Media Circles in the EFL Classroom:
Furthering Student Engagement

Adam Jeffrey Brazenas
Beijing Foreign Studies University
P.R. China

Abstract

This six-week action research study explored the use of a media-based adaptation of a popular student-centered, extensive reading-based activity known as Literature Circles (LCs). Twenty Chinese students decided upon groups and assigned themselves specific roles before viewing episodes of a selected television series for homework. The prepared roles then served as the basis for a subsequent discussion the following week. Students were observed by their teacher and given self-evaluation surveys bi-weekly, and their notes in preparation for the class discussions were collected in the final week to analyze word count and gauge participation rates. Findings were largely positive, with students remarking upon improved learning autonomy, oral communication skills, and increased cultural awareness. Moreover, observations and class artifacts indicated high participation rates and engagement with the activity on the whole. These results point to several pedagogical implications that should be useful for ESL practitioners teaching oral English to students at secondary or post-secondary institutions by fostering an independent spirit of learning and piquing the interest of students with interesting and meaningful content.

Keywords: EFL, China, constructivism, task-based learning, literature circles, action research

Introduction

Acquiring a second language is by no means a straightforward task. A quick glance at the recent history of English language teaching (ELT) approaches would suggest that following a single method has not been agreed upon. In fact, the variety of methods over time suggests that it is a meandering, mercurial path that simply does not offer a universal procedure. Stern (1983) recognized that language teaching was heading in many different directions all at once as far back as the early 80's. Some have begun to refer to the current time we find ourselves in as the *post-method era* (Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1994). That is to say, there is no single ELT method to guide practitioners.

Given the sociolinguistic features of both the L1 and L2 of students, not to mention the cultural expectations about learning brought to the classroom by educators and pupils, it is perhaps safest to approach ELT with the utmost care and empathy (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). By doing so, educators can examine their own context before deciding on an eclectic approach

that makes compromises between their own beliefs and the students' needs. This study was done in an EFL context and will thus be framed accordingly. However, it is my belief that the findings and implications, to be discussed in later chapters, will remain quite relevant for ESL teachers and students in an English-speaking host country and could be adapted to suit the learning outcomes of a variety of courses.

One of the most pressing issues in an EFL oral English course is maximizing student engagement with the target language in meaningful ways both inside and outside the classroom. It is often the case that students are only exposed to the target language once or twice per week. Following a weekly class meeting, students are then tasked with completing a written assignment for homework. Limited L2 exposure and tedious homework is a recipe for uninspired students and stalling progress. Derwing et al. (2008) found that Mandarin speakers in an ESL class struggled to develop oral fluency after two years, despite spending 25 hours per week in the classroom. The researchers also suggested that this was due to a lack of exposure to the target language outside of class. The pessimistic view here is that only the most motivated students will seek out ways of acquiring the language, and that success in EFL classrooms will inevitably be constrained by the aforementioned hindrances. A curious practitioner, however, will take this opportunity to be creative and forge an environment in which their students can explore the target language in meaningful ways (Anderson, 1993).

One of the results of EFL students' lack of L2 exposure is that they are not likely to be comfortable speaking English. That is to say, their willingness to communicate in the L2 will in many cases be diminished. MacIntyre et al. (1998) outlined some general variables regarding L2 speakers and their willingness to communicate. Moreover, Chinese students may have additional, culturally specific needs to be addressed in order to facilitate a willingness to communicate- including the concept of *face* as well as a more submissive style of learning (Wen & Clement, 2003). In other words, it is helpful to provide low-stress activities in which they can interact meaningfully with the language without the fear of public embarrassment. As such, the study involves students interacting in smaller, more intimate groups in which their willingness to communicate is heightened and thus will work together to discover and negotiate meaning.

If we accept that students receive inadequate exposure to the target language, and that the exposure they *do* get lacks significance, then we should not expect a majority of students to be eager to engage in class discussions each week, regardless of cultural reasons or learning preferences. By not engaging in class discussions, students are missing out on a valuable opportunity to develop arguably the most crucial skill of L2 communication. This produces a snowball effect that will inevitably stunt the overall language development of large numbers of students, especially the ability to speak.

Therefore, if EFL students meeting in an oral English course only once per week are not getting adequate L2 exposure, then we must ask ourselves *why*. It may be the case that the students have other English courses, and likely have homework assignments that create

exposure outside of class. However, homework often takes the form of reading or writing, or a combination of both. In some exceptional cases, a listening activity may be assigned with an accompanying written task, usually contained within the course textbook. Unfortunately, surveys of learner and teacher resources have indicated that very few textbooks include sufficient activities for enhancing oral fluency (Rossiter et al., 2010). This suggests that supplemental activities are imperative if improving oral English is a learning outcome.

Typical EFL homework assignments do not require spoken English, though listening exercises may produce some benefits in their spoken ability. Browning (1974) showed that L2 speakers who could evaluate the pronunciation quality of others correlated with improved pronunciation themselves. This relationship between perception and production suggests that listening exercises *can* be useful, if only students take them seriously and engage with the homework in earnest. If that is the case, then given the right homework assignments, the situation for EFL students may not be so bleak.

Unfortunately, listening tasks from the textbook are often dull, stilted examples of dialogue. Although the tasks may relate to a theme or unit from the textbook, they may not strike the student as particularly useful or interesting, and will thus be treated by students as a burdensome task to be mindlessly completed, or even worse, to be copied from another's work prior to class. This nightmare scenario could be avoided by assigning students homework that they are excited to complete. Could a situation where students not only complete their homework assignments with enthusiasm, but also arrive in the classroom feeling eager to discuss the homework be conceivable? Addressing these two issues, exposure and engagement, served as the original justification for this action research study.

Purpose

The focus of this study investigated the effectiveness of a task we will call *Media Circles* (MCs) in which students watch one episode of a television series for homework with the intent to discuss their reactions and interpretations the following class meeting. The overarching goal was to implement two crucial components into the curriculum of an oral English class. Firstly, to create engaging homework assignments that students could be excited to complete. Secondly, to promote lively discussion and active collaboration inside the classroom. *Media Circles* successfully doubled as both a homework assignment as well as an in-class, discussion activity. Thus, MCs were an attempt to tackle both of the aforementioned problems common to EFL in this chapter, though there were even more beneficial elements for L2 acquisition that will be discussed in later chapters.

The use of *Media Circles* was inspired by a popular reading-based activity commonly known as *Literature Circles* (LCs) (Daniels, 1994). LCs consist of a reading activity in which groups of students all read the same literature selection and subsequently discuss their personal interpretations of that reading assignment the following class. The key aspect of LCs derives from individual roles assigned to each student within a group to be completed during the

reading. These roles provide each student with a focused purpose for reading without being overwhelmed by the depth of the content. The subsequent class discussions primarily stem from these assigned reading roles (Daniels, 2002). The roles were as follows (Daniels, op.cit.):

1. Summarizer: responsible for summarizing the main events of the episode;
2. Vocabulary Hunter: tasked with selecting new, significant, or interesting words and phrases to share;
3. Key Scene Selector: chooses 2 or 3 dramatic or meaningful scenes of the episode and justifying the choices;
4. Real-World Connector: identifies references to real people, places, events, music, or products from the episode and contextualizes them;
5. Cultural Collector: searches for cultural comparisons and contrasts contained within the episode and offers reflections.

Although LCs were first devised for L1 students, in recent years LCs have been successfully used in Asian university EFL settings (Chiang, 2007; Mark, 2007). The successes of LCs reported by EFL teachers relevant to this study are attributed to the communicative, learner-led focus of the tasks and the positive influence this focus has on the motivation of language students (Cohen, 2010). Aside from motivating students, LCs combine the application of both Task-Based Learning and Communicative Approach theories to instruction, providing an ideal environment for students to develop L2 fluency (Richards, 2006).

Given the success of LCs in EFL contexts, it was assumed that similar success could be expected in an oral English class by substituting television episodes for reading literature. Since the second half of MCs mirrors the discussion aspect of LCs, it was assumed that communicative abilities would experience a positive impact. However, a unique feature of MCs is that the activity involves a significant amount of listening comprehension as part of the homework assignment and thus, unknown obstacles and benefits were expected to surface. Therefore, the following research questions were put forth and investigated:

1. To what extent can MCs improve student engagement and participation in class discussion?
2. What are students' perspectives towards using MCs in the EFL classroom?
3. How will students perceive MCs affecting their L2 skills?
4. What other aspects of L2 acquisition might students benefit from MCs?

Participants

The participants in the following study consists of 32 students at a major Chinese university. All of the participants speak Mandarin as their first language. The participants are all upperclassmen, non-English majors from an elective oral English course, though the students *do* major in other foreign languages. That is to say, most of them are highly motivated

and quite experienced with language acquisition strategies. The class meets once per week for 100 minutes of direct instruction, not including ten minutes for break. Most of them did not know each other prior to the beginning of the course, though there were a few exceptions in which a minority of the participants shared the same major (e.g. Italian, Russian, German). This unfamiliarity is of significance because Chinese university students take the majority of their courses with the same classmates. Thus, it was assumed that timidity in class discussions would be intensified.

Procedures and Analysis

In order to answer the above-mentioned research questions, three cycles of data collection were implemented over the course of six weeks of MCs (See Table 1). Each two-week cycle included field notes from classroom observations and student self-evaluation surveys. In the final cycle, one quantitative source of data was used to measure the level of participation: the word count of the students' prepared tasks. The minimum, maximum, and average word counts for all five tasks were tracked in this final cycle only. All of the self-evaluation surveys were conducted anonymously to protect the identity of each student and to encourage sincere responses.

Table 1: Research Cycles

Cycle	Data Source
1 (Weeks 1-2)	1. Field notes 2. Self-evaluation survey
2 (Weeks 3-4)	1. Field notes 2. Self-evaluation survey #2
3 (Weeks 5-6)	1. Field notes 2. Self-evaluation survey #3 3. Prepared-role word count

As for the implementation of MCs, some minor changes were made during each cycle. For example, cycle one followed the standard operating procedure of implementation as outlines in the previous chapter. Thus, students negotiated and assigned roles within their groups prior to viewing one episode per week for homework. The following week, each group met separately to share their interpretations of the episode according to their roles and engage in discussion. During the discussion, the teacher moved about the classroom taking note of relevant behaviors as well as comments from students. No model answers or scaffolding activities were provided for students prior to the homework assignment or the group discussions. The justification for this approach was to allow for students to approach the assignment with maximal sovereignty.

For the second cycle, the students remained with the same groups as cycle one, but were instructed to rotate roles in a manner to be decided by their individual groups. The only

stipulation was that the students prepare a different discussion role than they had done previously. The students viewed the episode at home during the week, and came prepared the following week with their prepared tasks. However, the discussion took a different form during this cycle. The students first met with their peers from other groups who performed the same role as they had in order to compare their interpretations before engaging in the discussion with their original group members. For example, all of the students who completed the vocabulary task met and shared their findings and the strategies they employed. This deviation from cycle one was introduced at the request of the students, and was done in order to help students orient their approach to the roles by comparison with their peers. As they had not been given any prior models to follow for their discussion preparations, the teacher felt that this would be a fair compromise between the constructivist approach of allowing full autonomy and a fully-structured approach with model answers, which would remove the element of self-discovery. Following this peer-comparison meeting, students then met with their original groups to engage in the aggregate discussion which is the standard form taken for MCs.

The third cycle began in the same fashion as cycle two. Students were instructed to rotate to a new prepared discussion role, distinct from their previous roles. Once again, the teacher did not play a part in assigning the individual roles. After viewing the episode and preparing their assigned tasks, students returned for the final cycle of this action research study. This cycle dispensed with the peer-comparison groups and had students enter into discussions with their original groups directly. The justification for this was that students had already been exposed to enough of their peers' task interpretations, and that two group discussions would no longer be warranted. However, immediately following the group discussions, the teacher presented a model interpretation for all five group roles in order to provide an insight into the cultural depth of the show, point out subtle references to real-life, and highlight interesting colloquialisms. This was done after the group discussions in order to fill gaps of understanding rather than overshadow the students' own interpretations. The observations and survey results will be discussed in more depth in the sections below.

Data Coding

The self-evaluation surveys in the first and third cycle allowed for participants to answer in their own words. The justification for this was that student perceptions was given top priority. If given a limited set of choices, the results may not have yielded an earnest reflection of those perceptions. Responses to the questions varied in length, but common patterns tended to emerge spontaneously. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity, responses to the Cycle 1 Survey were coded according to the five most common themes, and Cycle 3 Survey responses were coded into six. This method of questioning and coding allowed for some of the responses to be coded twice. For example, the question about the most valuable aspect of the assignment might yield a response such as, "I really valued the class discussion aspect. Also, the assignment was really fun to complete." This response would be coded twice,

once for *discussion*, and another for *fun.* Therefore, though there were 32 participants in the study, the responses to each survey item may total higher than 32.

Cycle One

During the first cycle, students were allowed to choose their own groups as well as assign roles within their respective groups. The roles were explained and brief examples were explained to them, though scaffolding was kept to a minimum in order to allow maximum freedom for interpretation by the students.

Students watched the first episode of the chosen television series, and in week 2 discussions took place. For the group discussions, the teacher played the role of observer and floated around the classroom to take notes on the participation of group members. Initial field notes recorded were as follows:

- *Students expressed uncertainty whether they have adequately prepared for the discussion, though that does not seem to be the case.*
- *Most students have over-prepared in an effort to compensate for their lack of confidence.*
- *A majority of the members are actively listening to the speakers.*
- *Students appear to be enjoying the informal discussions. There are a lot of smiling faces here.*
- *Vocabulary Hunters chose far too many words to share with their groups, causing discussion to get bogged down.*
- *Students commented that they would like to see an acceptable model of each member's task to help them make a better contribution to their groups.*

Thereafter, the students were given a self-evaluation survey to complete to evaluate their initial experience with MCs. The survey consisted of three questions, and students were allowed to provide their own answer, including more than one answer if they desired. Therefore, responses to some questions total higher than 32. Results from the initial observation and survey indicated a positive attitude towards MCs in general. For example, when asked if students felt they had contributed adequately to their group's performance, 87% of students felt that they had done so (Figure 1). As was noted in the class observation, students commented that they would like to have a model to follow in order to be sure that their contribution would be helpful the following week. Steps were taken during the second cycle of data observation, which will be covered later in the chapter.
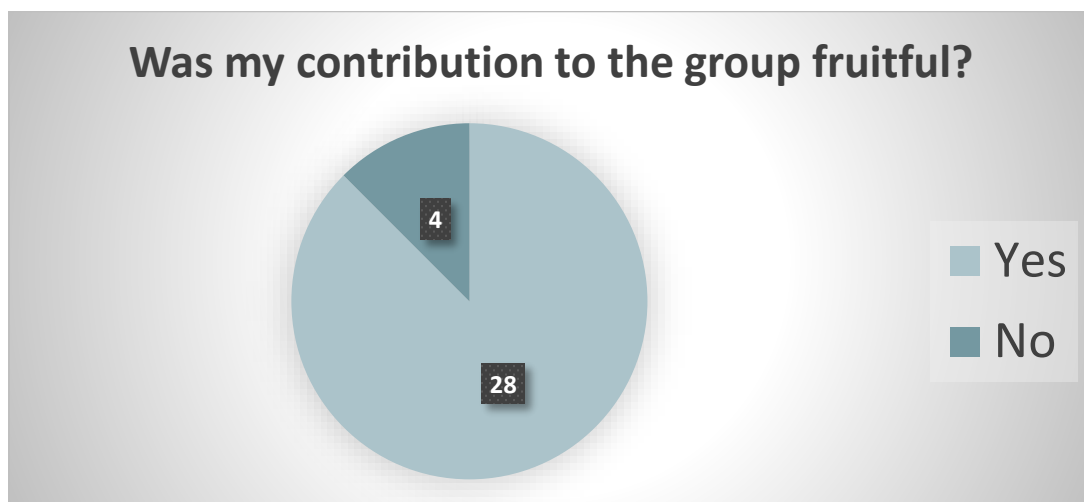
Figure 1: Student Contribution Perceptions

Moreover, when asked about the perceived value of MCs, students remarked especially highly that *cultural awareness* (34%) and *discussion* (31%) were the most valuable components (Figure 2). Using the target language and configuring meaning from context is a distinctive feature of systemic functional linguistics (Martin & Rose, 2008). The development of language skills within a cultural context thus enhances students understanding of the language and provides a definitive framework in which the language can function. Other scholars have noted the importance of contextual sensitivity to as an effective method of improving students' writing skills as well (Yasuda, 2011).

Other common themes in the responses included an increased ability to use vocabulary (25%) as well as critical thinking skills (25%). This may be the result of the lack of scaffolding and structure provided prior to the assignment. As students were not given strict instructions to follow, they had to select important information and justify their choices with sound reasoning. Finally, although fun was observed during the class discussion, only a minority of students remarked on it specifically in the survey.

WHAT WAS THE MOST VALUABLE ASPECT OF THE ASSIGNMENT?

discussion: 10
cultural awareness: 11
fun: 3
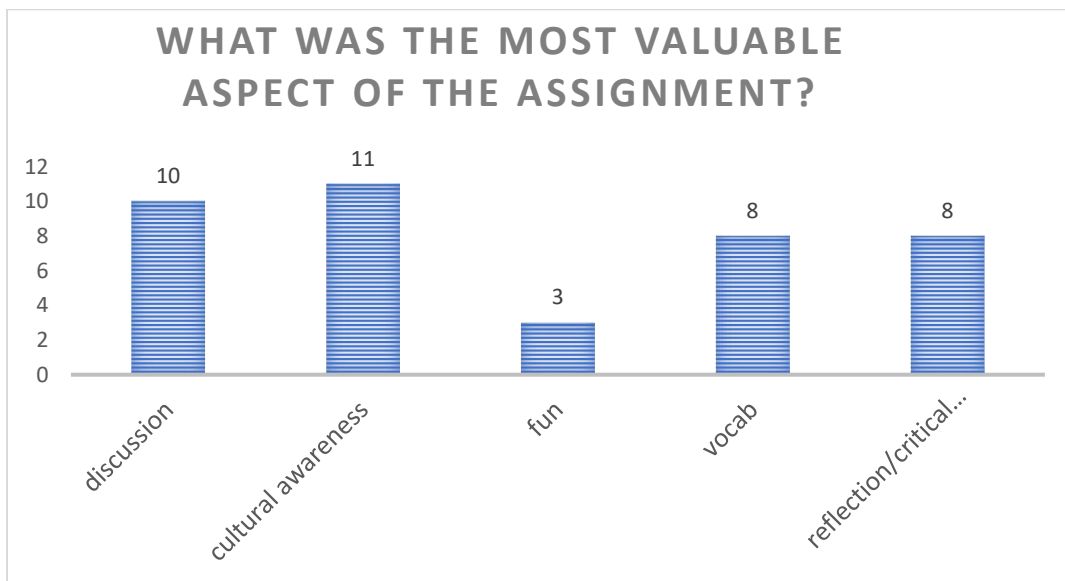vocab: 8
reflection/critical...: 8

Figure 2: Perceived Value of MCs

The third question asked about which specific language skills that the students perceived to have improved as a result of MCs (Figure 3). 47% of students remarked that their communicative ability had improved, 41% mentioned vocabulary had improved, and 31% answered that their study skills had improved. Students also noted that they felt that they had gained a better understanding of slang use or colloquialisms (22%), and one student specifically answered that confidence stood out as having improved. Again, since students were allowed to write in their own answers, and multiple answers were permitted, total answers will not be equal to the total number of students.
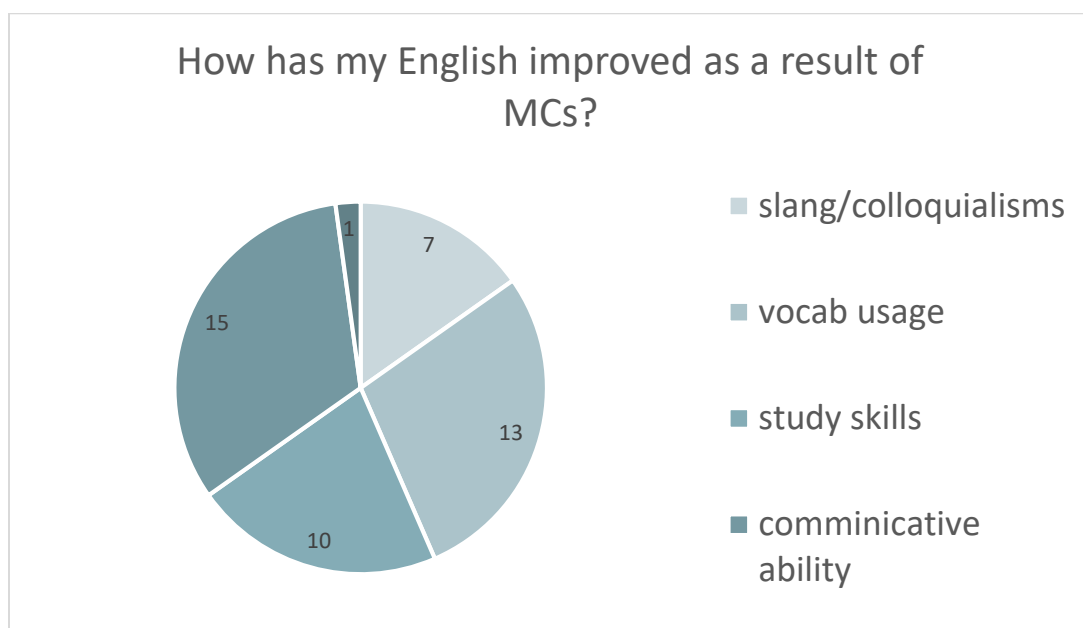
How has my English improved as a result of MCs?

- slang/colloquialisms
- vocab usage
- study skills
- comminicative ability

7 / 13 / 10 / 15 / 1

Figure 3: Perceived Improvement of Language Skills

Cycle Two

Upon reflection of the class observations and comments made by the students in the classroom, the second cycle of MCs included an extra step in the class discussion. In order to help students feel more confident about their contributions to their group discussion, they were instructed to meet with members of other groups who performed the same viewing task as themselves first. For instance, all Vocabulary Hunters met with each other and compared the vocabulary words that they had selected from the episode for the current week. After this initial meeting, students rejoined their original groups and thereafter shared their contributions for the week in a discussion.

Once again, the teacher moved throughout the classroom taking down observations and noting comments made by students throughout. Most notably among these observations were that some students who were originally observed to be more reserved were becoming actively engaged and participating in the discussions at unprecedented levels. This phenomenon is entirely consistent with the outcomes of LC implementations (Mark, 2007). The specifics of the observational notes from the second cycle consisted of the following:

- *Students were eager to compare their interpretations of their task for the current week.*
- *Students seemed more confident in their interpretations after comparing with others.*
- *Summarizers and Key Scene Selectors finished their initial discussion disproportionately early compared with other groups.*
- *Real-World Connectors prepared in depth history and context for the connections they made, with some even bringing in screenshots on their phone.*

- *Cultural Collectors commonly found differences that were not salient even to the instructor.*
- *Vocabulary Hunters prepared extremely long lists of individual vocabulary and slang words, but did not include many phrases. Idiomatic and colloquial language went noticeably unremarked.*
- *The second round of discussion did not seem as lively. Perhaps repetitiveness and fatigue began to affect enthusiasm.*
- *Plenty of gaps in understanding could be filled in by the teacher after discussions were concluded. Perhaps the next cycle should include a teacher's supplemental answers.*

After the discussions were concluded, a self-evaluation survey was administered once again in order to discern exactly how students perceived of MCs benefitting them. The students were given a list of seven skills and instructed to rank how much improvement they felt MCs had helped them achieve [1= none, 2= barely, 3= some, 4= plenty, 5= greatly]. The top three skills receiving a ranking of 4 or higher were listening (63%), vocabulary (63%), and teamwork (56%). All three of these were to be expected and largely agree with the findings of other studies in which improvements in collaboration were seen (Shelton-Strong, 2012). Surprisingly, speaking was only the fourth most highly ranked skill from the list receiving a four or higher from only 47% of respondents. Unsurprisingly, reading received the lowest percentage of respondents ranking it 4 or higher at only 9%. The complete data set can be found in the table in Table 2.

Table 2: Self-Evaluation Survey Results

Media Circles helped me to improve in…					
Skill	5	4	3	2	1
Pronunciation	6%	22%	44%	28%	0%
Listening	19%	44%	31%	6%	0%
Speaking	13%	34%	31%	26%	6%
Reading	0%	9%	25%	29%	37%
Vocabulary	19%	44%	37%	0%	0%
Critical Thinking	3%	19%	44%	28%	6%
Teamwork	22%	34%	28%	13%	3%

Cycle Three

The third and final cycle of this study included three major changes from cycle two. First of all, now that students had had a chance to compare their interpretations with their peers, and had participated in two interactive group discussions of the first two cycles, students could be expected to meet directly with their original groups and jettison the peer-comparison group discussion. Secondly, the instructor prepared materials to present and discuss for all five of the group roles at the end of the class discussions. This was done in order to fill in some cultural gaps, point out obscure and interesting connections to real life, teach idiomatic and colloquial language, and provide another model for students to consider incorporating into future MC assignments. Although every effort was made to make MCs a learner-led activity, observations from the first two cycles indicated that there was too much cultural and linguistic depth being overlooked in the discussions, and the students would benefit from having the teacher's input on these matters. Thirdly, despite observations made by the teacher which indicated high levels of participation, it was decided that quantitative data would add clarity to the findings of this study and provide a more definitive answer to the research questions regarding students' perceptions of MCs. As a result, students submitted their prepared tasks following the group discussions, and quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the minimum, maximum, and average word counts for each assigned role (Figure 7).

Similar to the previous two cycles, both teacher observations and a self-evaluation survey were used to collect the data. The teacher's observation notes were as follows:

- *The students are much more confident in beginning their discussions.*
- *Everyone has gotten straight to work without much delay.*
- *Groups are engaging in debate rather than passively listening to each group member present their findings.*
- *Some groups have finished much more quickly than others.*
- *There is plenty of translanguaging occurring, though the majority of the discussions have been conducted in English.*
- *Students have begun taking screenshots to help justify and provide context to their interpretations.*
- *Discussions seem to spend the most time on real-life connections and providing background information or history.*
- *Students were eager to take notes from the instructor's interpretations, particularly on idiomatic and colloquial language.*

The results of the self-evaluation survey provided valuable insight into the students perceived value of MCs and encouraged reflection on their own performances. There were six open-ended questions on the survey, and students were able to write as many responses as they would like. The responses were then coded based on five common themes per question (Table 3).

Students were most surprised at the amount of cultural and historical depth contained within each episode that they did not normally consider when consuming media for pleasure (42%). The increased awareness that students acquired through completing MC tasks ultimately results in incidental learning through self-directed noticing (Shelton-Strong, 2012). As a result, students were interested in researching history and cultural references upon finishing the assignment. The mental investment into meaningful input allows for language acquisition to take place more easily (Spada & Lightbown, 2010).

When asked what advice they would give to a future student doing MCs, the most common response was that the student should get involved in discussions right away (55%). Of the challenges that they faced, multitasking while viewing the episode was the most common response (31%). Some students recommended watching the episode twice, and only taking notes during the second viewing. Of the challenges that students did face, many students found repetition to be the most helpful solution (35%). When asked about the most enjoyable aspect of MCs, students remarked that the assignment was low-pressure (28%), and that the communicative nature of the class dialogue (44%) made practicing English fun.

Table 3: Open-Ended Self-Evaluation Survey Results

1. The most surprising aspect of MCs for me was:	% of Respondents
various perspectives on material	17%
thinking in L2	3%
reflection on depth/ connections	42%
exposure to new interest	10%
cultural awareness	17%
expanded vocabulary	9%
2. After MCs, I would like to find out more about:	% of Respondents
real-life connections to show	28%
vocabulary	12%
pronunciation	4%
cultural awareness	38%
communication skills	11%
more tv series	7%
3. My advice for a future student doing Media Circles is:	% of Respondents
get more involved	55%
enjoy it	16%
mimic actors for pronunciation	3%
take your time	13%
use screenshots	3%
avoid L1 subtitles	10%

4. The biggest challenge was:	% of Respondents
identifying key info.	14%
comprehension	17%
bad/wrong subtitles	4%
vocab retention	17%
expressing myself in groups	17%
multitasking/time	31%
5. I solved my challenges by:	% of Respondents
asking peers	10%
increase preparation	15%
web use	20%
repetition	35%
compartmentalize tasks	15%
making use of subtitles	5%
6. What I enjoyed most was:	% of Respondents
communicative learning	44%
cultural lessons	3%
fun, low pressure learning	28%
vocabulary expanded	13%
exposure to new interest	9%
making connections to world	3%

The word counts of the students' preparations for class discussions varied quite a lot (Table 4). Overall, students wrote an average of 178.8 words in preparation across all assigned roles. Obviously, some of the tasks required more substantial amounts of writing. The data indicated that preparing the vocabulary for the discussion tended to require the highest word count with an average of 278 words. One reason for this could be that it was the task that students were most familiar with prior to beginning MCs. Another reason for driving up word count is that universally, students prepared both the English and Chinese definitions for each word as well as an indication of parts of speech. Another interesting thing to note was that students never indicated the pronunciation of such words through writing. Either students felt that they could describe the pronunciation orally, or otherwise felt that pronunciation was not an important characteristic on which to focus. Exploring this tendency would be an interesting area for further research in a future study of MCs.

The role of Summarizer yielded the second lowest average word count of only 93 words. Students' interpretation of this role varied somewhat. Some of the students chose to write using full sentences and even full paragraphs while others chose to simply record bullet points.

Students preparing their reactions and interpretations of key scenes recorded the lowest word counts, ranging from 34 to 128 words, and an average word count of only 86.

Students may have found it difficult or uncomfortable to share their reactions in their groups, though the low word count may have simply been a result of students feeling that they did not need to write much information down. Since reactions were more personal and involved elements of opinion and interpretation, it is reasonable to assume that less preparation would be needed in order to sufficiently contribute to the discussions.

Students who researched and prepared connections of the show to the real-world prepared word counts ranging from 54 to 198, with an average of 166. Students with lower word counts tended to use more screenshots and images while those with higher word counts used more textual information.

Finally, the students who examined the cultural aspects of the show had average word counts of 271, ranging from a minimum of 109 words up to 318 words maximum. Students who were assigned this role tended to convey their interpretations textually, writing longer paragraphs and sharing personal anecdotes in order to synthesize information and draw intercultural comparisons or contrasts. Given the wide range of word counts, this may indicate that more teacher involvement, including pre or post-viewing noticing activities, may help make salient some of the more tacit examples of specific cultural behavior. This, of course, depends on the context as well as the intended purpose of using MCs and the desired outcomes defined by the implementing teacher.

Table 4: MC Prepared Role Word Counts

Word Counts of Assigned Role Preparations			
Role	Min.	Max.	Avg.
Summary	42	118	93
Vocabulary	206	401	278
Key Scenes	34	128	86
World Connections	54	198	166
Culture	109	318	271

Conclusion

Aside from yielding fruitful discussions, doing MCs was incredibly rewarding to be a part of. The reception by the participants was overwhelmingly positive. By the same token, the participation rate during each cycle was high, even when some students were absent from class. For instance, students who missed the class meeting still managed to send their prepared task to their respective groups digitally. This behavior strongly indicated that the students

enjoyed the assignment enough to complete it each and every week as well as a sense of ownership of the assignment resulting from the camaraderie of working within a group.

Being that MCs as an activity is mainly learner-led, it was not surprising that students reported feeling that their ability to learn independently had been improved. This autonomy, developed in the language classroom, is an internal transformation by which students take control over the process of learning (Little, 2007). In addition, since the students had to make an effort to perform a task, this provided a significant opportunity to interact with their peers. This meaningful interaction in their L2 helps pave the way for language learning (Skehan, 1996).

It was commonly observed during discussions that students would negotiate the meanings of certain phrases or behaviors exhibited by characters in a given episode. As was previously mentioned briefly, this communicative approach (CLT) arises from the teacher's role as a facilitator (Breen & Candlin, 1980). Nevertheless, students still asked the instructor to help expound upon certain cultural peculiarities they had observed which the groups didn't feel they could decipher. Thus, the supporting role played by the teacher acts as a cornerstone for content-oriented language-learning as opposed to linguistic forms (Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004).

Media Circles as an activity has a limitation in that its usefulness is limited ELT. Interestingly enough, although *Literature Circles* could be a useful activity for L1 or L2 students alike, *Media Circles* would be much more suitable for L2 learners, for listening comprehension is not a skill which L1 students need more practice in. In addition to providing L2 learners with listening comprehension practice, MCs may encourage the consumption of English-language media and promote enduring language-learning skills. Participants in this action research study inevitably acquired a more refined *noticing* ability, which is often cited as crucial in second language acquisition and retention (Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt, 1994; Roehr, 2008; Ellis, 2006; Ellis, 2008). This noticing ability was first facilitated by the assigned group roles, and was further expanded upon in cycle three during the teacher's demonstrations for the class.

Another limitation of MCs as an activity was accountability. MCs as an activity was designed to be fun and low-pressure. However, in order to further promote vocabulary retention, it would be wise for practitioners to include regular vocabulary quizzes. Since one of the group roles of MCs includes identification of key vocabulary or phrases, teachers could collocate the vocabulary of each group and compile a list of words to be quizzed thereafter. This accountability would increase the level of involvement with which students apply to the activity, leading to greater retention (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

Moreover, pronunciation was not reported to have been significantly improved. This lack of perceived improvement was consistent with observations made during class meetings. These findings were in spite of MCs providing realistic, contextualized L1 listening models

as practice for homework and ample opportunity for class dialogue. The reasons for this may be multi-faceted. First of all, although pronunciation does appear to be a skill that can be improved through input (Postovsky, 1974; Asher, 1977; Krashen, 1982), input *alone* is not enough for most students. That is to say, noticing activities and direct instruction have been shown to be much more effective strategies for consistently improving pronunciation (Bradlow et al., 1997; Wang & Munro, 2004). Another possibility may be that the participants in this study viewed each episode with the aid of both English and Chinese subtitles simultaneously. Although the subtitles likely improved *overall* comprehension, they likely reduced the need for *listening* comprehension. A future study exploring the use of MCs without subtitles would yield interesting results one way or another.

However, with the continuing rise of various local English varieties and emerging studies on English as a lingua franca (ELF), alternative models for achieving intelligibility have been proposed (Jenkins, 2000, 2002). Interestingly, the beliefs of L1 English teachers and L2 students diverge in different contexts. For example, university students from China and Taiwan preferred to achieve a native-speaker accent (Ren, Chen, & Lin, 2016). Despite students' beliefs, students may find English to be more accessible if class activities revolve around purely communicative goals (Ke & Cahyani, 2014). Therefore, *Media Circles* may not be helpful for improving pronunciation in the traditional sense, but rather helpful for boosting communicative experience and confidence.

Other limitations include the typical ones which practitioner research suffers from. These include lack of random selection from a student population, researcher bias, a lack of control groups, and the students' awareness of this being observed. (Zeni, 1998). In addition, the use of technology can be a limiting factor for practitioners working within contexts of relative poverty. Students who do not have reliable access to the internet or a means to view the content will not only be unable to participate in discussions, but they would likely be humiliated to admit their situation to classmates. In future applications, teachers would be wise to take this possibility into consideration.

Upon reaching the culmination of this action research study on MCs, there are a few possible areas that could be explored through further action research. First of all, an implementation of MCs using television episodes *without* the aid of subtitles would make for interesting results. Would the material be too difficult to comprehend in a meaningful way, impeding the learning outcomes of the assignment? Would the availability and selection of materials make implementation impractical? Would students engage with the material the same way? Would pronunciation and listening skills have a greater influence on the viewing and preparation of discussion roles?

Secondly, an implementation of MCs with more accountability built in would yield a more decisive conclusion as to the retention of assignment-related materials. In addition, such a study would likely include more quantitative data. For example, the administration of weekly quizzes for vocabulary would provide insight on vocabulary retention. Another possibility

would be extension activities, such as presentations or role-plays. Students could be tasked with summarizing their favorite episode, presenting on a cultural aspect they found meaningful, or providing background information for one of the real-world connections identified in a given episode. These presentations could be scored by the teacher using an analytic rubric and compared to a control group which does not take part in MCs. Although there would be limitations as to the validity of the scoring, the quantitative data might still display a positive correlation with MCs.

Finally, an action research study on MCs which includes a longer duration would also be helpful. As with any activity, students tend to become bored when something becomes overly routine. As this study only lasted for six weeks, it would be helpful for practitioners wishing to use MCs in their own classrooms to know how long students can remain engaged with the activity. There were no signs of boredom by the end of six weeks. In fact, the novelty of the assignment did not seem any less pronounced by observing class discussions. Perhaps the assignment could be done weekly for a full semester. A common duration for many narrative televisions series lasts for roughly 8-10 episodes. Running a study for 8-10 weeks on MCs could shine a light on this question and help teachers make an informed decision when planning their course syllabus.

References

Anderson, J. (1993). Is a communicative approach practical for teaching English in China? Pros and cons. *System, 21*(4), 471-480. https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(93)90058-O

Asher, J. J. (1977). *Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teachers' Guidebook.* Los Gatos, CA: Sky Oaks Productions.

Beglar, D., & Hunt, A. (2002). Implementing task-based language teaching. In J. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice* (pp. 96-106). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bradlow, A. R., Pisoni, D. B., Akahane-Yamada, R., & Tohkura, Y. (1997). Training Japanese listeners to identify English /r/ and /l/: IV. Some effects of perceptual learning on speech production. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America, 101*(4), 2299-2310.

Breen, M. P., & Candlin, C. N. (1980). The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching. *Applied Linguistics, 1*(2), 89-112.

Browning, G. (1974). *Testing Pronunciation Indirectly: An Experiment*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of California- Los Angeles.

Carless, D. (2002). Implementing task-based learning with young learners. *ELT Journal, 56*(4), 389-396.

Chiang, M. H. (2007). Improved reading attitudes and enhanced English reading comprehension via literature circles. *Lagos Papers in English Studies 1*, 168–83.

Cohen, A. D. (2010). Focus on the language learner: Styles, strategies and motivation. In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *An Introduction to applied linguistics* (2nd ed.) (pp. 161-178). London: Hodder Education.

Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom.* Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse.

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Stenhouse.

Derwing, T.M., Munro, M.J., & Thomson, R.I. (2008). A longitudinal study of ESL learners' fluency and comprehensibility development. *Applied Linguistics, 29*, 359-380. doi:10.1093/applin/amm041

Ellis, N. C. (2006). Selective attention and transfer phenomena in L2 acquisition: Contingency, cue competition, salience, interference, overshadowing, blocking, and perceptual learning. *Applied Linguistics, 27*, 164-194.

Ellis, N. C. (2008). Usage-based and form-focused SLA: The implicit and explicit learning of constructions. In A. Tyler, Y. Kim, & M. Takada (Eds.), *Language in the Context of Use: Cognitive and Discourse Approaches to Language and Language Learning* (pp. 93-120). Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter.

Jenkins, J. (2000). *The Phonology of English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, J. (2002). A sociolinguistically based, empirically researched pronunciation syllabus for English as an international language. *Applied Linguistics, 23*(1), 83-103.

Ke, I., & Cahyani, H. (2014). Learning to become users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF): How ELF online communication affects Taiwanese learners' beliefs of English. *System, 46,* 28-38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.07.008

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford: Pergamon Institute.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (1994). The Postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second/foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, *28*(1), 27-48.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2011). A complexity theory approach to second language development/acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 48–72). New York, NY: Routledge.

Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics, 22*, 1-26.

Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *1*(1), 14–29. http://dx.doi.org/10.2167/illt040.0

Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: Some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal*, *58*(4), 319-326.

MacIntyre, P.D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K.A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a second language: A situational model of second language confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal, 82*(4), 545-562.

Mark, P. L. (2007). Building a community of EFL readers: Setting up literature circles in a Japanese university. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.). *Proceedings from JALT 2006 Conference*.

Tokyo: JALT.

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2008). *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture*. London: Equinox.

Postovsky, V. (1974). Effects of delay in oral practice at the beginning of second language learning. *Modern Language Journal, 58*(3), 229-239.

Prabhu, N.S. (1990) There is no best method – why? *TESOL Quarterly, 24*(2), 161-176.

Ren W., Chen Y., & Lin C. (2016). University students' perceptions of ELF in mainland China and Taiwan. *System, 56*, 13-27. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2015.11.004

Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Roehr, K. (2008). Linguistic and metalinguistic categories in second language learning. *Cognitive Linguistics, 19*, 67-106.

Rossiter, M. J., Derwing, T. M., Manimtim, L. G., & Thomson, R. I. (2010). Oral fluency: The neglected component in the communicative language classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 66*(4), 583-606.

Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, *11*, 129-158.

Schmidt, R. (1994). Implicit learning and the cognitive unconscious: Of artificial grammars and SLA. In N. Ellis (Ed.), *Implicit and Explicit Learning of Languages* (pp. 165-209). London: Academic Press.

Shelton-Strong, S. J. (2012). Literature circles in ELT. *ELT Journal, 66*(2), 214-223. doi:10.1093/elt/ccr049

Skehan, P. (1996). Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction. In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching* (pp. 17-30). Oxford: Heinemann.

Spada, N., & Lightbown, P. M. (2010). Second language acquisition. In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 108-123). London: Hodder Education.

Stern, H.H. (1983). *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wang, X., & Munro, M. (2004). Computer-based training for learning English vowel contrasts. *System, 32*, 539-552.

Wen, W. & Clement, R. (2003). A Chinese conceptualisation of willingness to communicate in ESL. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 16*, 18-38.

Yasuda, S. (2011). Genre-based tasks in foreign language writing: Developing writers' genre awareness, linguistic knowledge, and writing competence. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 20*(2), 111-133. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2011.03.001

Zeni, J. (1998). A guide to ethical issues and action research. *Educational Action Research, 6*(1), 9-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650799800200053

Author's biography
Adam Brazenas is a lecturer in the School of English for Specific Purposes at Beijing Foreign Studies University. He teaches courses in debate, intercultural communication, English composition, and oral English. His research interests are in ELT, action research, practitioner professional development, intercultural education, and comparative studies in higher education.

Contact information
Name: Adam Jeffrey Brazenas
Institution: Beijing Foreign Studies University
Mailing address: No.2 North Xisanhuan Road, Beijing, P.R. China 100089
E-mail address: abrazenas18@apu.edu