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Literature Circles as Support for Language Development

There are many instructional approaches for helping English language learners improve both reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. One such approach, the literature circle—which is somewhat like a student book club in the classroom—has drawn a great deal of attention in recent years (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999). Many teachers champion the strategy and use it consistently in their classrooms (Daniels 2002).

According to the Standards for the English Language Arts published by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996, 32), the instructional practices realized by literature circles embody quality educational standards and are used by teachers "who are bringing out the best in their students day by day." To shed light on the many ways that literature circles improve English skills, this article defines the term, provides a brief theoretical foundation for the use of literature circles, describes their benefits, and then presents a four-lesson unit that applies the approach to the teaching of a literary text.

WHAT IS A LITERATURE CIRCLE?

A literature circle is an activity in which members meet to discuss and respond to a book that they are all reading (Daniels 2002). As Cameron et al. (2012) explain, literature circles are led mostly by students, while the teacher remains in the background and performs only basic control functions. Roles are usually assigned to members of the literature circle to allow the group to function productively and to help members remain focused on the chosen book. Examples of five individual roles are Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher (Daniels and Steineke 2004). The Discussion Director's task, for example, could be to develop at least five questions about the text and then share these questions with the group. The Literary Luminary pinpoints important parts of the text for the group in order to stimulate thinking and elicit some interesting facts about the text. The Illustrator's job might be to draw pictures related to the reading and share the drawings with the group; the group members then speculate on the meaning of the pictures and connect them to their own ideas about the text. The Summarizer's role is to recall what happened in the reading and prepare a summary for the group, and the Vocabulary Enricher helps the group find and discuss new or difficult words (Daniels and Steineke 2004). These roles can rotate with each discussion so that every student has the opportunity to perform each role. Overall, the purpose of the literature circle is to support student language improvement, particularly through reading comprehension and vocabulary learning.

BENEFITS OF LITERATURE CIRCLES

Recent evidence demonstrates that literature circles positively impact student learning processes and language development. Much of this impact is directed towards several important areas for language learning, including the following.

Improved comprehension skills

Most important of all the benefits, literature circles help students develop comprehension skills that are essential when reading a text. Literature circles support strategies such as visualizing, connecting, questioning, inferring, and analyzing that are vital to solid comprehension and lively conversation (Daniels and Steineke 2004). Since the assigned roles in literature circles require students to draw the events, create questions, and summarize the text, learners are called upon to use a variety of strengths and skills to prepare for the discussion. As students perform their roles, they draw information from the text, pay attention to details to support their ideas, highlight main ideas, and respond critically to what they have read by making judgments about the characters' intentions and actions, and about how and why things happened in the story.

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Increased student participation in a safe environment

Literature circles help to provide a safe classroom environment where students can build confidence and feel enabled to take risks while interacting in their second language (Burns 1998; Larson 2008). Learners may feel more comfortable working with their peers than being constantly monitored or corrected by the teacher and may be more willing to share their viewpoints without feeling anxious about making mistakes.

Enhanced responsibility and motivation

Another benefit of literature circles is helping students feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. Student choice and social interaction easily integrate into literature circles, which support student motivation and can have a very powerful effect on achievement (Burner 2007). Researchers have also found that when students work in collaborative groups they encourage each other's efforts and that this leads to increased motivation and effort (Daniels 2002; Chi 2008; Williams 2009).

Expanded collaborative discussion

Reading specialists highlight discussion, student response, and collaboration—all aspects of literature circles—as important for providing a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999). When students learn a second language, collaborative discussions with peers often play a vital role in reinforcing comprehension skills (Egbert 2007; Ketch 2005) because the active involvement that takes place entails speaking and listening to many different perspectives, which deepens second language learners' understandings (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999).

Developed oral proficiency

Research has found that the target language is learned more effectively when second language learners have a variety of opportunities to practice real communication (Krashen 1981); working in literature groups provides students with opportunities for social interaction and communication about issues important to them (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2008; Nagy and Townsend 2012). During the meaningful oral discussions that occur in literature circles, learners have more opportunities to practice oral skills, which eventually may help to develop their oral proficiency (Souvenir 1997).

Increased scaffolding opportunities

Scaffolding is the support given to students during the learning process so that they can cope with the learning task (Sawyer 2006). Almasi, McKeown, and Beck (1996),

for example, note that the discussing and exchanging of ideas that occur in literature circles can support a deep understanding of a text. This scaffolding shapes students' attitudes, helping them realize that their reading challenges are solvable, and increases their interest and involvement in the given activity.

Reinforced writing skills

Reading interactions may have positive effects on writing skills in general; they may also support greater participation and involvement as students share and shape their opinions on paper. Teachers can assign engaging and challenging group-writing activities that stimulate students' critical thinking, such as choosing a different ending to a short story, writing a short critique, or addressing writing prompts that reflect knowledge of what they have read (Webb et al. 1998).

OVERVIEW OF FOUR-LESSON UNIT

The brief overview of targets and processes below demonstrates how literature circles might be used in the language classroom in a unit consisting of four lessons.

Instructional goals

Although instructional goals for literature circles may vary depending on the text and context, the goal of the unit is that students, through group activities and discussion, will be able to analyze and comprehend a text. At the end of this sample unit, students should be able to:

- demonstrate the ability to compare and contrast the personalities of the main characters;

- provide understanding of the plot and the setting of the story and the characters' actions;

- apply strategies to preview, comprehend, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and relate literature to their own lives;

- understand literary conflicts;

- define and provide examples of vocabulary from the text and identify a language concept (e.g., similes, metaphors, allusions) used in literature; and

- understand the idea of timelines, create conversations based on narratives, and use transition signals to compare and contrast.

Using the text *Holes* for a literature circle

Holes, by Louis Sachar (1998), a popular young-adolescent text for intermediate-level language students, will be the basis of several tasks in this four-lesson unit. In the book, the author tells the tale of two young main characters who are cursed with bad luck, Stanley Yelnats and Hector Zeroni, who is called Zero. Stanley is wrongly accused of stealing a pair of baseball shoes, and Zero was abandoned by his mother and has experienced a lot of suffering and difficulties in his lifetime. It is these misfortunes that result in the boys being incarcerated in a juvenile correctional facility called Camp Green Lake, which has neither green plants nor a lake. At the harsh desert camp (representative of actual juvenile facilities in the United States but not like any specific ones), all the inmates are given tools to dig holes in the hard ground in order to "build character"; however, the story reveals a different purpose for the digging: the administrators of the camp are looking for a supposed buried treasure. Through a series of flashbacks, the story reveals how the current events that the characters take part in intertwine with events that took place in the past and how these events affect their lives. Eventually, the two boys become great friends, consequently boosting their strength to stand up for their rights to camp administrators and receive justice. The main themes of the story are justice, friendship, bullying, and overcoming hardship.

Pre-task overview and modeling

Before the unit starts, students should already have been exposed to topics related to the main themes in the selected short story or novel. In a preview lesson, the students are asked to share their personal experiences around important themes in the text. This

discussion leads to the introduction of the characters in the chosen reading.

To introduce the students to the concept of the literature circle, the teacher adopts the role of facilitator to help scaffold the understanding of how the text can be split into smaller parts and, through several simple stages of discussion and analysis, can be more easily understood. To this end, students read a short story in class and then receive a handout explaining the roles to be used during the unit. The teacher explains the roles and asks for five volunteers to create a model literature circle in front of the class as they discuss the short story.

Next, in the initial meeting of the actual literature circles, students look over the text and decide how to divide it up among the number of meetings they will have; they also assign roles for the first meeting. Once all questions have been answered and the teacher sees that all the students understand the process, the lessons can begin.

THE FOUR LESSONS

The teacher decides the timing of the literature circle lessons—they can be held daily, every other day, once per week, or whenever the teacher thinks it feasible and effective for the students. Each lesson below is organized in four sections: (1) Learning targets; (2) Preview (introduction); (3) Do (lesson content and tasks); and (4) Review (assessment of outcomes according to the learning targets). Preview activities may not be necessary for students in various contexts, while in others teachers may want to break up lesson sections in different ways. Student roles, if used, will determine how the circles run and which student leads which aspect of the tasks. Parts of the lessons can be deleted or adapted at the teacher's discretion, and some tasks will change based on the texts chosen for the literature circles. Although the following lessons are based on an unspecified short story or novel, several of the specific tasks described in the four lessons use the text *Holes* as an example of the procedure.

LESSON 1

Learning targets: At the end of the lesson, students will be able to identify the setting and the characters of the chosen text (short story or novel), use new vocabulary, and make inferences from the story.

Preview:

1. The purpose of this brainstorming task is for students to construct schema that will help them understand the setting of the text that has been selected for the literature circle unit. The teacher shows pictures of a place like the setting of the text—in the home country, if relevant—to the students so that they become familiar with the setting of the story. Students describe the characteristics of that place and brainstorm vocabulary that is relevant to that setting. They can also discuss what it might be like to live in such a place.

For *Holes*, the picture would be of a desert, and students might brainstorm words such as *flat, hot, sunny,* and *dusty* and a list of animals that might be found there such as *scorpions, rattlesnakes,* and *lizards.*

2. The goal of the second task is to enable the students to understand the concepts of the setting and the characters and to make inferences. To this end, the teacher works with students to understand the use of three worksheets: (a) a character details organizer (like the free one at http://freeology.com/graphicorgs/character-details-organizer) that asks students to chart each character's name, physical description, personality/qualities, and role in the story along with an important quote; (b) a worksheet with room to write in the time, place, description, culture, and other facts about the setting of the story; and (c) an inference chart with titled columns like "What the book says," "What I know about this," and "What I can infer." After students understand

how to use the worksheets, the teacher asks them to tell a short story they know that is familiar to all students, and then, using the worksheets, students describe the setting, list the main events, identify the characters' behaviors and actions, and infer why the setting was or was not good for the main character(s). The students then make inferences about the characters and setting of the familiar story and discuss their answers. For additional practice with the worksheets and relevant concepts, the students can tell another familiar story and discuss their responses to it in their literature circles.

3. The teacher may choose to preview vocabulary from the first section of the chosen text (in this case, *Holes*).

Do:

1. Having read the assigned chapters from the chosen text and prepared for their roles, students meet in their literature circles and work collaboratively on the worksheets to describe the characteristics of the setting and identify the characters. In groups, students then add to and/or comment on a drawing of the setting by the group's Illustrator, based on the descriptions in the novel. Using an inference chart, students look for evidence to infer how the setting may impact the characters. Students also share what they know so far about each character's behavior, traits, and actions, and about the events that have taken place.

For *Holes*, students would work from their understandings of the desert setting that were built in the preview, and the Illustrator would provide a picture of Camp Green Lake for the group. The group describes in what ways the setting would be a good or not so good place to live and why. Students list what they know about Stanley, Zero, and other important characters from this initial reading.

2. Finally, students discuss the main plot points presented so far in the text.

Students reading *Holes*, for example, discuss what the curse is and how the word *curse* is interpreted in their own cultures. They might also discuss "luck" and the way they deal with bad luck from their cultural perspective. Last, each group describes how the curse was placed in *Holes* and predicts whether and how the curse will be broken.

Review:
Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

• Clear illustration of the major features of the setting

• Completeness of character grids

• Logic of inferences

• Correct use of vocabulary

LESSON 2

Learning targets: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify a specific language concept (e.g., idioms, humor, descriptive adjectives, allusions, similes) and create their own examples, list plot points in chronological order, and address a text-based grammar point (e.g., verb tenses, use of prepositions of motion, sentence combination, use of ordering words).

Preview:

1. The teacher introduces the language concept by providing examples from the short story or novel. Students discuss the meaning and structure of the concept and find other examples from the text. Students then create their own examples of the language concept.

For *Holes*, the teacher introduces the concept of *simile* by providing an example from the novel, e.g., "Zero's face looked like a jack-o'-lantern that … ."

The teacher then shows pictures of a jack-o'-lantern, and students try to guess what is meant by the description of Zero's face. In groups, students then find other text examples, and finally come up with similar figurative descriptions from their cultures and share them with peers.

2. The teacher pre-teaches the grammar point by using examples from the text and other models.

For *Holes*, the teacher models how to combine two sentences into one to create a simile and then passes out a worksheet where students combine pairs of sentences into a single descriptive sentence. An example provides scaffolding for the students, such as "John is strong. A lion is strong. John is strong **like** a lion." Students then interact in groups to describe things or people they know by comparing them to things, people, and so on using *as* and *like*. The aim is to give the students exposure to and practice with similes that are similar to those used in the novel.

3. The teacher asks the students to help complete a timeline of events from the story. Students first make their own timeline in groups, creating a sentence for each plot point. They then share their timelines with the class, discussing points of disagreement.

Because *Holes* entwines stories from diverse generations, the teacher introduces the idea of a flashback by drawing a timeline on the board and asking the students to select events that took place in the past and in the present that are interconnected. The teacher then places a pin on the timeline, and as a class the students retell the events back and forth using words and phrases such as *first, then, before, in the past,* and *next*.

Do:
1. In their literature circles, students share examples of the language concepts they found while reading the assigned text. They also talk about how these examples affect or enhance the text.

In their *Holes* literature circles, students share similes they found and discuss how the comparisons the author used make the descriptions more vivid. They create additional similes for the characters by using information from the current chapters.

2. Student groups collaborate to find examples of major events in the text and list them on a timeline worksheet, to eventually be added to the class timeline.

In their *Holes* literature circles, students work together to create and write a one-paragraph "flashback" for one of the characters.

Review:
Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

• Grammatical correctness of the language concept

• Relevant inferences based on clues or evidence

• Inclusion of important events on a timeline

• Correct use of grammar point

LESSON 3

Learning targets: At the end of the lesson, students will be able to define and provide examples for new vocabulary and create a grammatically correct conversation based on a narrative piece from the text.

Preview:
1. The class reviews categories of literary conflict, such as person vs. person and person vs. society. The students then provide examples of these conflicts from real life or popular stories, with the teacher providing necessary vocabulary

support. After that, the teacher demonstrates an example of a conflict, and students come up with suggestions that might solve the problem. For more practice, the students share personal life experiences about conflicts that they have had, and others suggest possible solutions.

2. The teacher then chooses a context from a familiar story where there is a conflict and more than one character. Together with the students, the teacher creates a brief narrative based on that event and writes it on the board. The teacher encourages the students to share their opinions about what the characters might have said based on the narrative and writes the resultant conversation on the board. Students read and discuss the narrative and conversation and ask any questions they have.

Do:

1. In their literature circles, members of each group collaborate to list the conflicts they think of in the part of the text that they have read so far; students use a chart with the types of conflicts at the top (e.g., person vs. person, person vs. society) and put their examples of each type of conflict from the text in the correct column.

2. Students consider the conflicts that have been noted and work to find solutions based on what is possible in the reading. Students define and use new vocabulary from the text as they collaborate.

3. Each group chooses an excerpt from the text that deals with a conflict between two or more characters and creates and models a grammatical conversation based on the conflict. Students are encouraged to use language and grammar concepts to practice what they have previously learned.

Review:

Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Identification of a literary conflict

- Logic of solutions based on the novel

- Grammaticality of conversation

- Correct definition and use of new vocabulary

LESSON 4

Learning targets: At the end of the lesson, students will be able to explain relationships among characters in the reading, use signal words for comparison and contrast, and write a logical comparison/contrast paragraph.

Preview:

1. The teacher asks each group to write down as much information as possible about one character from the story or novel. The teacher then models comparison and contrast by asking guiding questions about the characters. The teacher writes in a Venn diagram (using, for example, the chart maker at www.lucidchart.com/pages/examples/venn_diagram_maker) as students explain whether each point is a similarity or a difference. Students copy the ideas to their own Venn diagram.

   In *Holes*, students will focus on the two main characters, Stanley and Zero, who, though different, will become good friends because of the extraordinary circumstances in which they met. Students can watch a short clip from the video version of *Holes* in which the two characters get to know each other. While or after watching the video, each student notes the following information for each character:

The teacher asks each group to write down as much information as possible about one character from the story or novel.

- Name of the character

- His or her family background

- Why he or she is in the camp

- Characteristics of the character

- Other notable information (dress, behavior, and so on)

Students then complete the Venn diagram that the teacher has modeled and discuss questions such as these:

- In what ways are the two protagonists similar or different?

- Do you think that they will be friends or enemies in jail? Why?

- What information helped you guess what might happen to the two characters?

2. The teacher passes out a worksheet of important signal words and expressions such as *on the other hand, but,* and *whereas*. The teacher shows a comparison/contrast paragraph to the students, and they indicate how the signal words are used. In groups, students underline the signal words in the paragraph. They then use their Venn diagram to write sentences about the similarities and differences of the two characters they have examined. The teacher and peers check for correct usage of the signal words and other grammar points.

Do:
1. In their circles, students discuss their Venn diagrams and add or delete any information.

In their *Holes* literature circles, students discuss how Stanley and Zero met and how the two characters are similar and different (physically and in character). Students also share their perspectives about the circumstances under which

Stanley and Zero have become friends. Students debate the way Zero and Stanley influenced each other and the way their friendship made them stronger and gave them the courage to challenge the hard living conditions in the camp.

2. Using a final copy of a Venn diagram, students list the characters' similarities and differences that they have agreed on. They use the diagram to write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the characters using the comparison/contrast signal words.

Review:
Students can be assessed according to the following criteria:

- Correct use of a Venn diagram

- Appropriate use of signal words

- Paragraph based on events in the text

CONCLUSION

These four lessons provide a simple framework to support learners in comprehending and using the content and language in a specific text. Important for teachers, literature circles are flexible and lend themselves well not only to all types and lengths of texts but also to the addition of other language resources such as video, audio, and graphics. In addition, there is no set number of lessons for any one text, and the framework above is only one suggestion of the many available (conduct an online search for "literature circles" to find examples, more lessons, and additional instructions). Teachers may choose to emphasize other aspects of the text and focus on different grammar points, but the central idea that students are involved both with the text and with each other does not change.

Research shows that using literature circles as an instructional approach in the classroom has the potential to create a positive and interactive environment that sustains the kinds of student motivation and involvement that

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are essential to reading development. Through interactive discussions and collaborative tasks, learners complete conversational and written activities that expose them to diverse responses and perspectives. These experiences not only help improve their basic language and literacy skills, but may also help to develop high-order thinking skills that are vital for helping learners to grow as independent and autonomous readers.

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