to improve their teaching efficiency. For college English students, English learning in this study has changed from offline learning to online and offline mixed learning, which improves students' learning efficiency, reduces their learning anxiety, and provides a path reference for improving the learning efficiency of other subjects.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

English reading assessments are arousing the concern of many scholars [27] [28] [29]. Huang uses college English test (CET) reading test as the assessment of students English reading comprehension [30]. Al-Qahtani uses reading section of the TOFEL test to assess students English reading comprehension [31]. Shobeiry uses IELTS as reading assessment [32]. However, Xie et al. points out that the CET-4 pass rate attaches high attention of both universities and students, and Chen et al. also indicates that most college students maintain high motivation for English learning because students need to pass the CET [33] [34]. CET band 4 is a large-scale standardized test sponsored by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, aiming to measure the English ability of college students objectively and accurately [35]. In view of this, CET-4 will be used as the English reading assessment in this study.

In recent years, more and more research has focused on hybrid English teaching [36] [37] [38] [39]. Many scholars have discussed how to combine different online teaching platforms to carry out hybrid teaching practice [40] [41]. Many scholars have discussed how to combine the MOOC platform to conduct college English blended teaching, and many scholars have discussed how to adopt the SPOC platform to conduct college English hybrid teaching [42] [43]. In general, MOOC platforms and SPOC are the two more mainstream platforms. Some scholars also discussed the use of other teaching platforms. Most Chinese scholars and College English teachers choose

the Unipus platform to conduct the hybrid English teaching [44] [45] [46]. Besides, there are many other scholars choose Zoom as the online platform [47] [48]. There are many scholars also choose Google meet as the online platform [49] [50]. Few research focuses on using iSmart platform. However, Pan believes iSmart platform is particularly suitable for College English teaching. This study tries to use iSmart platform as the online platform in College English teaching [51].

Besides, most research focus on the exploration and construction of the hybrid English teaching model [52] [53] and highlights the strategies of conducting the hybrid English teaching [54] [55]. Few research focuses on the practice of hybrid English teaching. This study tries to use iSmart platform as the online platform to conduct a hybrid English teaching practice.

What's more, much research takes all the English language skills as a whole to study [56] [57] [58] [59], relatively little research focus on the specific language skills training by hybrid teaching. This research tries to use the iSmart platform to conduct a hybrid English teaching practice and specifically focus on improving students' English reading proficiency.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Setting and participants

Considering the convenience of the research, this study intends to select a university that the author is familiar with. The university selected in this study is a public and comprehensive university in southwest China. The university offers college foreign language courses for all the college students who are not English majors. College English courses and college Japanese courses are all optional for the students in this university. More than 96% of the non-English major students are enrolled in college English courses. To be more specific, there are more than 6,000 students from more than 50 different majors in 16 colleges participating in college English learning. With decades of teaching experience in college English courses, the university attaches great importance to the reform of college English teaching and encourages the full use of modern teaching technology to innovate teaching methods and improve classroom teaching efficiency. There are more than 70 full-time teachers engaged in college English teaching. More than 50% of the teachers have a master's degree or above. College English courses are taught for 16 weeks per semester, with two 90-minute classes per week.

Two natural classes are randomly selected to carry out a quasi-teaching experiment from the first-year college English teaching class. One class is randomly assigned as the experimental class and the other as the control class. The two randomly selected experimental classes and control classes will be pre-tested to ensure that there is no significant difference before conducting the quasi-teaching experiment. If the randomly selected experimental class and the control class have significant differences, then another experimental class and the control class will be randomly selected again in the natural class until the two classes with no significant differences are selected, and then the formal teaching experiment will be carried out. The experimental class selected in this research has 48 students, and the control class selected in this research has 49 students. Those students are the participants to answer research question 1. A teaching team is built with 5 college English teachers' participation in the quasi-teaching experiment. Then participants are selected to participate in the interview. The purpose and significance of the interview, the use

of the data, and the rights of the participants in the interview process, such as the anonymity of their personal information and their rights of giving up at any time during the research, will be explained in detail to the interviewees. After getting agreement of the interviewees, the interview time will be scheduled, so as to obtain more in-depth answers to the interview questions. A recording pen is prepared during the interview, and the interview content is recorded after obtaining the consent of the interviewee. Five students are selected by purposive sample method to be interviewed to answer research question 2. The basic information of the students who participants in the interview is shown below (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information of the student

No.	Grade	Gender	Age
Student 1	Freshman	Female	18
Student 2	Freshman	Male	19
Student 3	Freshman	Male	17
Student 4	Freshman	Female	18
Student 5	Freshman	Male	18

Three English teachers are invited by purposive sample method to be interviewed to answer research question 3. Those three English teachers are chosen from the teaching team which comprises of five college English teachers to conduct the quasi-teaching experiment and have a basic time requirement of participating in classroom observation. The basic information of the three English teachers is shown below (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Basic information of the teachers interviewed

No.	Qualifications	Teaching Experience	Duration of Classroom Observation
Teacher 1	MA in UK	7 years	180 minutes
Teacher 2	MA in Australia	19 years	270 minutes
Teacher 3	MA in China	17 years	270 minutes

3.2 Data collection

The experimental class and control class are selected to conduct a 16-week quasi-teaching experiment. The CET Band 4 is used as the research instrument to collect quantitative data. For the pre-test, this study mainly adopts the multiple-choice parts of the reading comprehension section of CET Band 4 on September 2020. For the post-test, this study mainly adopts the multiple-choice part of the reading comprehension section of CET Band 4 on December 2020. The multiple-choice part of the reading comprehension section has two passages, each passage has five multiple-choices questions. A total of 10 questions are contained in the instruments. All the quantitative data from both pre- and post-tests are collected from March to July 2024, the 2023–2024 spring semester. The collected data will be used to answer research question 1.

To answer research question 2 and research question 3, two semi-structured interviews will be used. The semi-structured interviews in this study are mainly

self-made according to the research purpose. Before the interview, the detailed interview guides are developed, including the topic, scope, and content of the interviews, to ensure the consistency and comprehensiveness of the interview processes. Two experts are invited to do content validity testing for interview questions. After modifying the interview questions based on the opinions of experts, the final version of the interview questions is formulated and will be used to interview the selected students from the experimental class and English teachers who participant in the quasi-teaching experiment.

One-to-one interviews are conducted with five students and three teachers, and the time for each interviewee is about 15–25 minutes.

3.3 Data analysis

The quantitative data collected in this study is analyzed by SPSS to do the means analysis and independent sample T-test. The qualitative data collected to do the thematic analysis.

Data results from both pre and post quasi-teaching experiment. Before formal research, a pre-test on the randomly selected experimental class and control class is conducted. Students get one point for getting a multiple-choice question right. The pre-test data results of experimental class are shown as Table 3, and the pre-test data results of control class is shown as Table 4.

Table 3. The students' scores of the experimental class (pre-test)

Experimental Class	1 Point	2 Points	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points	6 Points	7 Points	8 Points	9 Points	10 Points
48 Students	1 Student	3 Students	7 Students	12 Students	14 Students	6 Students	1 Students	2 Students	2 Students	0 Student

Table 4. The students' scores of the control class (pre-test)

Control Class	1 Point	2 Points	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points	6 Points	7 Points	8 Points	9 Points	10 Points
49 Students	2 Students	3 Students	6 Students	13 Students	14 Students	5 Students	2 Students	3 Students	0 Students	1 Students

From Tables 3 and 4, we can see in the experimental class, one student gets only one multiple-choice right and gets 1 point, three students get 2 points, seven students get 3 points, 12 students get 4 points, 14 students get 5 points, six students get 6 points, one student get 7 points, two students get 8 points, two students get 9 points, and no students get 10 points. While in the control class, two students get 1 point, three students get 2 points, six students get 3 points, 13 students get 4 points, 14 students get 5 points, five students get 6 points, two students get 7 points, three students get 8 points, no students get 9 points and 1 student get 10 points. The mean value of students' scores in pre-test of both experimental class and control class are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. The mean value of students' scores in pre-test

	Class	N	Mean	S.D.	S.E. Mean
Pre-test	Experimental class	48	4.6458	1.70718	.24641
	Control class	49	4.6122	1.78904	.25558

From Table 5, the mean values of students from both the experimental class and control class are explained vividly. The mean value of the experimental class is 4.6458, while the mean value of control class is 4.6122. An independent samples T-test statistical analysis method is used to analyze the result of students' scores from the experimental class and control class. The details of the T-test results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. The T-test results in pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.044	.834	0.95	95	.925	.03359	.35519	[-.67155	.73873
Equal variances not assumed			0.95	94.936	.925	.03359	.35502	[-.67122	.73839

As is shown in Table 6, the Sig. value is 0.834, and the value of Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.925 > 0.05, which indicates that the experimental class and control class have no significant difference. The two class meet the standard for conducting the quasi-teaching experiment.

During the 16 weeks quasi-teaching experiment, students from the experimental class are guided with a hybrid English reading teaching way based on iSmart platform, while students from the control class are guided in the traditional way. A post-test is conducted after the teaching experiment. The post-test data results of the experimental class and the control class are shown in Tables 7 and 8, respectively.

Table 7. The students' scores of the experimental class (post-test)

Experimental Class	1 Point	2 Points	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points	6 Points	7 Points	8 Points	9 Points	10 Points
48 Students	0 Student	1 Student	5 Students	2 Students	16 Students	10 Students	8 Students	2 Students	2 Students	2 Students

Table 8. The students' scores of the control class (post-test)

Control Class	1 Point	2 Points	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points	6 Points	7 Points	8 Points	9 Points	10 Points
49 Students	3 Students	4 Students	5 Students	12 Students	13 Students	4 Students	3 Students	3 Students	2 Students	0 Student

From Tables 7 and 8 we can see, in the experimental class, no student get 1 point, one student get 2 points, five students get 3 points, two students get 4 points, 16 students get 5 points, 10 students get 6 points, eight students get 7 points, two students get 8 points, two students get 9 points, two students get 10 points. While in control class, three students get 1 point, four students get 2 points, five students get 3 points, 12 students get 4 points, 13 students get 5 points, four students get 6 points, three students get 7 points, three students get 8 points, two students get 9 points, no students get 10 points. The mean value of both experimental class and control class are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. The mean value of students' scores in post-test

	Class	N	Mean	S.D.	S.E. Mean
Post-test	Experimental class	48	5.7292	1.77140	.25568
	Control class	49	4.6122	1.95593	.27942

From Table 9, it can be found that the mean value of experimental class is 5.7292, while the mean value of control class is 4.6122. The mean value of experimental class is 1.1170 higher than the control class. The experimental class and the control class are also tested by independent sample T-test, the results are listed in Table 10.

Table 10. The T-test results in pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.356	.552	2.946	95	.004	1.11692	.37913	□.36425	1.86960
Equal variances not assumed			2.949	94.425	.004	1.11692	.37874	□.36496	1.86888

From Table 10, we can see that the Sig. value is 0.552 and the value of Sig. (2-tailed) is $0.004 < 0.05$, which indicates the two class in the post-test have significant difference.

Students' attitudes towards using the iSmart Platform. The purpose of this interview is to grasp students' attitude towards conducting hybrid English reading teaching based on iSmart platform and their willingness to continue using it. For interview question 1: What are the advantages of hybrid English reading teaching based on the iSmart platform? Students' answers can be summarized in two categories: the usage of resources and the effectiveness of English reading learning. For the usage of resources, students point out that this hybrid English reading teaching based on iSmart platform has three advantages like: the convenience of getting reading resource, the abundance of the available resources, and the suitability of using those resources. For the effectiveness of English reading learning, students figure out that this hybrid teaching enhances students learning interest and motivation so as to improve their English reading learning effectiveness.

For interview question 2: Do you want to continue using the hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform for your future English reading learning? Why and why not? In general, all the five students expected that teachers could continue using the hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform in their later college English reading teaching class. The main reason is that this teaching way can reduce students' learning anxiety and make sure that every student can have a certain level of development based on their own learning experience and background.

Teachers' attitudes towards using the iSmart platform. The first interview question for teachers is how the teachers think about the teaching efficiency of this hybrid English reading teaching based on the iSmart platform. Through sorting out the interview results, it is found that the three teachers all believed that the hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform could help students achieve better learning results, such as improving students' learning participation, enhancing learning

enthusiasm, and rationalizing the study load and so on. The second interview question is whether the teachers willing to do hybrid English reading teaching based on the iSmart platform. The results showed that only one teacher is very willing to carry out the long-term practice of hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform. One teacher expressed concern about continuing the hybrid teaching practice will increase the workload. Another teacher holds a neutral attitude and believes that specific training on the application of modern teaching techniques to teachers could help them conduct hybrid teaching more efficiently and quickly in the future.

4 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study intends to use the iSmart platform to carry out hybrid college English reading teaching, so that to improve students' English reading proficiency. To answer research question 1, we find that the reading achievements of students in the experimental class that adopted the hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform are significantly improved compared with those in the control class that does not adopt the hybrid teaching. It can be seen that hybrid teaching can improve students' English proficiency in the experimental class in a targeted way.

To answer research question 2, it can be concluded from the qualitative data that students strongly agree with the advantages of hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform, and what's more, students can explain specific advantages in detail. At the same time, we can also find that all the students who participated in the interview have a positive attitude toward the usage of hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform and expect to continue to use it in college English learning.

To answer research question 3, we find that all teachers affirm the teaching effectiveness of hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform. Teachers can enumerate the advantages of hybrid teaching. In addition, although a teacher is highly supportive of the continued use of hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform, another teacher points out that without the team collaboration, the workload of conducting hybrid teaching for a teachers might increase. Besides, a teacher points out that strengthening teachers' training on modern teaching technology and well-designed hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform is the key to whether it can be carried out for a long time. Through the discussion of the research results, we can draw the following implications:

1. **Teachers should make reasonable use of modern teaching technology, so that the development results of science and technology can improve the teaching effect.** This study carries out a hybrid teaching practice based on the iSmart platform, and the results show that this new way of teaching can improve students' English reading proficiency. To some extent, the selection and addition of online platforms enrich the connotation and extension of English reading teaching and improve the effect of classroom teaching. When teaching college English reading, teachers can try to make the most of modern teaching technology to empower their teaching, such as AI and big data. Using that well in their teaching can improve the quality and expansion of teaching content. In short, if teachers strive to improve the teaching effect and meet the personalized needs of students, they can fully excavate, carefully analyze, and rationally use the rich platform resources and content resources on the Internet so as to realize the dynamic development of classroom teaching and keep up with the times.

2. Teachers can build a strong teaching team to carry out hybrid teaching design through collaboration. It can be seen from the interview results with teachers that although all the interviewed teachers agree that the hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform can improve the efficiency of English reading teaching, and quantitative data results from the quasi-teaching experiment also shows that the reading performance of students in the experimental class has been significantly improved, some teachers still have doubts, hesitation and uncertainty about whether the hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform should be used in further teaching or not. The key factor for teachers' hesitation is the heavy teaching load. Compared to traditional classroom teaching, hybrid teaching based on the iSmart platform requires teachers not only to consider how to design the classroom English reading teaching procedures, but also consider the design of online teaching part and the integration the online and offline parts of teaching. There is no doubt that the burden of teaching is increased in hybrid teaching. In particular, for some teachers have low acceptance and proficiency in the use of modern teaching technology, so they are very anxious and have low willingness about long-term usage of independent hybrid teaching practice.

However, teachers working corporately as a teaching team and making a hybrid teaching plan together can not only reduce the individual's workload but also improve the quality of hybrid teaching, as teachers working together can brainstorm more ideas and provide a guarantee for the continuous implementation of hybrid teaching. In addition, through the establishment of working as a teaching team, it can also promote the development of teachers' personal professional skills, reduce the sense of job burnout so that teachers can complement each other and promote each other in the atmosphere of team members.

5 CONCLUSION

This study conducts a hybrid English reading teaching practice based on the iSmart platform, and the results reveal that the hybrid teaching can improve student's English reading proficiency. Both students and teachers recognize the effectiveness of hybrid English reading teaching. All students show very strong desire to continuing using the hybrid English reading teaching based on the iSmart platform, but teachers' attitudes towards continuing using the hybrid English reading teaching are different due to different reasons, like the lack of training in modern teaching techniques and the increase in teachers' teaching burden.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the sample used in this study is just from one university and from only one grade. This study only takes freshmen to do the experiment. So, the findings cannot represent all the students from the chosen university and cannot represent all universities in China. What's more, the instrument used to test students is the multiple-choice part of the reading comprehension section of CET-4, students English reading achievement.

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8 AUTHORS

Wen Jia is with the Schools of Foreign Languages, Yibin University, Yibin, China (E-mail: 2017103006@yibinu.edu.cn).

Xu Wenying is with the Schools of Foreign Languages, Yibin University, Yibin, China.

Zhao Yaling is with the Schools of Foreign Languages, Yibin University, Yibin, China.

Luo Chunyan is with the International Office, Yibin University, Yibin, China.