

Collaborative Learning Through Literature Circles in EFL

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Submitted: 2025-08-28 · Accepted: 2025-11-28 · Published: 2025-12-28

DOI: 10.26417/f2gzzv18

Abstract

This paper discusses how the introduction of 'literature circles' have led to the stimulation of social interaction among language learners. These social interactions happen because members of the literary circles are able to read and understand a book of choice, and assign participating student members their responsibility through structured time and assessment. They are primarily guided by students' insights and questions and they apply each other's learning, reading, writing, and speaking skills, making this approach to learning flexible and fluid, while initiating collaborative social interaction at the same time. This collaborative learning and social interactions have been applied in classrooms of 'English as a Foreign Language' learners. This paper looks into the need for literature circles that promote collaborative learning in the EFL classroom, in order to attain higher levels of language and literary skills. The research also shows that literature circles as reader-response centric have come to constitute a part of a balanced literacy program in learning foreign language in general and the English language in particular.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Literature Circles, Social Interactions, Collaborations, Language and Literary Skills.

Introduction

Concept of Literature Circles and Their Historical Evolution

In a 'book club', a group of people meet regularly to discuss specific ideas about the books they read, and express their opinions through discussions. Similarly, 'Literature Circles' involve students, discussing their academic books in the classroom. Such groups allow those with similar interests to come together, and encourage a 'love for reading' among young people. In DaLie's words, Literature Circles *"allow students to practice and develop the skills and strategies of good*

readers" (DaLie, p. 85). This circle allows small groups of students to discuss piece of literature in depth, and the discussion is normally guided by students' response to what they read and understand. Literature circles thus form an independent reading, which is structured as collaborative small groups, and guided by the readerresponse principles (DaLie; Daniels).

Historically speaking, the first recorded 'literature circle' started when the English colonizers were bound for American colonies (Daniels). It is stated that the noted Puritan figure, Anne Hutchinson was responsible for gathering a women's study group every Sunday on-board the ship during their voyage to America. Although most of the discussion was based on religion, it nevertheless set off the trend of literature circle groups. Researchers like Daniels explain that such literary circles have changed overtime, and it does not merely encompass home or parlour anymore, but that it has moved on to encompass even schools and other larger learning institutions. In his own words, "*what used to be quiet, home-grown activity in a few scattered classrooms has become a trend, a boom, almost a fad*" (Daniels, p. 1).

Necessity of Literature Circles in EFL

In today's learning atmosphere, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course books aim to include up-to-date and interesting texts for the target group, which relates to their everyday lives. The fact is that studying English poems, short stories, or plays has no major role in developing the communicative competence of students in the English language; instead, it only helps those who are advanced learners. Many of the English learners have therefore come to think that studying pure literature may not be the best way to develop English language skills, and that there may be other forms of learning through the EFL course books.

It is therefore necessary that different approaches to teaching and learning a language are being adopted, with regard to possessing '*strong centered components*' like cooperative and collaborative learning for the learners. This strong centered student component is evident in the 'literature circles' of the EFL system, where small groups of five to six people come together to learn the English language. In this kind of learning environment, the activities include reading the same piece of literature and trying to accomplish their different learning tasks through preparing questions, reporting challenging vocabulary, making efforts to understand cultural items, and relating the language-words and literature-story to contemporary society. After understanding and discussing among themselves, the group will later come together in a classroom and discuss their learning under the supervision of their English teacher. Having such literature circles helps to improve the potential of the student by increasing their foreign language competence.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to explore the way literature circles stimulate the social interaction among language learners

The objectives of this paper are:

To critically review the way literature circles promote collaborative learning in the EFL classroom.

To understand the importance of literary discourse and literary texts for a comprehensive attainment of higher levels of language skills.

Literature Review

Characteristic Features of Literature Circles: Emphasis on Collaborative Learning in Fostering Foreign Language Classes and Social Interaction

Literature review mainly focuses on the language aspect of literature, wherein literature circles and their studies of a specific book or books help to enhance the quality of learning 'English as Foreign Language' in groups through collaboration and cooperation. Learning foreign language means that people are engaged in learning and studying all new words in terms of collocations, idioms, communications and interactions with others, and phrasal verbs among others. This requires tedious and powerful work and literature circles as the platform for learning a foreign language helps with such a learning process. Since literature circles allow the learning of language within a more realistic atmosphere through discussion and reading for pleasure in groups, the system gives marked improvement.

Literary Circles adapt to the learning process of EFL and offers potential to improve reading for pleasure as well as learning a foreign language as a success. Many researchers show how such literary circles can become collaboratively integrated into foreign language learning. To start with, in understanding the collaborative learning of foreign language among students, Showalter states that literature circles among students allows them to analyze, read, think, speak, and write the language better, and allows students to take a structured approach towards literary problems and learn literary methodology (Showalter). Macaro brings out in his research that 'collaborative learning' through literary circles allows learners to achieve common learning goals by working together. This makes them respect each other's insight into learning the language as well as in making the learners learn at a faster pace (Macaro). Teachers in this case only act as facilitators, while students are the main key towards achieving the goals of competence in learning and speaking the language. When there is collaborative learning through literature circles, there is some sharing of authority and an acceptance of responsibility among the students, that allows them to put in effort both in terms of individual as well as the group's benefits. Consensus opinion through cooperation therefore gets the better of

learning than competitive studies among individuals. Researchers like Panitz stated that cooperative learning through literature circles in foreign language learning makes learning become more directive for the students to learn themselves, and the teacher's centrality is done away with (Panitz).

Literature circles as collaborative learning also makes EFL learning in the classroom become easier, and supports language learning in all levels of learning, from simple to difficult steps (Thaler). Learning EFL through literature circles includes all forms of skills and competencies like reading, thinking, speaking, and writing linguistic domains like grammar, lexis, pragmatics, and sentence construction, which amounts to the learners' 'language development'.

Efficacy of Literature Circles in EFL: An Empirical Investigation

Starting from the estimation on how 'literary circles' come to being, many researchers have been working on this concept, and the popularity of English language usage has made many schools and institutions look towards learning English as a 'Foreign Language', where the first language is not English.

Researchers like Daniels bring out how EFL started in literary circles for the first time. His assessment shows how from traditional books clubs which used to be popular only in public rooms became popular even in schools and the world at large in modern times. His research shows that millions of students are now involved in some kind of small interest group or peer group that wishes to discuss their learning and understanding, making literature circles very successful (Daniels). This work therefore shows transitioning of books clubs to literature circles as a natural transition that has brought immense benefits to EFL learning.

On the specific usage of literature circles (which Mark Furr termed as 'reading circles') in EFL, his research noted the effectiveness of the system as "the material [used in reading and learning] is both comprehensible and interesting to talk about, and it consists of a framework which makes having a real discussion in English an achievable goal for students" (Furr, p. 5). Other language learning researchers, like Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, discuss in their article the benefits and importance of using 'literature circles' while learning English as a foreign language. The fact is such groups not only improve language skills, but also learning skills and boost the confidence of the students. This makes literature circles a powerful strategy in enhancing language, literacy, and boosting confidence of the students, making learning fun and exciting. In their own words, literature circles, "*decreased anxiety about reading and participation, increased motivation on everyone's part, and improved reading accuracy and comprehension*" (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, p. 111).

Day & Ainley in their research on 'literature circles' also highlight that the system is proving to be very valuable for young adolescents learning English. This is because 'literature circles' allow students the opportunity to talk about books through their insights and opinions, making them express themselves through the language

requirement of the group. This makes foreign language learners understand the literary texts in the language they are learning. Christina Sanchez in particular also address how 'literature circles' helps EFL learners in their oral language development. Her analysis of fourth graders shows that 'literature circles' are very effective in making Second English Language Learners more adept in oral communication.

In the end, Kims shows that there are three steps through which literature circles have become effective in EFL learning. These include: pre-reading, discussion, and project evaluation. This comprehensive step-by-step procedure makes language learners achieve true personal encounters with texts learning, interpreting the texts, and appreciating the language they are learning (Kim). His suggestion is that if a language like 'English' is taught in a response-based manner, then EFL learners in literature circles will become more effective in nature (Kim). This reader-response theory provides specific direction to the learners for further growth and improvement.

Conclusions

In brief, the research shows that 'Literature Circles' as reader-response centric constitute a part of the balanced literacy program in learning foreign language in general and English as a Foreign language (EFL) in particular. Through literary circles, the member groups of EFL are able to read and understand a book of choice, and assign participating student members their responsibility through structured time and assessment. The group here is primarily guided by students' insights and questions and they apply each other's learning, reading, writing, and speaking skills, making this approach of learning flexible and fluid, while initiating in collaborative social interaction at the same time.

The fundamental need in researching the greater needs for improving EFL learning skills and development through literature circles can be well estimated in the modern day environment. Researchers therefore need to look into the matter of how literary materials based on present requirements can help simulate and boost students learning of the English language in the collaborative environment of literature circles. The research on this topic will help create better guidance and instructional materials that will helps students develop their foreign language competence. Additionally, studying and researching EFL as abbreviated scope in linguistics literature circles can also be given attention by future researchers.

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