

# **Reading Together: Student Teacher Meet in Literature**

## **Circles**

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### **Abstract**

Teachers are given too much power in a reading classroom. We choose the texts, design the course syllabuses, and put up a written exam after another written exam. However, we cannot stop our students from becoming book haters as soon as they leave our classroom. By implementing literature circles, we teachers might return the power back to our students, giving them freedom to choose, to organize their path, and assess their own reading as well as progress independently. In searching for a student-centered teaching method, this paper draws from Daniels' (1994) idea of literature circles and Henry's (1995) reading-writing workshop approach. It first introduces basic ingredients and discussion roles of literature circles. Added with Henry's (1995) requirement of literary letters, an experimental syllabus for an L2 reading class is presented. The theories behind literature circle syllabus will be discussed next. Finally, challenges that Taiwanese EFL teachers may encounter when managing a literature-circles-based reading class will be provided.

Key words: Literature Circles; L2 reading; student teacher read together

## Introduction

I hope I can teach my reading class again with a new method that produces more book addicts. Daneils' (1994) literature circles, along with Henry's (1995) reading-writing workshop approach, give me new hopes. With the literature circle syllabus, I hope I can bring enthusiasm back to students, turning them into independent and continuous English readers even after college (Elbow, 1998).

## The Basic Ingredients of Literature Circles

Pioneers in literacy theories have used several terms to capture the small group, student-centered literary discussion idea (e.g., literature study groups, Gilles, 1989; literary peer-group discussions, Leal, 1993; book club, Brock, 1997; McMahan, 1997; book club program, McMahan & Raphael, 1997), Daniels' (1994) definition of literature circles is perhaps the most frequently quoted. To him, literature circles refer to small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same book. When reading, the members calculate and decide the reading assignment, bring notes on their reading, and discuss the text according to assigned roles. The circles meet on a regular basis. Each time, the group members participate in the circles by rotating their discussion roles. When finishing a book, the groups share their reading in various ways with the other classmates. They then select a new text, trade, and reassemble with other finishing groups, and move to a new cycle of reading and discussion.

It is a method that incorporates "collaborative learning" and "independent reading," both of which are the most important concepts in education today. In his book, Daniels clearly specifies that literature circles actually consist of 12 key ingredients: 1) students *choose* their own reading materials; 2) *small, temporary groups* are formed, based on the chosen books; 3) groups read *different books* and; 4) groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discuss reading; 5) written/drawn *notes* are used to guide students' reading and discussion; 6) students *self-generate* discussion topics; 7) group meetings are *open, natural, and unthreatened conversations* about books, so personal comments are welcome; 8) Discussion roles are *rotated*; 9) the teacher is a *facilitator*, not a group member or an instructor; 10) evaluation is conducted by *teacher observation* and *student self-evaluation*; 11) a spirit of *playfulness and fun* is maintained in the classroom; 12) upon finishing books, *readers share with others*, and *new groups form* around new reading choices.

Discussion roles are essential in literature circles. Daniel recommends four required roles: 1) a discussion director (carrying the official responsibility to create good discussion questions and start the group discussions), 2) a literary luminary (choosing memorable passages from the designated text that are interesting, powerful, thought-provoking or important to read aloud), 3) a connector (connecting

relationships of people, places, and events in the text with readers' home life, school life, personal concerns, other literary works or other writings by the same author), and 4) an illustrator (bringing a graphic dimension into the text by sketching, drawing cartoons, diagrams, or flow charts) (Daniels, 1994, p. 62). These four roles offer students four different reactions to the text: analytical (discussion director), oral (literary luminary), associative (connector), and symbolic (illustrator). Besides, Daniels suggests five other optional roles which may be added when necessary. They include 1) a researcher (digging up the background information on the book, author, or any topic related to the book or text), 2) a summarizer (giving a brief summary of the reading that could include the gist, key points, or the essence of the text), 3) a character captain (offering the group a brief description or overview to a key character in the reading), 4) a vocabulary enricher (highlighting some key or unknown words that are worth noticing), and 5) a travel tracer (creating a map or diagram of the story settings).

### **Literature Circles in a Taiwanese College Reading Class**

While experimenting the new method, I will add two more components, suggested by Henry (1995) and Atwell (1998): literary letter writing and mini literary lessons, to enhance the functioning of literature circles. Adjustments need to be made to cope with the two in-class written exams, strictly required by most universities in Taiwan and the two-hour weekly meeting time for this two-credit course, titled "Vocabulary and Reading." The new lesson and final grading plan is elaborated in the "Literature Circle Syllabus" below:

Course Description & Objectives: This course aims to help you make English reading a regular part of your life and help you become a fluent and skilled English reader. You are required to choose and purchase six 200~300 page English literary works from any genre that you have read, are eager to, or have been recommended to read before the second week. You will be then asked to participate in "literature circle" discussion group for the entire semester (18 weeks) during which you will read and write a lot with the classmates and me.

#### Course Requirements:

1. Quantity of reading—25%.

*A*-Student reads 5 group novels, and 2 independent novels from approved list.

*B*-Students reads 5 group novels, and 1 independent novel from approved list.

*FAIL*-Students reads 5 group novels only.

2. Quantity & quality of literary letter writing—25%
  - A*-Student writes 16 letters, reflecting an excellent interaction with the texts, to me.
  - FAIL*-Student writes 15 or fewer letter to me.
3. Student self-assessment—30%
  - A*-Student writes 16 pieces of reading log, with excellent interactions with the texts.
  - FAIL*-Student writes 15 or less pieces of reading log.
4. Observed literature circle participation—10%
  - A*-Student is a frequent and active contributor to group discussion (0-3 absences).
  - B*-Student is a periodic contributor to group discussion (4 absences)
  - FAIL*-Student participate nominally (5 absences)
5. Mid-term & final exam—10%
  - A*-Student reflects and reports sincerely on own independent reading, when taking the exams.
  - C*-Student has nothing to report, when taking the exams.

This is actually a radical syllabus that might bring severe criticisms. For instance, classroom teachers, if implementing such literature circle syllabus, will be carrying out nothing but several ten- to twenty-minute mini literary lessons throughout the entire semester. The only scene presented in everyday classroom is “students’ reading and discussing” since it is a class of “student reading.” In addition, my brave add-in course requirement of “literary letters” (Henry, 1995, p. 143) will be controversial as well. In addition to writing weekly reflective journals (as requested in literature circles), students must write a piece of literary letter to the teacher. The first burden comes from the fact that students will have so much to read and write. The second burden will result from the writing of literary letters. The last burden is on the teachers’ side because they will need to grade and respond to these letters (or even journals) every week.

Nevertheless, both first and second language researchers and teachers have confirmed that extensive reading and writing is one of the most effective strategies in shaping our learners’ proficiency as well as literacy (Kellermann, 1981; Bernhardt, 1991; Aebersold & Field, 1997). I hope, by introducing this experimental “Literature Circle Syllabus,” I am actually putting all the current theories into classroom practice. I would like to see how far my kids could go.

### **Theories Underlying the Literature Circle Syllabus**

To support the small, social group action consisting of learners with varying abilities, Vygotsky’s (1978) “zone of proximal development”(p.86) is the most quoted theory. True learning is believed to occur on a social level when content becomes

meaningfully and personally relevant and when a learner interacts with a more experienced mentor who leads the learners through scaffolded information to a level of increased understanding (Leal, 1993; Daniels, 1994; Lehman & Scharer, 1996; Pitman, 1997). While reading is considered a process in small groups, three other key elements guarantee such success: natural talks, personalization of, and internalization of learning. Lehman & Scharer (1996) and Strickland, et al. (1989) argue that talking together brings about critical thinking. Short (1990) notes that reading, writing, and sharing in a peer group allows pupils to personalize their own progress. McMahon & Raphael (1997), moreover, suggest that individuals' mental processes are guided by external, social acts and that internationalization of the social contexts occur as a natural result. Classroom small groups are powerful settings where learners internalize the read texts.

An L2 teacher Nelson (1984), in line with L1 researchers above, affirms my belief that 2<sup>nd</sup> language learners benefit equally from such fear-free, small group discussions. She observes that even in a stratified "advanced" class, students' English skills are still diverse. Learners in teacher-free small groups actually help each other. Samway & Whang (1996), teachers of graders in the state of California, who had experience with multicultural students, give their support to Nelson as they have seen success from literature circles composed of multilingual kids, committing to help one another.

Real choice, according to Daniels (1994), in literature circles is another key that assures its popularity among learners. Short (1990) indicates that real choices are promised because all decision-making moments in the learning community are reinforced by the existence of predictable routines. Students form circles by choosing books, prepare and participate in discussions by rotating roles, decide amount of reading by peer negotiating, and ultimately plan own ways to present their texts. Grambrell (1996) and Burrns (1998), as advocates of motivation, believe that opportunities for choice give students real purpose to invest, commit themselves, thus becoming highly motivated "engaged readers" (Grambrell, 1996, p. 16). Atwell (1998) further asserts that free selection of books has a strong impact on learners' fluency, reading rate, and comprehension. L2 teachers, Samway & Whang (1996), experience similar success with L2 learners as they agree that giving choices is not only giving motivation to students but also lifting the burden of forcing knowledge upon an unwilling student from teachers (Pitman, 1997).

Freirean (1973) self-generated, problem-solving principle sheds lights on literature circles as well. Cohen (1983) claims that students' self-generating of questions aids comprehension and can actually start as early as in third grade. ESL teacher Nelson (1984) echoes with Cohen as she sees the twin objectives of

question-formation technique: students comprehension and student investment. She finds that students reread and invest more closely while writing questions, thus improving their comprehension. Their sense of responsibility forces them to devote to reading even more closely than ever.

Reading-writing integration, believed to be beneficial to L1/L2 learners (Eisterhold, 1990), is embedded in literature circles. Playing the discussion director role, students compose discussion questions based on what they read. Writing reading logs and literary letters, they interpret reading in various ways and share with peers and the teacher. Though Daniel does not credit anyone for his sharing sessions activities, which capture the reading-writing connection (such as advertising the chosen book, writing a new ending, reporting on an interview with a character), owe a lot to Kirby, Liner & Vinz (1988).

Rosenblatt's (1995) reader-response theory gives Daniels a strong support as she argues that a text is just ink on a page and will be useless unless a reader goes through it and gives his/her personal meaning. Hence, literature circles' high value of open-ended, natural discussion of a literary work with no correct answer and role rotation which enables readers to approach a text from various perspectives are simply practicing Rosenblatt's transactional theory model. Probst (1988) shares similar thoughts and notes that more sophisticated interpretation of literature derives from a person's response through literature, not around it. Hancock (2000), supporting Rosenblatt, pinpoints that meaning results from the interaction between the text and the reader and that readers' diverse comprehension adds in new insights. Thus, welcoming and examining a text in literature circles create more meanings as students approach from their social, academic, expert, and peer statuses (McMahon, 1997).

From an L2 perspective, Brock (1997) argues that L2 learners can be very enthusiastic contributors to the meaning-constructing process. Diverse backgrounds and ways of thinking in their "funds of knowledge" (p. 143) bring in the mainstream literature circle discourse new meanings. L2 participants actually enrich the discussion. My experience with Taiwanese students solidifies Brock's observation. Students in my reading class create and bring new meanings to British and American literature with their Taiwanese values and beliefs. I strongly believe that L2 learners should not be cut away from language rich literature because each of them, under the light of reader-response theory, will provide fresh, thought-provoking ideas to old texts (Collie & Slater, 1987; Hess, 1991; Ali, 1994).

## **Preparation of Students**

The first issue is the possible discussion roles. I insist that six roles, including four required and two optional roles (a researcher—activating prior knowledge (Leal,

1993) and a vocabulary enricher—promoting newly encountered words), are important to L2 readers. In a typical 60-student class, regardless of the number of total group members in each group, six roles will be maintained consistently. However, if any member is absent on a certain day, the rest of his/her members must fulfill the responsibility of all the six discussion roles, keeping the completeness of literature circle discussion.

Students are alerted about their compulsory purchase of five books for classroom discussions. Typically a book fair will be held during the second week of the class. Each student brings several books of their interests and introduces the texts to the class. Students make final decisions about the purchase after the book fair and decide on the choice of books as a group decision. I will also recommend some books from my own collection and bring in books I scrounged from publishers. The fair ensures that the class and I will not be shocked by some pornographic, unethical, or violent titles while everyone gets a chance to know in advance what their first choices in the first literature circles. Eventually students can choose to donate or keep all or some of the books they bought.

### **Challenges Await and Tips on Running Successful and Smooth Literature Circles**

Book collection, as pinpointed by many classroom teachers, is the foremost important issue in assuring the success of literature circles (Hill, Johnson, & Schlick Noe, 1995; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999; Monson, 1995). However, it is a challenge for any teacher to collect enough copies of popular books (Daniel, 1994; Henry, 1995). It may seem easy that teachers can always ask the students to purchase their own books. Yet, we teachers will still need a lot of help from local publishers. Very often, if several groups of students happen to choose the same title for a certain week, publishers and book distributors in Taiwan may not stock that many volumes. Normally, compromise needs to be made—I must ask my students to choose another book that has *enough copies* available for all of their group members to read. Frustration sometimes overrides students' joy, causing many disappointments.

In addition, EFL teachers, if intending to try out this literature circle syllabus, must be aware of the problem of “overstressed teachers.” As most teachers everyday need to face fifty to sixty students in a regular Taiwanese classroom, it will be an endless pain if all the journals and literary letters need to be read, commented, and returned regularly. I should warn that the ideal student number for running an effective literature-circles-based class should be no more than thirty. (And try imagining if you are teaching two or even three reading classes at the same time!)

Moreover, frequent visits to the office of your supervisor can be a possible problem that teachers of literature circles need to deal with. We may need to explain to our supervisor why we are not “seen” teaching in the classroom. We may also need to introduce and explain all the theories that support literature circles to our supervisor as well as students’ parents (who will write us several complaint letters). Adjustments on the course requirements (e.g., the pages of journals or literary letters) may be made as long as teachers and students both agree to change.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, the concept of literature circles is not new; it is simply a collection of current theories of learner-centered teaching. The literature circle syllabus is of course not yet thorough. By sharing the idea, I am inviting teachers who have been searching for a method that can create more bookworms to try it out, giving me additional comments and suggestions. Together, we will construct a complete literature circle syllabus, meeting and reading again with our students in literature circles.

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